**Working jointly to break down barriers to services: An interview with Mary Brennan-Taylor**

*Introduction:*

*You are listening to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center Just Rural! Podcast series that highlights innovative programs and success stories from rural communities across the United States.*

*[Music: Cattails]*

**Ali:**

One of the models for effective collaboration between child advocacy centers and sexual assault programs involved housing a satellite office for the CAC within the sexual assault program. I had the opportunity to discuss some of the logistics involved in getting a new collaboration started in a rural part of Niagara County in New York with Mary Brennan-Taylor. Mary serves as the Vice President of Programs for the YWCA of Niagara, a dual domestic violence and sexual assault program. The work that Mary described was a new effort to launch a satellite office for the CAC within the YWCA. She shared how this collaboration came about, some of the specifics for getting the new program off the ground, and the process of gathering community support with the ultimate goal of providing better services for victims of all ages. To provide some of the history for this collaborative effort, Mary discussed the development of a SART team and how the need for more services for children came up there.

**Mary:**

In August of 2009 the YWCA took over the rape and sexual assault services program for all of Niagara county. It had been housed in the Niagara county department of mental health and since that time, we have been providing 24 hour a day/7 day a week services for rape and sexual assault victims. We also through this initiative developed along with a few other member agencies something referred to as a sexual assault response team, or SART. The SART team is made of the district attorney, law enforcement, forensic nurse examiners, other advocates and the CAC.

Actually it was in February of this year, we were sitting at a SART meeting and a member of law enforcement was bemoaning the fact that in the eastern part of Niagara county, which is actually the more rural section of Niagara county, there really were not any services, but there was really not a place a safe space for children to be interviewed. For the children who live in some of the more remote, rural areas, Dark or Somerset, Royalton, you know these areas in Niagara county would have to take could be upwards of could be upwards an hour, an hour and fifteen minutes, an hour and a half to get into the inner city of Niagara falls, which is where the child advocacy center is located and many children have parents who do not have transportation, could not get them to the CAC, and so some of these children go without these services.

**Ali:**

Mary went on to describe how her organization and the county’s CAC had been working together up to this point. For them, the model that worked best seemed to be providing crisis services for teens and adults, while the CAC addressed the needs of children.

**Mary:**

The YWCA of Niagara and the Child Advocacy Center of Niagara have had really a long history of collaboration. The child advocacy center of course, children who have been physically or sexually abused and the YWCA of Niagara as a domestic violence service provider for victims and their children and since 2009, the county’s confidential rape crisis service provider. We deal primarily from the YWCA with older adolescents and adult victims and the child advocacy center of course with young children. So we have worked with the child advocacy center frequently if we have had victims who have children who are in need of their services, whether it is through our domestic violence program or our residence for homeless women and children in Niagara Falls called Carolyn’s house.

**Ali:**

Based on the successful work between the YWCA and CAC in the past, and the newly identified need for reaching child victims in the rural part of the county, an idea developed for hosting a satellite office.

**Mary:**

I said, we have space in the YWCA space in this building that is being really underused. We certainly could open up that space and make it available for a special victim’s room that we could use for our adult and older adolescent victims for counseling, but then also free it up for the CAC to be able to use for victims at this end of the county. That’s how it started and there was tremendous excitement from the CAC , from the district attorney’s office, from law enforcement to use this facility for not only adult victims of sexual assault, but use it for children and have it be a warm, welcoming comfortable space, so we started in February, we started with doing some outreach to the community.

**Ali:**

To make this welcoming interview space a reality, Mary discussed their joint efforts to gather community support and financial contributions.

**Mary:**

We had one initial principle donor who provided us with a significant donation to get this project off the ground, which enabled us to do some very major renovations into the areas that we were going to be using and that’s really how it started.

The executive director of the CAC and I have been going out to every possible civic organization in Niagara County over the past several months. So it’s been many evenings of talking to Rotary clubs and Kiwanis and Optimists and exchange clubs and all these various fraternal organizations and asking them to partner with us, no matter how much a donation would be, to help us help children. And so that’s really, it’s really been a terrific working relationship, a terrific collaborative, where both agencies are working together to get this off the ground.

**Ali:**

I was curious to learn more about this space and how it would be used and shared between the two organizations. While they were still in the planning stages when I spoke to Mary, she was able to provide a picture of what this would be like in practice.

**Mary:**

It will be staffed by YWCA staff primarily. And then we will work out a schedule whether it’s Tuesdays and Thursdays, or whatever day works best for the Child Advocacy Center to have their staff present in that room. The room is not only a, as I mentioned, a warm and welcoming counseling room, that has just very non-institutional kind of furnishings, almost like somebody’s home actually, very comfortable, and there’s are also two rooms off of that counseling room. One is a forensic interviewing room with a two way mirror and on the other side is the observation room where the district attorney, CPS, law enforcement, could watch while a child is interviewed by someone from the CAC to explain what traumatic experience that child has been through and the purpose of that of course is that the child only has to tell his or her story once. That interview room is available 24 hours a day, so if there is some case and the district attorney or law enforcement needs to interview a child at 10 at night or whatever time, we can make that room available to the CAC.

**Ali:**

In discussing what has been rewarding about this collaboration, Mary emphasized how great it was that both organizations could work together to educate and engage the community and provide better services for children.

**Mary:**

Well as I mentioned it’s just right now getting off the ground, but what it really has done is show to the community that this is indeed a *[sic]* equal partnership between the YWCA and the child advocacy center. We make the presentations jointly; we talk about this as a collaboration. We’re going to refer to this room as the CAC satellite office in the YWCA of Niagara. We have some of our major funders and certifying agencies, the Office of Child and Family Services, the Office of Victim Services, have been behind this collaboration.

We have not had any kind of turf issues or any kind of egos haven’t gotten in the way. Both agencies come from the perspective that we’re here to help victims, it’s not about the YWCA, it’s not about the CAC, it’s about the victims and I think as long as we continue to remember why we’re doing the work we’re doing, I don’t think we’ll have those problems.

*Outro:*

*This project was supported by Grant No. 2009-TA-AX-K042 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this program are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.  For more information about our Rural Project visit* [*www.nsvrc.org*](http://www.nsvrc.org)*.*

*[music: Cattails]*