

Cultural Competency

Role of Cultural Competency

Sexual assault affects every culture and race. As our state becomes more diverse so do the needs of sexual assault survivors. This presents additional challenges for sexual assault response teams. SART members all serve critical functions in supporting a victim from the trauma through prosecution and healing. In order to be culturally competent SART members must be aware of the relationship of culture and its impact on sexual assault victims.²³

A victim centered response to sexual assault recognizes that underserved populations – women of color, low-income people, undocumented women, persons of disability and LGBT populations are disproportionately impacted by sexual assault. Because of this, local communities must be steadfast in their commitment to increasing their multicultural competency. Adopting the following principles of multicultural competence will move communities closer to being culturally competent in their response to sexual assault.

- **Multicultural competence includes multiple dimensions of diversity:** Culture should be defined broadly and extend well beyond race and ethnicity to include sensitivity to gender, age, disability, language, literacy, sexual orientation, and any set of beliefs that guide an individual.
- **Multicultural competence involves experience, knowledge, skills and commitment:** SART responders should place a strong emphasis on including women, persons of color and persons of disability. Member organizations should provide for ongoing staff education on cultural competency to increase their knowledge and skills.
- **Multicultural competence applies to individuals and organizations:** Commitment to cultural competence should be integrated into policies and procedures, written materials, and evaluation. Services should be adapted to use the language and vernacular of people of color. Assistance should be provided to victims with literacy difficulties and/or limited English proficiency. Responders should strictly enforce zero tolerance policies for harassment, discrimination, racist language or homophobia.
- **Multicultural competence is an on-going process of growth:** Professional development should address the need for ongoing growth. SART responders should continually evaluate the cultural needs of underserved victims by conducting regular focus groups and collecting victim feedback information. Underserved victims should be highly active in the development, implementation and evaluation of local services.

Best Practice in SART Cultural Competency

²³ Zarate, L. Suggestions for Upgrading Cultural Competency Skills of Sexual Assault Response Teams. Position Paper by Arte Sana. (2001).

Cultural competency is a goal for which to strive; becoming culturally competent is an ongoing process. Although best practice in cultural competency for SARTs is an emerging field of knowledge, women of color advocates have identified a number of recommendations about how sexual assault response teams can increase their cultural competency and ensure equity in access to victim centered services for all victims of sexual assault.

Inclusive Representation

SART providers should strive to reflect the demographics of the local community – particularly underserved populations. A SART should not only include members groups that will come into contact with a victim, but also make sure that those individuals represent the communities being served. It is imperative to ensure that women of color – the most likely victims of a sexual assault – have a voice in shaping local response to sexual assault. Strategies that strengthen representation include:

- Inviting women of color advocates to join the local SART
- Conducting focus groups and listening sessions with underserved populations – women of color, low-income, undocumented women, persons of disability and LGBT people
- Creating an environment that encourages underserved people to become victim advocates

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Reducing Access Barriers

Diverse populations underutilize services. There are many reasons for this, including fear of formal systems and/or retribution, lack of trust due to past experiences, concerns about not being understood or respected, concerns about accessibility, lack of familiarity with available services and discomfort from inadvertent and inappropriate comments or approaches from providers. SART members should acknowledge these barriers when working with underserved survivors.

Addressing Language

SART disciplines should ensure that victims have access to bilingual services – either through bilingual staff or through interpreters. Remember to consider country of origin, acculturation level, and dialect issues. SART disciplines should also ensure they have the ability to provide services to the Deaf community and those who are hard of hearing – either through staff or through interpreters.

Cultural Competency by Discipline:

Advocacy Response

Diverse clients are often more comfortable with providers from similar backgrounds. Unfortunately, diverse service providers are often in short supply. Community-based advocacy organizations should work diligently to create an environment that welcomes and encourages women of color to become sexual assault advocates. They must also create an environment that makes it safe for women of color to talk about issues of race and racism within the agency and the community. The Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (WCASA) provides consultation and technical assistance to local sexual assault service providers about how to increase representation and leadership among women of color advocates through its Women of Color Initiative.

Law Enforcement Response

It is crucial that law enforcement be knowledgeable about and committed to reducing real and perceived fears within communities of color about institutional racism and in the LGBT community about institutional homophobia. This means being aware of how ongoing critical incidents and suspicions of abuse of authority by law enforcement may impact on how the underserved peoples perceive them. It is equally critical for law enforcement to separate itself from ICE. The perception of many undocumented survivors of crime is that the police and ICE are one in the same.

Prosecution Response

Prosecutors should acknowledge the fears that underserved victims bring with them into the prosecution process. These may include fears about judgment, blaming, discrimination, harassment and retribution. Some of these fears may be perceived, and some may be based on victim's previous experiences. Regardless, the fear is a genuine and powerful experience for the victim. Prosecutors should not downplay or discount fears that women of color, undocumented women or LGBT victims share. A culturally competent approach includes: (a) asking underserved victims about their fears; (b) acknowledging that the fears are real for the victim; and (c) problem solving with the victim about what prosecution can do and not do to reduce their fear.

Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) Response

The examination which is done after a sexual assault may be especially traumatizing for some survivors who have never had a gynecological exam, as is the case for many rural immigrants, and survivors on fixed incomes who cannot afford preventive care.

Special attention should be taken to address the needs of secondary survivors (parents, boyfriends, husbands, etc.) as they may directly impact the survivor's healing. Language is key for establishing safety and trust, both for primary as well as secondary survivors.

For those survivors and family members who place a high importance on virginity, one way to approach this issue is to remind parents, boyfriends, and family members that virginity cannot be taken, it can only be given. No matter the physical condition of the survivor, she is still spiritually and psychologically a virgin, for this was not a sexual act but an act of violence.

Wisconsin Adult Sexual Assault Response Team Protocol (pp. 43-45) by Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2011. Retrieved from https://www.wcasa.org/file_open.php?id=203
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