

# Forming a Collaboration Among Service Providers: An Initial Meeting Activity

After identifying the agencies that should be involved in collaborating to improve access to services for sexual violence victims with disabilities and completing the preparations to bring a group together, the content of the first meeting of the collaboration must be considered.<sup>1</sup> This module offers a starting point for dialogue for these agencies. It is designed to help service providers from partnering agencies do the following: (1) build a shared knowledge about each of their agencies; (2) learn about each agency's history in this work and in their current roles; and (3) lay the foundation for a local collaboration.

## Key Points

- A collaboration is a well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals.<sup>2</sup> Collaboration involves agencies coming together to accomplish something that they cannot do alone.<sup>3</sup>
- Collaboration is critical to providing a seamless, service-delivery system for all victims of sexual violence. Victims have many potential points of entry into the service delivery system: advocacy organizations, the criminal justice system, health care organizations and school systems, just to name a few. It is important that these systems are accessible and work together to meet all of the needs of all victims of sexual violence.
- When forming this collaboration to improve access to services for sexual violence victims with disabilities, planners should bring together agencies in their communities that represent the various points of entry for victims seeking services. They should also consider when and how to include the voices of consumers, as appropriate to the established goals of the collaborative.

## A1. Forming a Collaboration Among Service Providers: An Initial Meeting Activity

### Purpose

This module focuses on planning for the first meeting of a newly forming collaboration. By this time, service providers have identified a need or purpose for the group and identified potential partners. It is important that the organizers who are convening the meeting critically consider if they have identified and included all potential stakeholders. Potential stakeholders should include both those who will be impacted by the work of the group and those who will be needed to successfully carry out the work. Potential stakeholders could include service providers, policy makers, funders and consumers—depending on the goals of the collaboration.

After identifying stakeholders to involve and completing the preparations for bringing a group together (e.g., date, time, place and invitations to individuals and organizations), the structure and intended outcomes of the first meeting need to be considered. This meeting offers a starting point for dialogue for agencies interested in collaborating to improve services. For clarity, agencies should understand that a collaboration is a well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals.<sup>4</sup> These organizations come together to accomplish something that they cannot do alone.<sup>5</sup> Collaborations can be short-term to focus on time-limited projects or long-term to address more in-depth challenges.

Collaboration is critical to providing a seamless, service-delivery system for victims of sexual violence. In West Virginia, an estimated one in six women will be the victim of an attempted or completed sexual assault.<sup>6</sup> These victims have many potential points of entry into the service delivery system: advocacy organizations, the criminal justice system, health care organizations and school systems, just to name a few. It is important that these agencies and systems are accessible and work together to meet all of the needs of all sexual violence victims.

This module's purpose is to help service providers from partnering agencies do the following: (1) build a shared knowledge about each of their organizations; (2) learn about each agency's history in this work and in their current roles; and (3) lay the foundation for a local collaboration.

### **Objectives**

Those who complete this module will be able to:

- Describe their agency's services and the services of partnering agencies;
- Discuss the status of the existing service system for sexual violence victims with disabilities; and
- Come to agreement about basic components of the local collaboration process.

Note that this module, along with other modules in *Collaboration 101*, is intended to be used by two or more agencies to facilitate collaboration rather than for individual agency training purposes.

### **DISCUSSION: Projected Time for Discussion**

*2 to 3 hours*

### **Preparation**

Note that **this discussion section is intended to serve as an outline for organizers to plan the initial meeting of a collaboration. The purposes of collaborations will differ, so the questions that will be asked of the participants will differ.** For illustration purposes, the examples given are for planning the first meeting of a sexual assault response team (SART). Also note that preparation for this initial meeting discussion is more involved than most other discussions in the toolkit.

- Prior to the meeting, carefully consider whether all key stakeholders have been invited to participate. The composition of any collaboration should be reflective of the local community and representative of those being impacted by the decisions that will be made. Therefore, each collaboration will be unique. For example, in creating a SART, it would be logical to include representatives of all first responders to sexual assault and others who may eventually be in contact with the victim throughout the criminal justice or healing processes. However, the composition of this team will differ based on the community. In a large city, key members of a SART might be the law enforcement officer from the special sex crimes unit, sexual assault nurse examiners, the rape crisis center's advocate, the prosecutor from the Violence Against Women unit, a disability service provider and the sexual violence prevention/services coordinator on the local college campus. In a rural community, none of those entities may even exist. Emergency medical services may be a first responder and, with no hospital, the local health department may be a resource for victims. In rural areas, victims may enter the service delivery system in different ways, such as through the faith-based community or by contacting the one law enforcement officer for the municipality. For a collaboration's work to be effective, the participants have to be knowledgeable about and committed to the issue (e.g., improving the coordinated response to sexual assault victims).

- The initial collaboration meeting may be the first time that participants discuss the issue of sexual violence outside of their work setting and it is possible that a participant could disclose victimization. Therefore, take steps to ensure that the group environment is safe and responsive to its members. Prior to the meeting, identify and arrange for the necessary supports in the event that a member should require self-care. (For example, have a private office or room available or access to an advocate.) Plan at the beginning of the meeting to do the following: (1) acknowledge the sensitive nature of discussing sexual violence; (2) stress the importance of self-care for survivors; and (3) advise the group of the supports that are available.
- Ensure that the meeting is held at an accessible location. Ask participants prior to the meeting if they need any accommodations, and if so, work with them to secure those accommodations.
  - o Encourage participants to review a resource developed by the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services, *The Guide: NASDDDS Handbook on Inclusive Meetings and Presentations* (through <http://www.nasddds.org/Publications/special.pubs.shtml>). Since the collaboration will be working to improve the accessibility of services, a starting point is to ensure that the meetings themselves are accessible to all potential participants.
- Prior to the discussion, request that participants from within an agency work together to prepare a *10 to 15 minute* informal presentation on the following:
  - o Agency philosophy and mission;
  - o Agency services (including types of services, area served, staff size, service hours, brief history and definition of terms/acronyms used); and
  - o Services specific to the issue the collaboration is going to address. (For this example, a description of these services might include the number of victims served, the training the staff receives and how referrals are made.)

If the participants are volunteers or consumers who do not represent an agency, they might be asked to share their personal work and/or interest in this field. If participants are invited to attend the meeting as consumers, they should not be identified as such without their permission.

NOTE: The information discussed should be pertinent to the purpose of the collaboration. In forming a SART, it would be important to know the roles and services of existing partners. If the purpose of the collaboration were to exclusively examine services for sexual violence victims with disabilities, some information the participants might share could include how victims with disabilities currently access services, screening processes that are in place, and how staff members are trained on this issue. It is anticipated that in the course of discussing existing services, gaps will be identified. Participants should be encouraged to engage in an open discussion of service and training limitations within their agencies.

- Encourage participants to bring any printed materials (e.g., agency brochures and business cards) to the meeting to share with other participants.
- Select a discussion facilitator and note taker.
- Bring the following supplies and materials to the meeting: flipcharts and colored markers, sufficient copies of participant materials, office supplies (tape, pens, paper, etc.) and a clock/watch to monitor time. Since this is the first meeting, it would be helpful to have name badges or table tents.

## Activities and Questions

1. **Briefly explain that this meeting is meant to be a starting point for a dialogue** for agencies and individuals interested in collaborating on your selected purpose area (e.g., to develop a SART or to improve services for victims of sexual violence with disabilities). (5 minutes)  
**Then ask participants to introduce themselves** and share their work and/or personal journey that brought them to their current role. (Up to 5 minutes for each participant)
2. **Invite participants to identify discussion ground rules to promote open communication.** Utilize the following principles: (10 minutes)
  - An environment of mutual respect and trust is optimal. Everyone should feel comfortable expressing their opinions and feelings about the various topics. There are no right or wrong answers, only different perspectives.
  - Avoid personalized comments that are negative as they can lead to defensiveness and confrontation among participants and ultimately may shut down dialogue.
  - Be clear about what information discussed during this meeting is confidential and what the expectations are for confidentiality in the context of this partnership.
  - Acknowledge the sensitive nature of discussing sexual violence and stress the importance of self-care for survivors. Advise the group of the supports that are available during the meeting and in the community.
3. **Ask a representative from each partnering agency to spend 10 to 15 minutes providing an agency overview**, as described in the *Preparation* section.
4. **Ask participants to discuss the questions below.** (10 minutes for a. and b.)
  - a. What did you learn about existing services that you did not know?
  - b. What gaps and challenges exist (e.g., for victims in general or for victims with disabilities in accessing the services of the partnering agencies)? Record in the meeting minutes any gaps and challenges identified so that partnering agencies can address them at future meetings.
  - c. Is there information or insight gained from the discussion that you will take back to your agency that will impact the agency's service delivery system? (10 minutes)
5. **Ask participants to come to an agreement on the following:** (20 minutes)
  - a. What do you see as the initial purpose of this collaboration? What are some of the outcomes that can be achieved? (NOTE: These are important questions and enough time should be allotted for a thorough conversation. If time does not permit such a discussion, at a minimum develop a consensus on when the goals of the group will be established.)
  - b. How do you want to structure these meetings (e.g., whether to have a chairperson, if the role of meeting facilitator will be rotated, etc.)?
  - c. How do you want to record the notes from these meetings (e.g., format and level of detail of the notes, rotation of note takers, etc.)?
  - d. What are the expectations regarding confidentiality of what is shared at these meetings?
  - e. What decision-making process should be used (e.g., to vote, come to agreement on issues, etc.)?
  - f. How will agencies communicate with each other between meetings?
6. **Schedule meetings and meeting sites** through the next quarter and establish an agenda for the next meeting. (10 minutes)

## West Virginia S.A.F.E. Training and Collaboration Toolkit—Serving Sexual Violence Victims with Disabilities

Project partners welcome the non-commercial use of this module to increase knowledge about serving sexual violence victims with disabilities in any community, and adaptation for use in other states and communities as needed, without the need for permission. We do request that any material used from this toolkit be credited to the West Virginia Sexual Assault Free Environment (WV S.A.F.E.) project, a partnership of the West Virginia Foundation for Rape Information and Services, the Northern West Virginia Center for Independent Living and the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (2010). Questions about the project should be directed to the West Virginia Foundation for Rape Information and Services at [www.fris.org](http://www.fris.org).

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<sup>1</sup>Partnering agencies refer to the persons they serve as “clients,” “consumers” and “victims.” For convenience, the terms “victims” and “clients” are primarily used in this module. Also note that the terms “sexual violence” and “sexual assault” are generally used in this module to encompass sexual assault, sexual abuse and other forms of sexual violence.

<sup>2</sup>P. Mattessich, Can this collaboration be saved? 20 factors that can make or break any group effort, *Shelterforce Online*, #129, May/June 2003, National Housing Institute, at <http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/129/savecollab.html>. Note that all online documents referenced in this module were available at the links provided at the time the module was written. It is suggested you check the sites for any updates or changes. If you experience difficulty accessing the documents via the links, another option for locating documents is doing a web search using titles.

<sup>3</sup>Mattessich.

<sup>4</sup>Mattessich.

<sup>5</sup>Mattessich.

<sup>6</sup>West Virginia Bureau for Public Health, Health Statistics Center, 2008 *Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey*.