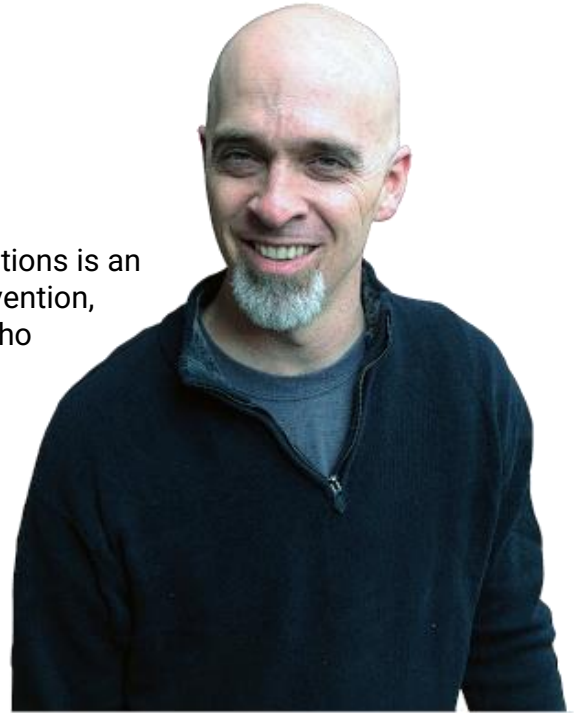


## *I Am Shared Safety* Tony Lapp, LCSW Executive Director, Courdea

As the executive director of [Courdea](#), managing expectations is an important part of Tony Lapp's work. Courdea is an intervention, treatment, training, and education program for people who commit harm and intimate partner violence. "We don't expect to be able to change everyone we encounter. That's not realistic in any program that works with adults," says Tony. "Adults are hard to change, so we're trying to change the things we can, to get them to work for change."

Tony has worked at Courdea (formerly Menergy) for nearly 25 years. Earlier this summer, Stephanie Levin, co-chair of Shared Safety's communications sub-committee, spoke with Tony about the work Courdea does, how he thinks city systems have changed—and are changing—in response to intimate partner violence, and how involvement with Shared Safety benefits the people he works with.



### **SL: What do you want people to know about working with people who commit harm?**

**TL:** Working with abusive partners is another way to work toward greater safety and well-being for survivors and families—if we can get the abuse to stop, that benefits the people who are getting hurt. We don't think of ourselves as being involved in a different project than survivor work; we're just doing something from a different angle. In the process, though, we've come to have appreciation for the many ways in which people learn to act in ways that are destructive toward others, not always because of intentional malice, but because of bad modeling and bad training. The hope is to find ways to get people to question their behaviors: "Is there another way of thinking about this, and, if there is, am I willing to try it to see how it works?"

### **SL: So what happens when a person who commits harm is not changing?**

**TL:** Part of accountability work, how programs are used in the real world—whether the program itself recognizes this or not—is for information-gathering. There's been research on this. Programs like ours get used by abused partners to gather information for their decision making. Sometimes that information is welcome information—the abusive partner is changing; things are getting better; partners who have been abused can make decisions based on that. But sometimes people come to programs like ours and do poorly, and that's not *welcome* information, but it's useful information. That can help survivors make decisions they're struggling with—like whether it's time to leave an abusive partner. So we take that seriously.

### **SL: What do you think would surprise people about working with those who commit harm?**

**TL:** There's a surprising number of people whose behavior is quite disruptive—they're doing a lot of really not good things—who do not necessarily connect with the idea that their intentional goal is to exert power and control over their loved ones. Even though it's very clear that the *effect* of their behavior is experienced that way, for sure. What they will identify with is having a very hard time feeling powerless and out of control. Their behavior is understood, maybe, as a really dysfunctional way of avoiding feelings of discomfort in themselves, rather than trying to create discomfort in others. At least initially.

If we can get people thinking about discomfort—understanding that none of us like to feel uncomfortable—and that there can be other ways to behave while feeling that discomfort, and get them actually trying them, then the lived practice of that can sometimes make a big difference. But it gets really hard because change and rebuilding trust can take a long time. There can be a big lag between when I change my behavior and when I start to notice a difference. That's a place where people often stumble and fall back into old behaviors.

**SL: How do people get referred to Courdea?**

**TL:** Historically, programs like ours have worked primarily with referrals from the criminal justice system. We do work with people who have court involvement—people with active court cases and on probation or parole. But we also work with people referred by therapists, health systems, HR departments, and faith communities, or who have been asked to do this by their partner or a family member.

**SL: How have you seen systems responses to people who commit harm changing?**

**TL:** We're now a number of decades into the criminal justice response to domestic violence. We have lots of hard data showing that the implementation of laws in big urban settings like Philadelphia is applied in dramatically inequitable ways. Lower income, Black and brown, and LGBTQI+ folks really do experience interactions with the criminal justice system in a different way than white and cis[gender] folks, as far as disparities and resources.

Engagement in another system, like behavioral health, has the potential to bring more parity and less damage in the referral process. There are lots of creative, strong partnerships and innovative work being done in Philly, but we're just beginning to have a sense of what this could look like over time.

**SL: How does Shared Safety involvement factor into your work?**

**TL:** One of things I am so delighted about—about Shared Safety as an effort—is it's a real attempt to build beyond the criminal justice response to domestic violence, to look for ways to educate, engage, and connect people to supports before things get to the point of needing police or court involvement.

Shared Safety has been wonderful—especially during and in the aftermath of COVID—as a way to stay connected with people who feel passionate, and move forward in finding ways to keep growing this systems response.

**SL: Have you seen any shifts/trends in your work since the start of COVID?**

**TL:** I think we intuitively think that greater stress and isolation are associated with increased levels of conflict and destructive behavior, but I'm not sure there's concrete evidence you can point to that shows a dramatic change during COVID. I do know that a lot of people

were not able to access supports at that time, and that was a very big issue. The courts are still digging out from their backlog and caseloads from delays caused by COVID, so things like accountability were definitely affected. Systems fell back and it will likely take a while for us to get back to where we were when the pandemic began.

**SL: What keeps you doing this kind of work?**

**TL:** It's incredible to accompany [a person who has been abusive] as they get faced with an important moment of decision in their life. It's kind of a precious moment. Even to be able to witness that occasionally feels great. To be able to help someone to think about themselves in a way that helps them get unstuck—that's a pretty cool thing.

We have partners [who have been abused] thank us for taking the time and trying, even if their partners aren't changing. We can sit in their grief with them—that means something. To give those partners the sense that they really have tried everything and can consider walking away from the relationship. Even though that can be a really sad moment, it can also have an element of real satisfaction. And that's when it helps to have supports for that person—that's when other Shared Safety resources become so important.

**SL: What do you enjoy doing when you're not working?**

**TL:** I started mountain biking recently and discovered this incredible network of trails in Philadelphia—it's amazing and super fun!

*This I Am Shared Safety feature was shared in the August/September 2023 Shared Safety Newsletter.*

*To subscribe to the Shared Safety Newsletter, go to: <https://bit.ly/SharedSafetyNews>*