

Formalizing a Collaboration

This module discusses taking the step of formalizing your collaboration and institutionalizing changes across partnering agencies that will facilitate increased access to services for sexual violence victims with disabilities.¹ One useful tool in this process is a formalized agreement among the partnering agencies. Crafting such an agreement is the focus of this module.

A document that formalizes an agreement among agencies might be called a memorandum of understanding, memorandum of agreement, an interagency agreement, a working relationship agreement or another term altogether. These documents may differ in areas such as level of detail, whether they are open-ended or time specific, etc. It is up to each collaborative to determine which type of formalized agreement best meets its purpose.

Key Points

- For the purpose of this module, a formalized agreement is a written document that identifies the common purposes and goals of two or more organizations.² It spells out the partnering organizations' understanding of their working relationship.³ A formalized agreement can:
 - o State what resources and services will be shared between/among the partnering organizations to meet their common goals;
 - o Define each agency's roles and limitations in service provision and in the collaboration; and
 - o Identify agency-specific and cross-agency policies, procedures and training that will be utilized to assist victims with disabilities.
- Formalized agreements are jointly developed, agreed upon by a partnership and subsequently signed by agency administrators.⁴
- Periodically, formalized agreements can be evaluated for usefulness in carrying out the goals of the collaborative. They can be revised and re-signed as needed to ensure that all of the professionals and agencies involved are aware of related policies and practices and committed to carrying out the agreement.

A5. Formalizing a Collaboration

Purpose

The *Collaboration 101* series of modules offers information and guidance on how to create the foundation for a successful collaboration among agencies in order to increase access to services for sexual violence victims with disabilities. Module topics include forming a collaboration, examining current partnerships and developing a plan to enhance collaboration, identifying the community resources available to victims with disabilities, and facilitating the necessary social change that a collaboration can create. This module discusses taking the next step of formalizing a collaboration and institutionalizing changes that facilitate increased access to services for victims. One useful tool in this process is a formalized agreement

among the partnering agencies. Crafting such an agreement is the focus of this module.

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- Define each agency's roles and limitations in service provision and in the collaboration; and
- Identify agency-specific and cross-agency policies, procedures and training that will be utilized to increase access to services for victims with disabilities.

A formalized agreement is jointly developed and agreed upon by the partnering agencies and, subsequently, signed by agency administrators.⁸ While the development of such an agreement takes time, many of the details can be decided upon at earlier stages in the collaboration process and then reaffirmed when the agreement is being drafted. Periodically, a formalized agreement can be evaluated for usefulness in carrying out the goals of the collaborative, then revised and re-signed as needed. Periodic revision and re-signing can help ensure that all of the professionals and agencies involved are aware of related policies and practices and committed to carrying out their agreements.⁹

Objectives

Those who complete this module will be able to:

- Develop a draft of a formalized agreement among partnering agencies to increase access to services for sexual assault victims with disabilities in their communities; and
- Identify steps to finalize the agreement and implement it across agencies.

DISCUSSION

Projected Time for Discussion

Allow two (2) hours

Developing a formalized agreement among agencies is a process and may involve a series of meetings and/or follow-up activities (e.g., seeking authorization from the administrators of the participating agencies to support the details proposed in the agreement). This discussion is designed to provide the framework for developing a draft agreement and the planning process necessary to finalize and implement it.

Preparation

NOTE: This discussion includes questions that partnering agencies can consider to generate the content for a formalized agreement. Because each community and each collaborative is different, discussion facilitators should consider whether additional questions need to be asked and additional issues need to be addressed when establishing their agreement.

- 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 how to develop a formalized agreement among agencies.
- Select a note taker.
- Prior to the discussion, participants and the facilitator should review the sample formalized agreement provided at the end of this module. This review will provide context for the discussion and the creation of a collaborative-specific agreement.
- 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 Questions¹⁰

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.

2. Identify who will develop the written draft of the formalized agreement and be responsible for coordinating with other agency representatives in finalizing it. This discussion will provide the text to insert into the agreement; the next step will be to bring it all together into one document. It is helpful to identify the drafter prior to the remainder of the discussion, so that person can be particularly focused on making sure the draft accurately reflects decisions made during the discussion.

For Suggested Activities and Questions 3-7, utilize both discussion activities/questions and the Sample Formalized Agreement at the end of the module to aid participants in developing the content for their own agreement.

3. Develop the introduction of the agreement.¹¹ The introduction section provides the reader with an overview of the agreement. It describes the need, the agencies involved, why

it is necessary to work together, etc. It is optional to include details about past efforts or to discuss how the agencies reached this level of agreement. To develop this section, ask participants to consider the following:

- a. What agencies are involved in this collaboration?
- b. What are the purposes of this collaboration?
- c. What led them to come together to collaborate for this intent?
- d. What are the goals of this collaboration?
- e. What are the desired outcomes of this collaboration?
- f. Why is it necessary to work together to achieve these goals and outcomes?
- g. Why is this agreement necessary?
- h. What agreements are set forth in this document?
- i. What level of detail, if any, is desired in this section on the collaborative's background (e.g., the guiding principles for the partnership itself, its service approach to victims with disabilities, etc.)?

After encouraging participants to brainstorm responses to each question, request that they develop concise statements regarding each question that can be inserted into the draft formalized agreement. (Note that some of these questions were discussed in *Collaboration 101. Forming a Collaboration Among Service Providers: An Initial Meeting Activity* and *Collaboration 101. Examining Your Collaboration*.)

4. Develop the agency description section of the agreement. This section lists the agencies to be included and provides a brief, general description of their services. It may also include a statement describing any specific services that agencies provide to sexual assault victims with disabilities. Invite participants from each agency to develop concise statements that include this information that can be added to the draft agreement.

If an organization has multiple departments or programs, consider including a brief overall description of the agency, as well as a description of the specific department involved in the collaboration (e.g., the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources and Adult Protective Services). Also, be sure to define any agency- or discipline-specific acronyms and operational or technical terms included. (Note that agency descriptions were discussed to some extent in *Collaboration 101. Forming a Collaboration Among Service Providers: An Initial Meeting Activity* and *Collaboration 101. Examining Your Collaboration*.)

5. Develop the section that defines the activities of the collaborative and the related roles and responsibilities of the partnering agencies. This section covers (1) agency roles and responsibilities in maintaining the collaborative itself and (2) roles and responsibilities of specific agencies in carrying out the goals of the collaborative. To develop this section, ask participants to consider the following:

- a. **What activities have been established to maintain the collaborative itself?** (E.g., regular meetings and trainings; ongoing development of work plans; identification of how

each agency can provide leadership; staff and resources to support the collaborative; sharing of information; periodic community assessments and evaluations of the collaborative; etc.) **What are the *related roles and responsibilities of all of the partnering agencies*?**

- b. **What *agency-specific activities* have been identified to carry out the goals of the collaborative?** (E.g., coordination of cross-training; self-assessment of the accessibility of agency services for victims with disabilities; coordination with other agencies to serve victims with disabilities; creation/revision of policies, procedures or agency materials; coordination of the initial response to victims with disabilities; coordination of referrals; coordination of public education efforts, etc.) **What are the *related roles and responsibilities of each agency*?**

After encouraging participants to brainstorm responses to each question, request that they develop concise statements regarding activities and agency roles and responsibilities that can be inserted into the draft formalized agreement. (Note that these questions are discussed to some extent in the other *Collaboration 101* modules, particularly *Collaboration 101. Examining Your Collaboration*.)

6. Develop the timeframe section of the formalized agreement. This section can identify the dates that the agreement is effective, as well as how it will be reviewed and renewed. If the agreement will be time-specific, ask participants to come to agreement on:

- For what time period should the agreement be effective?
- When should the agreement be reviewed, revised if needed and renewed?

Give your collaborative adequate time to implement its activities before reviewing the formalized agreement and judging its success.¹² Also, keep in mind that revising and renewing the agreement is another time intensive project and is not practical to do too often.

As an alternative to a time-specific agreement, partnering agencies may want to consider having an agreement that has no specified ending date (i.e., it automatically renews), but that can be modified upon the request of any participating agency. There are some benefits to using this strategy: It would prevent the activities identified in the agreement from expiring if the formal collaborative body becomes less active over time or if an activity is a key service to the community. For example, what begins at some point as a new practice may become the standard protocol after a period of years (e.g., law enforcement officers transporting victims to a shelter). A new chief of police, with little background information or history on the protocol, is asked to sign the 18th annual renewal of the agreement—just as gas prices have increased and his department’s funds have been cut. By being asked to sign the renewal agreement he has the opportunity to easily opt out of the collaboration and terminate a practice to which he may not have given any consideration up to this point. In this case, the unintended consequence of the process of re-signing the agreement was the termination of the law enforcement practice of transporting victims to a shelter!

Given that abrupt changes in working relationships could significantly impact victim services, the collaborative should consider the importance of continuity when developing agreements. While allowing for the periodic review of roles and responsibilities, consideration should be given to the continuity of any practices created by the partnership and how such practices

might be incorporated into each individual agency's policies.

7. Get the appropriate signatures to “seal” the agreement. This section includes the signature of a representative from each participating agency. That representative must have decision-making authority. Having agency administrators sign the agreement is a way to hold agencies accountable for upholding their responsibilities as members of the collaborative. Ask participants to consider the following:

- a. Who is the most appropriate administrator from each agency to sign the agreement? Should more than one representative sign?
- b. What is the likelihood that each of the administrators identified will support this initiative and be willing to sign the agreement? Are there suggestions on increasing the likelihood that they will be supportive?
- c. Who will request the signature from each agency administrator?
- d. What is the timeframe for obtaining the signatures?
- e. What process should be used for getting original signatures on one copy of the agreement? Who will coordinate this process?

A key factor to consider in formalizing a partnership is having agency “buy-in” into the collaboration versus having the support of one individual representing that agency. Having the agency versus an individual invest in the project safeguards the continuity of the relationship should there be changes in staff. It guarantees that the collaborative work is supported by the entire agency. Such a commitment by the agency provides more sustainability for the collaborative efforts.

If an agency has numerous departments and/or staff, consider having the agreement signed by the agency administrator *and* the coordinator of the specific program that will be working directly with the collaborative. For example, an agreement might be signed by the hospital administrator *and* the emergency department's nurse manager.

8. Ask participants to review/identify steps to take to develop the agreement, finalize it, obtain the necessary signatures and provide a signed copy to all of the partnering agencies. Make sure everyone involved in developing the agreement is aware of and agrees to their roles and deadlines for completing their tasks. Ask the participants to identify the specific actions that need to be taken and the parties responsible for each step and then create a time line for completing each step. (Consider recording this information on a simple chart with headings such as the one below. To customize the chart, copy it, then edit the headings if desired and add as many rows as needed.)

Action Step	Responsible Party	Time Line

Also, ask participants to consider activities that can mark the accomplishment of producing the agreement and jumpstart the collaborative’s activities. For example, partnering agencies might hold a celebration to publicize the formalization of the collaboration and follow it up with a joint training program. If participants identify and agree upon such an activity, ask them to incorporate coordination of this activity into the above planning process.

9. Schedule follow-up meetings as necessary to facilitate the development of the agreement and the completion of the above steps. Identify meeting sites. *(10 minutes)*

<<name of the collaborative >>

Sample Formalized Agreement Among Agencies¹³

Introduction

<<Insert names of the partnering agencies>> have come together to collaborate for the purposes of <<insert purposes, e.g., increasing access to services for sexual assault victims with disabilities>>. These partnering agencies herein desire to enter into a formalized agreement, setting forth the purposes and goals of the collaborative, as well as its activities.

This collaborative developed as a result of <<insert description of why the collaborative was developed, e.g., a survey of local agencies revealed service/policy gaps and barriers that impeded the provision of effective, accessible and seamless services to sexual assault victims with disabilities>>.

The goals of the collaborative are <<insert goals, e.g., collectively build the capacity of partnering agencies to offer appropriate, accessible services to victims with disabilities>>. Ultimately, the desired outcomes are to <<insert desired outcomes, e.g., create permanent change at all levels of the sexual assault and disability systems in which effective services for persons with disabilities are fully integrated into the existing structure of victim services and advocacy>>.

Description of Partnering Agencies

Partnering agencies involved in <<insert name of the collaborative>> offer the following services, in general and specifically to sexual assault victims with disabilities:

- <<Insert a brief agency description of each partnering agency and its work regarding sexual assault victims with disabilities.>>

Roles and Responsibilities

Each partnering agency in the <<insert the name of the collaborative>> agrees to do the following:

- Actively participate as a member of the <<insert the name of the collaborative>>, participate in scheduled collaborative meetings and trainings, share information and resources related to its agency's role in the collaborative, work to implement and monitor the provisions of this agreement, share in/support the leadership, evaluate the effectiveness of collaborative efforts and recommend revisions as needed over time. <<Edit the above or add in any additional roles or responsibilities of all members of the collaborative.>>
- <<Add roles and responsibilities specific to each partnering agency in the collaborative.>>

Time Frame

We, the undersigned, commit to participate in the <<insert the name of the collaborative>> and

the roles and responsibilities as described in this agreement. This agreement becomes effective on _____ and will be reviewed and renewed by _____. <<If the agreement will not be time-specific, this section can merely indicate that the agreement can be reviewed at the request of any partnering agency and revised as needed.>>

Signatures

<<Insert signature, typed name, title, agency of each signer and date signed. Ensure each signer has the authority to sign for their agency.>>

Signed: _____
Name: _____
Title: _____
Agency: _____
Date signed: _____

Signed: _____
Name: _____
Title: _____
Agency: _____
Date signed: _____

Signed: _____
Name: _____
Title: _____
Agency: _____
Date signed: _____

Signed: _____
Name: _____
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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.

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¹Partnering 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.

²D. King Akers, *Balancing the power: Creating a crisis center accessible to people with disabilities* (Austin, TX: SafePlace), 115.

³King Akers.

⁴U.S. Department of Justice, 126.

⁵The following resources were useful in the development of this module: A. Duke (Ed.), *Creating a memorandum of understanding: A know your rights guide for public housing tenants in Massachusetts* (Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, 2005), based on a booklet originally prepared by the Massachusetts Union of Public Housing Tenants, *How to create memos of understanding: Training materials for public housing tenant organizations in Massachusetts*; King Akers, 97-132; SAFECOM, *Writing guide for a memorandum of understanding* (Department of Homeland Security, Office for Interoperability and Compatibility), <http://www.safecomprogram.gov/NR/rdonlyres/70169F1E-F2E9-4835-BCC4-31F9B4685C8C/0/MOU.pdf>; U.S. Department of Justice, *A national protocol for sexual assault medical forensic examination, adult/adolescent* (Washington, D.C., 2004), 30–2, through <http://samfe.dna.gov>; and *Sample memorandum of understanding* (for applicants of grant programs of the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice), <http://www.ovw.usdoj.gov/docs/sample-mou.pdf>. The 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.

⁶King Akers, 115.

⁷King Akers, 115.

⁸U.S. Department of Justice, 126.

⁹Drawn from U.S. Department of Justice, 126.

¹⁰Activities 3 through 7 in this section are loosely drawn from SAFECOM, 3-8.

¹¹Paragraph drawn from SAFECOM, 3.

¹²Drawn from King Akers, 113.

¹³Adapted from Red Wind Consulting, Inc., *Sample memorandum of agreement, Drafting a protocol for sexual assault medical forensic examinations in American Indian and Alaskan Native communities: Recommendations and tools for tribes and federal, state and local agencies* (draft, February 2010).