Community Assessments: Powerful Tool to Improve Sexual Assault Services
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June 2013

What do people in a community think about sexual violence? How do people hear about services? How do people in other systems respond when survivors disclose to them? When do community partners refer people to an agency and when don’t they?

The Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative (SADI) developed a community assessment toolkit that allows communities to answer these questions and more, and SASP funds could be used to partially support other community assessment projects. Resources available in the Listening to Our Communities: Assessment Toolkit include:

- A Fact Sheet on Community Assessments
- Guide on Data Analysis
- Guide for Focus Groups
- Sample Interview Guide
- Tips for Interviewing
- Tools for Measurement

For the six SADI sites, the assessments led to some interesting findings about sexual assault services in multi-service program contexts. The following excerpt is from the January 2014 SADI newsletter and is available in its entirety here:

Sexual assault services are often invisible. All the SADI sites knew from the start of the project that their other services were better known in the community. The most common issues are that shelter services are tangible, easy to understand and easy to make in-kind donations to. Consequently, many people equate the programs solely with shelter.

For example, some community leaders said they were aware the program served survivors of sexual violence and that if a survivor needed shelter, they would refer them. However, if they did not need shelter, then the assumption was that there were no services available for them. Understanding what community members and leaders think they know about their programs is helping SADI sites strategize specific ways to become more visible. This includes reviewing their written and online materials to ensure they adequately describe all services, including sexual assault support.

Long-term support is critical. Dual programs are often more experienced with meeting immediate crisis needs. For survivors of sexual violence, this usually means medical and legal advocacy in the first hours or days following an assault. However, the sites learned that just as we see in research, in their communities most survivors reach out for help much later. Therefore, sexual assault support must also emphasize long-term support services. Based on what they learned, sites are in the process of developing many innovative approaches to those services. In addition to traditional counseling and therapy, they are also exploring the potential of other healing modalities such as the expressive arts, craft circles, trauma-
informed yoga, nature walks, and equine therapy. It is important that such efforts fit what the community is comfortable with and what is consistent with their culture.

By having listened closely to their communities, SADI sites can make decisions that are informed by their communities, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will be well received and meet the needs of survivors.

Community assessments hold a lot of promise for helping dual and multi-service agencies improve and expand their services for survivors of sexual assault.