

SEXUAL ASSAULT: KEY LESSONS LEARNED IN MULTI-YEAR DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

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Courtesy of Principal Deputy Director Bea Hanson, Ph.D., of the Office on Violence Against Women

Finding the most effective ways to prevent and respond to sexual assault is a high priority for OVW. Thus we funded a [multi-year, six-site project](#) that delved deeply and systematically into the outreach, services and community partnerships of organizations that identified as dual programs that serve victims of both domestic and sexual violence and multi-service programs that include services to sexual assault survivors.

The goal of the project, called the Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative (SADI), was to enhance sexual assault services at the selected sites while also identifying practices and dynamics that cut across all of the sites so that the lessons learned could be transferred to others.

The six diverse sites engaged in a process to assess, plan and execute a range of new and enhanced services designed to reach survivors of sexual assault across the lifespan, improve the effectiveness of services and to increase the capacity of the organizations and personnel who deliver those services.

The lessons learned can be found in [Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative—Final Report](#) published by the National Sexual Assault Coalition Resource Sharing Project and the National Sexual Violence Resource Center and available on [the project's webpage](#)

The final report contains insights and recommendations for those who fund sexual assault services, those who provide technical assistance and those who deliver the services.

The staff in dual and multi-service programs work incredibly hard, care deeply about survivors and their community and want to provide services that their communities need. The lessons learned ask organizations to be critically self-reflective about the very nature of their structure and service models for serving survivors of sexual assault across the lifespan.

Some key lessons learned through SADI were:

- At the start of the project, there was a pervasive lack of knowledge and skill about sexual violence outside of domestic violence. The project's initial internal assessments indicated the extent to which the six programs, four of which had for decades identified themselves as dual domestic and sexual violence programs, were understanding and responding to sexual violence primarily in the context of domestic violence (rather than as violence on its own outside of domestic violence.)
- All six sites recognized that they lacked both fundamental and advanced understanding and skills about sexual violence. If even these programs recognized the need for fundamental training, then we can assume that training needs of most dual and multi-service programs are likely high.

- It was only when training was provided on active listening, trauma and advocacy that the sites started to grasp the differences between their current model – providing tangible, crisis-oriented aid in a caring way – versus the emotional support throughout the lifespan that survivors of sexual violence likely sought.
- While these changes did not result in the creation of new, comprehensive services, they represent major changes in the way core services were understood and delivered. The sites that most incorporated active listening and trauma-informed approaches ended their time as part of the project in the best position to move forward with creating new services that extend beyond core support and advocacy.

Across sites, the process of launching the project began with high energy and enthusiasm. As the project moved from assessment and planning into implementation, there was a period of organizational destabilization that was either resolved through honest self-assessment that led to re-stabilization and moving forward or was unresolved and led to disengagement.

Comprehensive and meaningful sexual assault service development in dual and multi-service organizations requires the shift from diffuse organizational identities that vaguely included sexual assault services to a clearer organizational identity as a dual and multi-service organization. Having a clear sense of organizational identity was associated with changes that permeated throughout the organization.

The project pinpointed several key factors to bringing about the organizational change required to make this shift, which include:

- openness to learning and change;
- direct and ethical communication practices;
- stability in leadership and empowering leaders;
- support for staff to mitigate secondary and organizational trauma;
- incorporation of anti-racism/oppression work; and
- critical self-reflection and honest self-assessment.

Communities and organizations who are considering a review of their services for survivors of sexual violence will find valuable guidance in the [SADI Final Report](#). The bottom line: Enhancing sexual assault services in dual and multi-service programs requires that programs acknowledge that sexual assault survivors are not getting what they deserve. It is not merely a matter of wanting to serve more survivors or survivors from more groups within the community. Programs must engage in an honest and critical self-assessment that includes reflection on whether, as an organization, they are ready to say, “We don’t know what we don’t know” and to accept feedback in all areas, including those where they thought they were doing well.

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