Changing Social Systems

This module helps to increase service providers understanding of social systems in general and encourages them to consider how they can create social change in their local social service delivery systems.[1]

Key Points

- A social system is "the people in a society considered as a system organized by a characteristic pattern of relationships." [2] In the social service field, a social system could be comprised of individuals and agencies that are either formally or informally networked because of the varying needs of the clients they serve.

- For the purposes of this module, social change will focus on how the acts of an individual or group of individuals can result in a sustainable change in the social service delivery system for sexual violence victims with disabilities.

- Social systems can change on a variety of levels. Some individuals' efforts to create social change will have broad impact, while others' efforts will have a more targeted impact. Below are some concrete ways to work toward social change:

  o Examine the vision and mission statements of your organization, especially as they apply to serving sexual violence victims with disabilities.

  o Provide an honest critique of your agency's progress in meeting that vision and mission.

  o Identify action steps that you and your agency need to take to improve the agency's service delivery system.

  o Assess how collaborative efforts can assist your organization in achieving its vision and mission.

A3. Changing Social Systems

Purpose

Service providers can have a major impact on the recovery of sexual violence victims with disabilities when they assist them in identifying and addressing their needs and wishes. To have this impact, service providers must not only provide services, but "go the extra mile" on behalf of victims when advocating within their own agencies and when accessing services from other community agencies.

However, social service providers often are so overwhelmed with maintaining services that they do not look outside of their own agencies to view how their services interface with other

organizations to address their clients' needs in the larger, more complex service delivery system. This module is designed to do the following: (1) develop service providers' understanding of social systems in general; and (2) encourage service providers to consider how they can create social change in their local social service delivery systems to improve services to sexual violence victims with disabilities.

NOTE: Ideally, service providers engage in two kinds of advocacy: advocacy to promote positive systems change for their clients, as discussed in this module; and advocacy with individual clients to empower them to have their self-identified needs met. For a discussion on promoting self-advocacy, see *Disabilities 101. Self-Advocacy and Victims with Disabilities.*

Objectives

Those who complete this module will be able to:

• Define a social system;

• Define social change;

• Identify their agency's role and vision for creating social change; and

• Identify ways they can impact social change, both individually and collaboratively.

Preparation

• If your agency has conducted an accessibility assessment of its services for sexual violence victims with disabilities using *Tools to Increase Access. Programmatic and Policy Accessibility Checklist* and *Tools to Increase Access. Physical Accessibility Checklist for Existing Facilities,* review a copy of the findings.

• If your agency and other community agencies have begun to draft a transition plan to address the barriers identified in their assessments, review of copy of that plan. (See *Tools to Increase Access. Developing a Transition Plan.*)

PART 1: CORE KNOWLEDGE

What is a social system?

A social system is "the people in a society considered as a system organized by a characteristic pattern of relationships."[3] In the social service field, a social system could be comprised of individuals and agencies that are either formally or informally networked because of the varying needs of the clients they serve. (In this module, this social system is also referred to as a social service delivery system.)

A social service delivery system for serving sexual violence victims will vary depending on the resources within a given community. However, it will most likely include advocacy organizations (rape crisis centers, disability services, etc.), the criminal justice system (including law enforcement agencies, prosecutors' offices and the courts), medical care providers and any other points of entry that victims might use to access services. In some communities, that system could include a college campus; in others, it might include

emergency medical services and yet in others it could include the faith-based community. (See *Collaboration 101. Creating a Community Resource List.*)

The overarching system includes practices and protocols—both written and unwritten—for serving sexual assault victims as well as policies that may facilitate or impede the service delivery process. Each of these components could impact victims' experiences after a sexual assault.

What is social change?

Social systems are continuously evolving. Changes to those systems can benefit many members of society and can be caused by different sources. Some changes have a very obvious, far-reaching impact that affects most members of society. For example, the invention of electricity changed how people live and interact; the automobile helped change where people work and how they access goods and services. Other changes impact fewer people, but can be equally as dramatic—such as policies affecting immigration, voting privileges and basic civil rights.

Social change is a general term which refers to:[4]

- Change in social structure—the culture, social institutions, social behavior or social relations of a society, community of people, etc.

- A change in the behavioral pattern of large numbers of people that is visible and sustained. Once there is a deviance from culturally-inherited values, rebellion against the established system may result, causing a change in the social order. Historical examples range from African Americans boycotting buses to protest segregation in the southern United States in the 1950s and early 1960s to the current trend of healthier eating habits in some cities, resulting in restaurants changing menus and posting nutrition values.

- An event or action that affects a large group of individuals who have shared values or characteristics and causes a united, sustained result.

- Acts designed to change in ways that are viewed as positive.

For the purposes of this module, social change will focus on how the acts of an individual or group of individuals can result in a sustainable change in the social service delivery system for sexual violence victims with disabilities.

Why me?

The famous American anthropologist Margaret Meade once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."[5] You are reading this module because your agency is part of a community team— the "small group of thoughtful, committed citizens"—that is working to collectively improve access to local services for sexual violence victims with disabilities.

If your agency has conducted a programmatic accessibility assessment of its services for sexual violence victims with disabilities using *Tools to Increase Access. Programmatic and Policy Accessibility Checklist,* it has already identified existing access barriers. With this knowledge, you and your agency are uniquely positioned to address those barriers and ultimately improve access for all who need your services. You and your agency can also work

with partnering agencies to address barriers in coordination and communication across agencies.

Some agency and system changes will require approval from the agency's administrators. Depending on your role in the agency, you may be limited in your ability to influence policy change. But agency/system change also entails changing how a policy is interpreted and implemented at a local level. While you may feel you do not have the ability to change policy, realize that you can influence how that policy is implemented locally. Policies should always be implemented for their intended purposes; this module is not suggesting that rules be bent or violated. Sometimes, however, the interpretation of a policy can have unintended consequences that create barriers for persons with disabilities, and the practices for implementing a policy could be modified or expanded.

Consider the following scenario: It is your agency's policy that all those seeking services must independently complete an application form prior to accessing services. You walk through the waiting room and see someone struggling to read the form because it appears the print is too small. You could do nothing or you could ask if you could be of assistance, providing the form in larger print if available or taking the time to read the form to the person. The policy is in place to ensure that applicants' answers are indeed in their own words. As long as you read the questions as written and do not influence the answers, you are still following the policy. In this scenario, although you may not have the authority to re-write that policy to specify that all forms be available in an alternate format, it is within the scope of your role to interpret agency policy in a way that allows equal access to services for all clients. (See *Disabilities 101. Accommodating Persons with Disabilities* and *Tools to Increase Access. Readiness to Serve Victims with Disabilities: A Review of Intake Practices.*)

How do you change social systems?

Social systems can change on a variety of levels. Some individuals will witness the broad impact of their advocacy work, such as the creation of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Violence Against Women Act. Others will have a more targeted impact, such as ensuring that the Americans with Disabilities Act has created accessible services in a specific community or that sexual violence victims are not polygraphed as outlined in the Violence Against Women Act. Below are some concrete ways to work toward social change:

1. **Examine the vision and mission statements of your organization, especially as they apply to sexual assault victims with disabilities.**

   How specific are these statements? Most tend to be rather lofty, with few targeted action steps for achieving them. Do they accurately reflect the work of your organization? Does your agency have a plan for achieving them?

2. **Provide an honest critique of your agency's progress in meeting that vision and mission.**

   Is your agency falling short in achieving its goals? Who is not being served effectively? How do your current services for sexual violence victims with disabilities measure up to your vision for those services? (NOTE: Utilize *Tools to Increase Access. Programmatic and Policy Accessibility Checklist* as a component of measuring your agency's capability to effectively serve victims with disabilities.)

3. **Identify action steps that you as an individual and as an agency need to take to improve your agency's service delivery system.**

   Changing the service delivery system in a sustainable way creates systems change. There are many opportunities to facilitate change. For example, you can be a role model for co-workers by using person first language and assisting others in learning how to better communicate with people with disabilities. (See *Disabilities 101. Person First Language* and *Disabilities 101. Tips for Communicating with Persons with Disabilities*.) Perhaps your agency does not have a method of training new staff on communicating with sexual assault victims with disabilities. If not, you could suggest that *Disabilities 101. Tips for Communicating with Persons with Disabilities* become a mandatory part of staff orientation. Maybe your agency does not routinely ask clients if they need accommodations or if they are safe. If not, then *Disabilities 101. Accommodating Persons with Disabilities*, S*exual Violence 101. Safety Planning* and *Tools to Increase Access. Readiness to Serve Victims with Disabilities: A Review of Intake Practices* could be presented/discussed and intake forms changed. If your agency is developing a transition plan for improving access for sexual assault victims with disabilities, you could volunteer to serve on the transition planning team. (See *Tools to Increase Access. Developing a Transition Plan*.) You can help increase awareness of the barriers facing sexual assault victims with disabilities by sharing your concerns and ideas with your co-workers and supervisor. Engaging colleagues in your agency who are interested in an issue is also a way of heightening your capacity to impact change.

   These seemingly small actions can enable services to reach more victims and potentially save lives. The key is in taking the time to identify what needs to be changed, determining what realistically can be changed in the short and long-term, and then taking the initiative to make the changes happen. (See the modules in *Tools to Increase Access.*)

When planning changes, you should always consider the history of existing policies and practices. That history can influence your co-workers' responses to your concerns. Long-term employees have reasons for doing things the way they do and making changes can be threatening to some, or may be seen as devaluing their experiences with the agency. Understanding the underlying reasons for a policy can be critical to gaining support for changing a policy or practice that no longer meets the mission or vision of the agency.

4. **Assess how collaborative efforts can assist your organization in achieving its vision and mission**.

   Changing the question changes the focus. Move past "What is wrong?" to "What can we do about it?" Broader social change occurs when agencies move beyond their own doors and engage colleagues in their efforts.

   The discussion section of this module is designed to encourage collaborative efforts among organizations toward social change.

Test Your Knowledge
Refer to the pages in this module as indicated to find the answer for each question.

1. What is a social system? *See page A3.2*.

2. What individuals and agencies comprise the social service delivery system for victims with disabilities in your community? *See page A3.2.*

3. What is social change (specifically in regard to this module)? *See page A3.3.*

4. What are some specific ways that service providers can work towards social change? *See pages A3.4– A3.5.*

PART 2: DISCUSSION

Projected Time for Discussion
2 hours (may vary depending on group members' experiences with social change)

Purpose and Outcomes

This discussion is designed to help participants apply the information presented in *Part I: Core Knowledge* of this module to their collaborative work with sexual violence victims with disabilities. The discussion could be incorporated into forums such as agency staff meetings, meetings of an agency's board of directors, as well as multi-agency meetings or trainings. Anticipated discussion outcomes include an increased understanding of the barriers and challenges experienced by victims with disabilities in accessing the current service delivery system; identification of ways to enhance accessible and victim-centered services through responsive agency policies, procedures and resources; and a plan to create changes in the current service delivery system through collaborative efforts.

Refer to the learning objectives at the beginning of this module for specific outcomes for this module on changing social systems.

Key Points for the Group to Consider

Social change efforts can seem overwhelming to staff with already large workloads. It is important for the group involved in this discussion to understand that systems change is a process and can occur on many levels. Seemingly small changes can have a major impact on services. Changing intake procedures, improving training content and creating a list of interpreters—these types of activities can, with minimal efforts, drastically improve the service delivery system for victims with disabilities. Other projects, such as challenging the accessibility of transportation or the court system in a community, may take a larger work group and an extended period of time to achieve. It is important for members of a collaboration to take on work that they have the capacity to handle. For larger projects, it is essential that the workload and time frames established be completed in doable increments. Small steps still achieve the same end results, just over longer periods of time. A group should not avoid addressing major service barriers in its community solely because it cannot resolve the issues quickly.

Planning

• Ensure that the meeting is held at an accessible location. Ask participants prior to the meeting if they need any accommodations—if so, work with them to secure accommodations.

- Select a facilitator. The facilitator should be familiar with social and systems change and be able to assist the group in thinking through the potential unintended consequences when considering social/systems change. Vigilante efforts to force changes versus planned, thoughtful efforts that work within systems can yield different results. The facilitator may need to research the concepts of social and systems change to provide more foundational information to the group, depending on her/his expertise.

- Select a note taker.

- Participants and the facilitator should review *Part 1: Core Knowledge* of this module prior to the discussion.

- Each participant should bring to the meeting:

  o A copy of vision and mission statements for their agency;

  o A copy of any strategic plan that their agency may have related to working toward achieving their agency's vision; and

  o If completed, a copy of findings from their agency assessment using *Tools to Increase Access. Programmatic and Policy Accessibility Checklist* and any transition plans related to addressing identified barriers.

- 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. Optional items include name badges or table tents.

Suggested Activities and Questions

1. **Invite participants to identify discussion ground rules to promote open communication.** Utilize the following principles: *(5 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.

2. **Ask a representative from each partnering agency to share their vision and mission statements and their agency's plans for addressing that vision as it pertains to serving sexual violence victims with disabilities.** They could also share the summary of their accessibility assessments and transition plans. *(10 minutes)*

3. As a large group, **discuss the following questions**: *(1.5 hours)*

a. What common themes are shared among the vision and mission statements of the agencies present? List the themes on a flipchart.

b. What challenges are agencies presently facing in achieving their vision as it pertains to

serving sexual violence victims with disabilities? (If *Tools to Increase Access. Programmatic and Policy Accessibility Checklist* was completed, it may have identified these challenges.) List the challenges on the flipchart.

c. What, from the list, are some common challenges that the group is experiencing? Highlight those from the chart.

d. Which of those challenges can be met by changing policies and practices from within the individual organizations? List those on a separate page.

e. Which of those challenges must be met by changing policies and practices outside of the individual organizations? List those on a separate page.

f. How will input from persons with disabilities be sought to ensure that any challenges identified are in fact actual barriers to services? How will their suggestions for solutions be sought?

g. As a group, answer the following questions for each item on the two lists (i.e., showing the common challenges that can be met by changing policies and practices inside *and* outside the individual organizations).

   1. Is this change achievable?

   2. What specific steps need to be taken to facilitate this change?

   3. Who must be involved in that process?

   4. Do we have the resources and capacity to make this change? If not, is there a way to access those resources?

   5. Can we commit the time and resources for initiating this change? If so, create a time frame and plan for meeting again to begin the process.

4. **Closing.** Ask each participant to write down how the information gained from this module discussion will promote change in their agency's policies, practices or training programs and their next steps in the process of initiating that change. Then facilitate a large group discussion on this topic. *(15 minutes)*

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

[2]WordWeb Online (international dictionary and word finder) (accessed 7/12/09), http://www.wordwebonline.com/. This and other 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.

[3]WordWebOnline.

[4]Adapted from *The Psychology Wiki* (accessed 7/12/09), http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Social_change.

[5]Well-known quote attributed to M. Meade (1910-1978), although when and where it was said is unknown.