



# Sexual Assault

## DEMONSTRATION INITIATIVE

Enhancing Sexual Assault Services

The Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative (SADI) was created to enhance sexual assault outreach and services in dual/multi-service programs.<sup>1</sup> Six sites across the nation engaged in a multi-year process of assessment, planning, and implementation of new and enhanced services and organizational capacity building supported by the Office on Violence Against Women, the Resource Sharing Project, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, and project partners. Understanding that there is always a need for improved, innovative, and enhanced responses to sexual assault survivors across the country, this project allowed us to look specifically at the need from the perspective of dual/multi-service programs.

We know that dual/multi-service programs work incredibly hard, care deeply about survivors and their community, and want to provide services that their communities need. The lessons that we learned in the SADI ask our movement to be critically self-reflective about the very ways that we have structured our organizations and service models in regard to serving survivors of sexual violence across the lifespan.

The SADI was a unique project. It started with a basic framework and goals, but sought to collaboratively create the strategies and resources as the project unfolded. As a demonstration initiative, the SADI aimed not only to enhance services at the selected sites, but also to identify practices and dynamics that cut across all of the sites. In this way, the lessons learned from the SADI can be used by other dual/multi-service programs as they work to enhance their own services to sexual assault survivors.

Some of the key lessons we learned through the SADI were:

1. Comprehensive and meaningful sexual assault service development in dual and multi-service organizations requires the shift from a diffuse organizational identity that vaguely included sexual assault services to **a clear organizational identity as a dual/multi-service organization**. Diffusion of organizational identity is a barrier to organizational change because it makes it difficult to identify what direction to move in and which strategies to implement. It can also contribute to a sense of disempowerment among staff, especially those who are most concerned about enhancing sexual assault services. As sites developed a clearer

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<sup>1</sup> Dual programs refer to programs that address both sexual and domestic violence. Multi-service programs address additional issues, for example, child abuse, homelessness, trafficking, etc.

organizational identity as a provider of sexual assault services, they could more clearly state: ‘This is who we are; this is what we do; this is how we do it.’ Some of the key ways to enhance the organizational identity as a sexual assault services provider include:

- Online presence
- Public presentation, including the name of the program/agency
- Communications within the programs
- Job and program structure
- Policies and procedures

2. Sustainable organizational change requires **explicit and agency-wide support for sexual assault services**. Organizational change was evidenced in many SADI sites through the changes they made to policies and protocols. The specific policies varied between the sites, but all had the common goals of making sexual assault services more integral to the organization’s work, ensuring that all staff have clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the sexual assault program, and making policies and protocols more trauma informed. Places to assess and strengthen the focus on sexual assault include:

- Job description
- Supervision protocols
- Staff and volunteer orientation and training materials
- Medical response procedures
- Self-care and debriefing
- Intake procedures and data tracking

3. A basic tenet of the SADI was that effective sexual assault services cannot happen if there is not an understanding and direct response to racism and oppression. To the extent that programs do not endorse and enact an anti-racism/oppression approach, they will be limited in their capacity to serve survivors from marginalized groups. Among the SADI sites, most of them ascribed to anti-racism/oppression language from the beginning of the SADI. However, their understanding of what that means varied greatly. Even more, **staff capacity and willingness to allow themselves and their work to be shaped by that understanding ranged from active engagement to passive or active resistance**.

4. Stable and empowering leadership was found to be fundamental to organizational change. Many leadership styles can be effective. However, across these diverse sites a common dynamic was that organizations that accomplished the most

comprehensive changes were led by people who demonstrated trust in and empowerment of their staff. Moreover, **the extent to which the organization was open to learning reflected the openness of the executive leader.** However, the organizational climate established by the executive leader prohibited staff from creating spaces and time for engaging as a group in learning. Additionally, leaders' resistance to learning put a stop to numerous changes in services.

5. Programs must **attend to the well-being of their staff** and of the organization as a whole. Trauma work is rewarding and fulfilling while at the same time demanding and draining. Even when there is no secondary or vicarious trauma evidenced, staff are doing difficult jobs, usually without full compensation or social rewards. It is the responsibility of leaders to create structures and an environment that supports their staff. The extent to which programs support their own staff was seen as directly influencing the quality of services that could be provided to survivors.
6. **There was a pervasive lack of knowledge and skill at the start of the SADI around sexual violence outside of domestic violence.** The initial internal assessments indicated the extent to which these programs, four of which had for many years identified themselves as dual domestic and sexual violence programs, were understanding and responding to sexual violence primarily in the context of domestic violence. This mirrors the public perception of the programs as solely or primarily domestic violence agencies that were found in the community assessments conducted by each of the sites.

**All sites recognized that they lacked both fundamental and advanced understanding and skills about sexual violence.** This was striking in light of the fact that some of these sites had operated as dual agencies for decades. If even these programs recognized the need for fundamental training, the training needs of dual/multi-service programs in general are likely high. Some of the key ways to address this training deficit include:

- Start with pro-active sexual assault specific foundational learning
- Prioritize advocacy skills based on active listening
- Train on trauma-informed service and anti-oppression frameworks
- Require vigorous and on-going sexual assault-specific training for all staff and volunteers

It was only as training was provided on active listening, trauma, and advocacy that sites started to grasp the differences between their current model of providing tangible, crisis-oriented aid in a caring way versus the type of emotional support throughout the lifespan that survivors of sexual violence are likely to seek.

7. There was recognition early in the SADI that the established practices of the sites may not adequately serve the needs of sexual assault survivors, due to the way they focused on immediate physical safety while overlooking long-term emotional safety. **Services were aimed at providing tangible support<sup>2</sup> and were not suited to providing ongoing emotional support that sexual assault survivors need.** This was evidenced through:
- Inability to identify sexual assault patterns outside of intimate partner violence
  - Lack of awareness of how sexual trauma affects survivors throughout the lifespan
  - Inability to describe the program’s own sexual assault services
  - Placing arbitrary time limits on hotline/helpline calls
  - Defining successful services as only those where a tangible resource was provided and/or where a police report was filed.

Some of the key ways to assess and address lack of services specific to sexual assault include:

- Sexual assault-specific service oriented policies & procedures
- Intake and screening procedures
- Establishing core sexual assault services
- Recognizing active listening and support as an intervention
- Non-shelter advocacy contexts for sexual assault services including helpline/hotline services
- Active listening and trauma-informed service approaches
- Organizational commitment and supports for serving child, adolescent, and male survivors

8. **Enhancing sexual assault services in dual/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 bravely 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. It requires openness to more radical change than mere minor tweaks to existing programs. Some of the key factors to make this shift include:
- Openness to learning and change
  - Empowering leadership

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<sup>2</sup> Tangible support would include assistance such as immediate housing needs, no-contact orders, application for financial assistance, etc.; these types of support are more relevant to the needs of domestic violence survivors than most sexual violence survivors.

- Direct and ethical communication practices
- Stability of leadership
- Attention to vicarious and organizational trauma
- Incorporating anti-racism/anti-oppression work
- Critical self-reflection and honest self-assessment

Such shifts do not always result in the creation of new, comprehensive services, but they represent major changes in the way core services were understood and delivered in the SADI. **The sites that most incorporated active listening and trauma informed approaches ended the SADI in the best position to move forward with creating new services that extend beyond core support and advocacy.**

Local programs need and deserve help from coalitions and funders to be successful. The SADI provides a model for a more intensive, collaborative approach. This requires that technical assistance providers:

- Communicate directly when setting feasible expectations, providing resources, and suggesting strategies
- Simultaneously take on collaborative roles including generating ideas, planning, creating resources, and tailoring resources along with the program they are assisting, drawing on the local expertise of the program
- Create time and space for reflection and work as a counterbalance to the draw toward crisis that programs experience
- Keep programs on task in order to carry out their plans in a timely manner
- Customize assistance in a way that is specific to the program and adapts as the program changes

With support, creativity, and diligence, every dual/multi-service advocacy agency can develop excellent sexual assault services. Coalitions, local programs, and funders who are considering a review of their services for survivors of sexual violence, will find valuable guidance in the [SADI tools and resources](#) available from the RSP and NSVRC.

*“Before the SADI, we thought we were doing sexual assault work, but we weren’t. We thought you hung a shingle out, said we’re here, call us, and we’ll figure it out. Everything was a crisis. If they call us, they call us. So we thought we were doing the work...Now we really are doing the work.” -a SADI project site employee*

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