

A Bird's Eye View of Your Community's Response to Sexual and Domestic Violence

a guided imagery exercise

(Tell the audience that this exercise is intended to help them consider the total community response to sexual and domestic violence from multiple perspectives. All they need to do is relax and listen, take note of the images that come into their minds, and use those images to begin their group discussion.)

The purpose of this exercise is for you to consider the total picture of your community's response to sexual violence:

- *The people*
- *The places*
- *The services*
- *The languages*
- *The attitudes*
- *The accessibility*

I am going to ask you to place yourself in other people's situations and imagine how you would experience your community system.

As I talk, think about what things look like where you are.

Make a mental note to yourself about where the good stuff is, where you smile, and also where your emotions or reactions begin to get negative – no matter why. Remember where there are blips on the radar screen.

When you begin your discussion as a group, you're going to see if anyone else read the same blips, and whether you, as a community, want to do something about that.

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Maybe you're just a regular person in the community. Someone who goes to church and work and picks up the kids at school and has the luxury of not having to think much about personal violence on a daily basis. But someone comes to you for help, and you agree to help find what she needs.

- Do you think immediately of the sign on the office where you can go? Or the face of a familiar person who works or volunteers there? Or is it like you're trying to discover a part of town you never knew existed?
- You go to a place that looks like part of the response system. Is it an herbal tea/group hug kind of place? Or an office with cubicles and fluorescent lights. Or a shabby-looking house in a questionable neighborhood? What does it feel like, smell like, when you walk in the door?
- Does the person you talk with there try to fix you with a one-size-fits-all response? Or is there an appropriate level of flexibility to fit the situation at hand?

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Now try on a series of different personal perspectives:

Assume you are a person who has just moved into your community from a far away place. For the purpose of this exercise it really doesn't matter whether you came from Mexico or Malibu. From your perspective, many things are different here. The food is different. The ways people socialize is different. Maybe the religion or culture or language you grew up with isn't even represented here in your new home.

You are in trouble, and you need help, in this strange place.

Or maybe you're just a kid, still in elementary school. You are scared about something that's been happening with an adult you see regularly in the community. You were about to tell your mother one day, but she was so overloaded with other trouble that you decided not to weigh her down any more.

You have to tell someone though, even though he told you not to.

Or maybe you are from one of the best and oldest families in your county. Your relatives are who's who, the movers and shakers, the power brokers, the "go to" people in the community. Your batterer knows how to hit you so the bruises don't show. And your big house is out in the country, so no one could possibly hear you scream or cry.

If you are the stranger, the child, or the socially connected woman,

- How do you find out who can help?
- Are services listed in the phone book using the same words you would naturally use?
- Are those around you - the leaders of your social or cultural community or your school - informed about domestic and sexual violence resources?
- Do they speak your language? And reflect values that are comfortable to you?
- Do any of the faces there look like yours?
- Are services located in a place that you can easily find?
- Do the program offices intimidate you, disgust you, or comfort you?
- Are there ways you can "test the waters" or try them out before you start trusting them with what's really on your mind?
- Can you get in and out of there without other people getting in your business, and maybe telling your offender you were there?
- How likely is it you will leave even a little better off than when you walked in?
- Is there one person somewhere in the system who asks a question in such a way that makes you shut down, turn around, and bolt out the door?
- How do the medical, law enforcement, court room, and crisis response staff treat each other? _With respect? Is there tension between them?

- Once you get past the trauma of reporting and prosecuting, and you're finally safe again, are there resources available to help you with the nightmares that keep coming back?

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Or maybe you are a new professional in the community, in the shelter, on the crisis line, in Child Protective services, in the police department, or in the district attorney's office.

You are starting your first day on the job. You are excited but nonetheless smart enough to be a little intimidated by the critical nature of your work.

- Do you have the resources you need at your desk to get you started? Do you even have a desk? A computer on your desk? Does the roof leak onto your desk when it rains?
- Do you have a valid personnel notebook? Something that is actually accurate & useful?
- Do you have access to a room where you can speak with victims privately?
- Do you have a place where the children can play when you talk with their parents?
- How are you going to learn what to do on the job? Who will train you?
- Do you even know exactly what the expectations are for you in your job?
- Do you have a list of your professional peers in related offices? Will there be an opportunity to meet them soon? Are there protocols that explain who does what with which response?
- Do the other organizations practice truth-in-advertising? That is, are they really capable of doing what they say they can do? Is your organization capable, too?
- Is there one person or one organization in the community that seems to put up obstacles with particular types of clients or offenders? Can you address that problem openly? Or is it a huge undiscussable issue in town?
- Can you see that there are both individual and collective strategies in place to both respond to and end the violence?

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Maybe you're a director or board member of the professional response program.

- Are you proud of that office? Does it lift you up or drag you down to walk in the door?
- Do you think these are absolutely the best people in the world? Or do you comfort yourself by apologizing "we just do the best we can with what we have."
- Do you cringe when you review the level of staff salaries and benefits?
- Are there enough volunteers to provide 24 hour response, seven days a week? Or are the staff worn out because they have to carry beepers?
- Are you absolutely clear in your heart and mind and mission statement about what you are there to accomplish?

- Would all the other staff and volunteers and board members agree with that definition?
- Do you have access to all the different types of expertise you need to run the organization?
 - Someone to review the insurance coverage,
 - to manage information technology,
 - to work on both organizational development and the plumbing,
 - someone to plan the fundraiser...
- Do your board members reflect the diversity of your community?

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Take a deep breath, and think about the things that might threaten or simply change your community, and how that would affect your response to domestic and sexual violence.

- Think about extreme weather. Is your office in a flood zone, or on high ground? What are your physical vulnerabilities and advantages?
- Think about local economic conditions. Has there been a downturn, like a plant closing, and you're seeing more referrals as a result of the stress?
- Think about how the community views your program. Are they apathetic, hostile, or supportive?
- What is your local financial support like?
- Did some fantastic new person just move to town who might join you in this work?
- Are the elected officials willing to turn up in public to celebrate your work?
- Do the local governments and philanthropies provide in-kind or financial support?
- If you threw a fundraising event, would anybody come?

*Now, begin the conversations at your table about what came to your mind during this exercise. I suggest you first take turns going around the table to share what good things came to mind, as well as what the blips on the radar screen were. What works, and what needs strengthening. Pay special attention to the issues that are mentioned multiple times, even if they aren't the issues you thought you came here to discuss.*