

## MAKING THE CASE FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

### PURPOSES & BENEFITS

This document illustrates the importance of community organizing as a means to end sexual and domestic violence. The specific purposes and benefits are:

- To define community organizing within the context of the toolkit.
- To identify the key characteristics and benefits of a community organizing approach.
- To highlight the effectiveness of community-based collaborative approaches engaged in community organizing/change efforts, as well as making the link to the importance of building the capacity of those collaboratives in order to be effective.

### HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

This document can help the collaborative group to make the case for community organizing, whether it is for recruiting collaborative group members, recruiting stakeholders for planning or plan implementation purposes, to obtain community buy-in on the collaborative's efforts against sexual and domestic violence, etc. This document is meant to be used in conjunction with every other tool and section of the toolkit. For further support on making the case for community organizing and its impact, see the Additional Community Organizing Resources section of the toolkit for links to additional resources, and specifically the tool, "Social Movements That Have Had Success."

**Kansas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence**



This project was supported by grant #2005-WR-AX-0015 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, US Dept. of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Dept. of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

## MAKING THE CASE FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Community organizing is a broad term used to encompass a variety of methods aimed at "bringing together the talents, resources and skills of people in the community in order to increase their collective power and work for social change (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2002)."

While community organizing encompasses a wide range of specific mechanisms, the key characteristics that help to define this approach include:

- Community-based participatory processes
- Development and expansion of community ownership
- Community empowerment and inclusiveness
- Collaboration and partnership
- Accountability to and an opportunity for empowerment through action by those impacted by the issues of sexual and domestic violence (Wineman, 2003)
- Development of traditional and non-traditional leadership
- Expansion of community participation (beyond the "usual suspects")
- Emphasis on social justice and social change that can be connected back to the founding principles of the anti-sexual and domestic violence movement (Lehrner & Allen, 2009)

Often, in our attempts to address the needs of the many victims and survivors of sexual and domestic violence who seek our assistance, community organizing (and the collaboration inherent in it) can seem like an insurmountable task or one more burden on our time. Because violence against women is supported and fostered by root causes deeply embedded within our society, creating a world that is free of violence will require social change. The need for social change has long been recognized as key to ending violence against women and, even as the movement has become more sophisticated and professionalized, creating social change remains a core component of our philosophy in working to better the lives of women and children. Social change within this context is defined as education, advocacy and community mobilization intended to systematically challenge and alter existing knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors regarding sexual and domestic violence and the social and cultural practices and institutions that support these behaviors, with the intention of creating fundamental social and cultural transformation.

Social change regarding violence against women will require a fundamental shift in societal worldview, beginning with an acknowledgement of the problem beyond those who directly experience the issue. Numerous approaches will be necessary to address such an enormous task. Current efforts have achieved considerable success in improving victim safety and offender accountability through such methods as policy development, systems change initiatives, victim services, batterer intervention, sex offender treatment and provider education.

These approaches, however, could be further enhanced and supported by wider community engagement that seeks to raise awareness, change community norms that support violence against women, and mobilize communities for social change.

Enhancing community engagement to end sexual and domestic violence offers an opportunity to reinvigorate strengths of our "grassroots" history as a movement while also building support for prevention and intervention initiatives and those who currently hold the primary responsibility for advocating for victims of sexual and domestic violence, local domestic and sexual violence agencies.

**Kansas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence**



This project was supported by grant #2005-WR-AX-0015 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, US Dept. of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Dept. of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

Utilizing community organizing strategies offers numerous potential benefits for ending sexual and domestic violence. Some of these include:

- **Focus on root causes** – Community engagement fosters a more critical examination of the underlying causes of sexual and domestic violence among the public while fostering dialogue to help increase awareness and dispel myths and misconceptions;
- **Promotion of social justice** – By providing a mechanism for more effective collaboration between institutions, organizations and community members, community engagement allows for increased sharing of power and decision-making, facilitating equity and highlighting issues of social injustice;
- **Connection of people and resources** – Community engagement builds relationships between individuals, institutions and community organizations, creating increased awareness of and investment in the issue;
- **Development of better solutions** – Bringing a greater diversity and number of voices to the issue increases the likelihood that more creative solutions will be developed and that solutions will more responsive to the needs of those impacted by the issue;
- **Expansion of ownership and responsibility regarding the issue** – By fostering the identification, development and involvement of a wider range of stakeholders in the issue, investment in and responsibility for ending sexual and domestic violence is expanded beyond that of local domestic and sexual violence service agencies, thus increasing the likelihood of community support (in multiple forms) for the local agency, change initiatives and victims;
- **Change in community norms** – Community engagement expands the focus of sexual and domestic violence services to mobilization of the larger community, providing a mechanism for accessing the majority of individuals who are unlikely to perpetrate sexual and domestic violence and fostering a community norm that emphasizes the unacceptability of violence against women. Such a norms change enhances prevention initiatives by reducing the likelihood that violence will occur and intervention initiatives by increasing support for victim safety and offender accountability;
- **Increased sustainability** – By engaging the community throughout issue identification, solution development and program implementation, there is an increased likelihood of institutionalization and thus sustainability of change initiatives. Group learning and decision-making have been demonstrated to be key elements in institutionalization.

One of the many by-products of community organizing is capacity development for both a collaborative and the community.

Recent studies on successful public health interventions indicate that building community capacity increases:

- The effectiveness of evidence-based programs
- The scope of interventions
- The scale of efforts in a sustainable way so that they can actually reduce community-wide rates of child and family problems

One study by Longhi and Porter (2009) examined the ten-year impact of local, community-based collaboratives in Washington State. These local collaboratives (i.e., community networks) were comprised of families, community-based organizations and state managers, and were formed to develop higher levels of community capacity in order to reduce the rates of major child and family problems, including domestic violence and child abuse. These local collaboratives were assessed on: 1) A strategic, shared, result-based focus; 2) Collaborative leadership with whole community, leveraged resources, and sustainable efforts; 3) Innovation and learning from changing conditions and experiences; and 4) Careful attention to measured “risks” and results-based decisions.

The findings from this study included:

- Among counties with state-funded Community Networks, overall severity of problems decreased or remained stable while they worsened for those counties without state-funded Community Networks.
- Among counties with state-funded Community Networks, the higher the average community capacity, the larger the number of better-than-state trends in rates of locally prioritized child and family problems.
- Counties that achieved more improvements in community capacity during this period achieved greater reductions in the overall severity of child and family problems by the end of this period.

These findings support the conclusion that building community capacity is a powerful means for reducing rates of child and family problems and, eventually, for making these problems less severe, even in communities challenged by demographic changes, poverty and poor economic conditions. Furthermore, building the capacity of local collaboratives may be especially helpful in overcoming obstacles and becoming more effective in order to help local communities and states to build resiliency in economic downturns, when economic stress and funding cuts can add to child and family problems.

Lehrner, A. and Allen, N. (2009). *Still a movement after all these years?: Current tensions in the domestic violence movement*. Sage Publications 10.1177/1077801209332185 <http://vaw.sagepub.com> hosted at <http://online.sagepub.com>.

Longhi, D. and Porter, L., in collaboration with the Family Policy Council Staff and Community Network Staff (February 2009). *Community networks – Building community capacity, reducing rates of child and family problems trends among Washington State counties from 1998 to 2006: Executive summary and technical paper*. Washington State Family Policy Council: Olympia, WA.

Wineman, S. (2003). *Power under: Trauma and non-violent social change*. Steven Wineman.