COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND ACTIVISM

People who are survivors of multiple traumas – and who fall through the cracks of systems designed to help them – often do not get much empathy from the larger community and society. This reality becomes readily apparent when we listen to talk shows, read the responses to news articles about funding cuts for human services, or engage people around us in conversation about the work we do. We’ve all heard the comments:

“Why don’t those people stop whining and get a job?”

“I don’t want to sound judgmental, but don’t they create their own problems?”

“There’s no problem that a dose of personal responsibility won’t solve.”

“I just HATE victims!”

While it might be tempting to ignore such comments after dismissing them as naïve and narrow-minded, we do so at the risk of those we serve. When politicians who want to win elections listen to this rhetoric, the result is all too often draconian policy decisions and state or federal budgets balanced on the backs of marginalized people. And this impacts our own ability to help the people we serve effectively.

Interpersonal violence, in particular, is a problem that thrives in the face of public attitudes that blame and hate victims. Holding abusers accountable for their behavior – and getting others to do so as well – is critical to our work as advocates and community partners who help people impacted by violence or abuse.

Judith Herman, M.D., author of Trauma and Recovery, points out complex trauma stemming from interpersonal violence or abuse is always embedded in a social structure that permits the abuse and exploitation of a subordinate group (Herman, 2009). Therefore, providing community education designed to address the underpinnings of violence – such as racism, classism, sexism, homophobia and ableism – is also a critical element of our work to end interpersonal violence and end oppression on all fronts.

Given these realities, some advocates and other social service providers have stopped asking, “Should we get involved in social change efforts?” Instead, they’ve begun asking, “How can we get involved most effectively?”

What is social activism, exactly?

The ability to deliver effective services depends on a strong voice in government and improved community understanding, as well as advocacy or counseling skills.
When we think of social activism, a definite image often comes to mind. We envision people taking to the streets, marching and carrying signs proclaiming their cause to the world. Or we envision a crowd gathered in a public arena, listening as a series of speakers fire up the crowd to take action in support of their cause.

While marches and rallies are time-honored forms of social activism, there are numerous ways for people to get involved in working for social change. Other actions qualifying as social activism range from community education to involvement in coalitions that work for change and writing letters to legislators or television show sponsors. Activism can be very public, or it can be a behind-the-scenes endeavor (an important factor for survivors with safety concerns).

Here are just a few examples:

- **Lobbying.** This includes tracking public policy and legislation that has the potential to impact the people we serve, and persuading elected officials to make the appropriate decisions. Lobbying activities can range from calling or writing legislators to testifying before legislative committees and organizing formal Lobby Days.

- **Public education.** A variety of public education efforts can be used to change societal beliefs about interpersonal violence and the people victimized by it. Schools, places of worship, civic organizations and public television stations are just a few of the venues that advocates and community partners can target for educational presentations.

- **Media campaigns.** This can include paid advertising in news outlets or on billboards, or free media coverage in the form of news articles, radio or television programming or public service announcements. This can also include monitoring advertising and other media for accurate or inaccurate messages about the people we serve as well as messages that seem to glorify violence or promote negative stereotypes, and contacting editors or sponsors to let them know our feelings about these messages.

- **Grass-roots organizing.** This means encouraging as many people as possible to join us in all of the above efforts. There is strength in numbers. One person or organization can too often be easily ignored. When several people or organizations join together, people begin to take notice.

**The benefits of social activism**

Working for social change is an excellent way for survivors to channel the normal anger that results from having been abused or oppressed. Public engagement also benefits advocates and other providers who sometimes feel frustrated in their efforts to help make the system work better for people who need help.

For some people who have survived trauma, activism offers one way to heal from the violence or abuse. Says Judith Herman (1997):
“These survivors recognize a political or religious dimension in their misfortune and discover that they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action. While there is no way to compensate for an atrocity, there is a way to transcend it, by making it a gift to others. The trauma is redeemed only when it becomes the source of a survivor mission. Social action offers the survivor a source of power that draws upon her own initiative, energy, and resourcefulness but that magnifies these qualities far beyond her own capacities.”

Social action on the part of survivors can take many forms (Herman, 1997):

- **Helping others who have been similarly victimized.** Survivors may become volunteer advocates at rape crisis centers or domestic violence shelters, or advocates for other victims in court. Or they may share their experience with other survivors in a support group setting.

- **Political involvement.** This may involve educational, legal, or political efforts to prevent others from being victimized in the future. Some survivors have gotten involved at the legislative level, by participating in letter-writing campaigns or lobbying efforts, or even testifying before legislative committees about their experiences.

- **Attempts to bring offenders to justice.** Many survivors believe holding the perpetrator accountable for crimes is not only important for their own personal well-being but also for the health of the larger society and for other victims. For many survivors, the act of reporting the crime to police or going to court is helpful in and of itself, regardless of the outcome the case.

- **Educating others.** Many survivors have shared their experiences and success stories as a way of offering hope to other survivors, or have told their stories at conferences and other training venues to help educate service providers about the needs of survivors.

Common to all these efforts, says Herman (1997) is a dedication to raising public awareness. Using the police and the courts to pursue justice, or participating in consciousness-raising activities, are ways to defy the perpetrator’s attempt to silence and isolate victims and open the possibility of finding new allies.

Social activism can also hold benefits for advocates and their community partners:

- A study of sexual assault program coordinators found that an ability to influence public policy was a particularly rewarding part of their job. Central to their positive experiences was the focus on working with women and advocating and lobbying on their behalf (Carmody, 1997).

- Advocates and other providers may also feel anger about attitudes, actions or statements from criminal justice personnel, including police officers, judges, detectives, defense attorneys and prosecutors; toward the perpetrators of the abuse; and toward societal attitudes about women and other marginalized groups (Wasco & Campbell, 2002). Social activism can be a productive way to channel this anger. As such, it can help
advocates and other providers avoid the burnout and vicarious trauma that can result from anger that’s not channeled in a healthy way.

- Many providers report a sense of higher purpose in life and a sense of camaraderie that allows them to maintain optimism in the face of horror (Herman, 1997).

### Packaging your message

A good way to start your community education and activism efforts is to create an attractive information packet. These packets can be used in a variety of venues to educate the public about your agency and its services, create an accurate picture of the realities faced by people you serve, and combat myths and stereotypes.

Some things to include in the packets are prepared statements, news releases, fact sheets, graphics or photos to go with news releases and fact sheets, pamphlets promoting your program or agency, and background on the agency itself such as detailed information about your services, number of people served, names and phone numbers for contact people, and other significant information.

Fact sheets are one- or two-page summaries of a given topic. They may be handed out at press conferences, sent to media outlets with press releases, distributed to elected officials during lobbying efforts, or used as follow-ups to telephone calls. Distilling information into a fact sheet helps reporters, legislators and other members of the public understand your message.

### Getting press coverage

While paid advertising on billboards and buses (especially for hotline numbers) can be an effective way to promote your services, it can be expensive. Fortunately, you can take advantage of free media – from news articles and op-ed pieces to public service announcements – to not only promote your services, but also debunk myths and educate the public.

Because the news media has power to help or hinder you in promoting your message, it’s to your benefit to create a positive relationship with the press. The good news is, most journalists do strive to be fair and responsible. But they have extremely tight deadlines and space restrictions, and some may be relatively inexperienced. The easier you make their job, the more you help them get a clear and accurate message to the public. Here are some tips on the care and feeding of journalists:

- Suggest ideas yourself, especially for feature stories. On any given day, many feature stories will have originated from tips provided to editors by the public. Feature material could include new or highly successful programs, agency anniversaries, significant grant awards, staff promotions or new staff profiles (especially a new director, or a new staff position made possible by grant funding).
• Get to know the players. If certain reporters regularly cover social service issues, learn who they are and provide them with a regular supply of information. If you don’t know who in a specific organization would cover your kind of story, contact the city editor (print), assignment editor or news director (broadcast).

• Designate a press area. At public events such as rallies, forums or educational programs, have reserved seating or a press area large enough to accommodate camera crews. Provide information packets to reporters in advance of the event so they can have a better understanding of topics to be discussed. Also spend a few minutes after the event answering press questions.

• Return phone calls. Always return reporters’ calls as promptly as possible. Deadlines do not wait for you or the reporter. Two hours late is too late.

• Think in terms of sound bites. When speaking with a reporter, keep interview answers simple and short, especially with radio and television reporters. Ten to 15 seconds is best for broadcast “sound bites.” Long, complicated answers put the burden on the reporter to determine which information is most important. State your conclusion, then your substantiating data. Hit your bottom line first.

Press releases

Press releases are an effective way to relay information of interest to several media outlets at once. They are appropriate for announcements of public events, fund-raisers or staffing decisions such as hiring a new director. A press release can also be an effective way to present your response to a controversial issue, such as a new television show that promotes negative messages. Following are a few tips for effective press releases:

• Give the press release a professional look. Use agency letterhead stationery or a letterhead specifically designed for news releases. Type all copy double-spaced or even triple-spaced to leave room for a reporter’s editing, and use only one side of the paper. If sending the press release online, use only standard typefaces such as Times New Roman or Helvetica, or use the PDF format, to ensure that messages don’t become garbled in transmission.

• Give complete information. For each person mentioned in the story, use first and last names and identify the person by title, position, or reason for being included in the story. Date your story and indicate the date it may be printed. (You’ll generally use the words FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE.)

• Include graphic elements. Mention opportunities for photos, or include good quality photos with the release. Identification of people in photos should be on a separate piece of paper pasted to the back of the photo, not written directly on the photo. Charts and graphs can also add visual impact to a story, especially when confidentiality concerns
restrict the use of photos. If photos are used, make sure everyone in the photo has signed a photo release.

- Keep it short. Write concise sentences and keep paragraphs no longer than about four sentences. The entire press release should be two pages or less.

- Use what journalists call the “inverted pyramid” style. Who, what, when, where, why and how are the essentials – and as many of them as possible should be in your lead paragraph or two. If you save important information for the end of the story, you may never see it in print or on the air.

- Pay attention to deadlines. Some sections of daily papers are printed in advance (the community calendar, for example) and weeklies may work one or two weeks in advance. For television and radio, find out when news directors are planning their stories.

- Be available for more information. Be available to assist the reporter who wants to follow up on a press release. For example, a reporter may want to interview additional people, or want photos or graphs to go with the story.

- Always include contact information. Include contact persons and phone numbers on everything, even short press releases, in case a reporter has questions or wants to follow up with a feature story. Better yet, provide two contact people in case one of them is not available at the time a reporter calls, and include a home phone number or cell phone number for at least one person.

**Press conferences**

A press conference allows you to reach all media simultaneously, and to have all your own experts in one room for statements and interviews. Press conferences need not be intimidating, and are an excellent way to obtain the kind of coverage you need to get your message to the public. When giving a press conference:

- Believe in the “newsworthiness” of your story. A news conference is appropriate for the announcement of important new programs or services, as well as for major grant awards. (This gives you an opportunity to publicly recognize your funders.) Join together with other social service providers for a press conference about the impact on your programs of government legislative or budget decisions. Other events such as “Violence Prevention Month” can also provide occasions for news coverage.

- Observe deadlines. Know and respect the reporters’ deadlines, so you know when – and when not – to schedule a press conference. Schedule the event several hours before that day’s deadline for both print and broadcast media.

- Think outside the box. Don’t limit your idea of “media” to the large newspapers and TV stations. Small, regional weekly or monthly publications, student newspapers, and newsletters put out by your local chamber of commerce or other community
organizations also qualify as media. Their staff should be sent press releases and invited to news conferences.

- Be prepared. Have experts on hand who can be called on by reporters with questions. All those who will speak or who may be called on should be briefed beforehand on anticipated questions and the parameters of their responses.

- Provide refreshments. Coffee, soft drinks and doughnuts or cookies add a nice touch.

**Other external communications**

Fortunately, you don’t have to depend totally on the news media. Several creative ways exist to take your message directly to the public. You have two options: take your agency into the community, and bring the community into your agency. Here are some ideas:

- **Newsletter.** Create an agency newsletter that goes out to potential donors, elected officials, business and community leaders, churches, doctors’ offices and public events.

- **Tours.** Conduct agency tours for legislators, business and community leaders, members of the clergy and other interested parties.

- **Speaker’s bureau.** Establish a speaker’s bureau to give presentations for religious or civic groups. Include both staff and board members or volunteers. Develop a presentation kit with handouts and PowerPoint slides about your agency for anyone who will be doing the community presentations. Suggest programs to community groups that could be furnished by your staff or volunteers.

- **Luncheons.** Have informal sessions (luncheons, coffees) where staff can meet with small groups of business people, legislators and other community leaders.

**Organizing the community**

For agency staffs working to manage critical issues, few efforts are more important than that expended to build grass-roots coalitions within the community to support your goals and your message. In addition to helping you provide better services to survivors of trauma, coalitions can form a united front to address or influence legislative activities.

Coalition groups can be organized in any number of ways; in fact it’s likely no two groups will be identical. They may be local or they may link up with similar groups in other communities to form a regional or statewide network.

Some groups, such as statewide domestic violence and sexual assault coalitions, are highly sophisticated organizations with their own offices, board members and staff. Others have no formal structure, but consist of loose networks of individuals or organizations that can be relied on to take part in a telephone or letter-writing campaign.
when the need arises. On a local level, this may include staff from domestic violence or sexual assault agencies working together with community partners such as law enforcement agencies, public health organizations, groups that serve children, etc.

Developing a coalition will increase your power base with elected officials in several ways:

- Your coalition will give the appearance of a large number of constituents who have an interest in an issue.
- The coalition can form a united front to influence legislative activities.
- Developing working relationships with other agencies or groups as well as elected officials can be valuable in a crisis.
- Members of a coalition can organize candidate forums or debates, publish voting records and provide information for the public on important issues.

When working with coalitions, keep in mind that members won’t always agree on every issue. The best group leaders can do is to present accurate information and let people make up their own minds about whether they support a particular priority, position or activity and whether they think it’s worth working for.

**Lobbying elected officials**

Lobbying can take many forms – letter-writing campaigns, petition drives, personal visits with elected officials, telephone calls, providing background information about your issues, testimony before legislative or local government committees, and even an official Lobby Day. Here are some things to keep in mind when lobbying elected officials:

- Don’t be intimidated. Some people think authority figures such as legislators or the governor are out of the reach of ordinary people. However, they are generally quite approachable. Most lawmakers are glad to hear from their constituents, and those that aren’t should be suspected of not doing their jobs.

- Coach group members. Be sure all members of your lobbying group know the basics of how to approach elected officials and have solid background on the issues before they start writing letters or charging the Capitol. Offensively aggressive or ill-informed members can destroy a group’s credibility quickly.

- Pace activities. Effort may be needed at every step of the legislative process, right up until the moment the governor or president acts on a bill.

- Keep in touch with elected officials on an ongoing, year-around basis. Be sure they get to know your group and what it represents. When appropriate, send notes of praise and encouragement.
• Be realistic. Realize from the onset that lobbying can be frustrating – being right is no guarantee of winning. A clear understanding of the legislative process will help members of your group have realistic expectations.

• Anticipate that maintaining interest may be a problem. Some hot topics generate their own interest, but some of the most important issues are dull. Funding for human services is a notable example, but nothing is more basic.

• Seek legal advice. As long as all members of your group are volunteers for lobbying purposes and stick to issues affecting the people they serve rather than endorsing particular candidates, they may not need to be registered as lobbyists. Organizations receiving various types of government funding have less latitude than individuals. If in doubt as to which kinds of lobbying can be done without getting your agency into trouble with funders or jeopardizing your tax-exempt status, seek legal advice.

• Express appreciation. Conclude any lobbying effort by sending appropriate thank-you notes to legislators, representatives of organizations and other volunteers who assisted in any way with the lobbying effort.

The fine art of letter writing

Writing letters to the editor, to legislators, or to TV and radio advertisers is a great way to convey your position on issues that impact the people you serve. And recipients do pay attention. Legislators want your vote. Advertisers want your business. When they get even a few letters from different people, it begins to have an effect.

When writing to an elected official:

• In the first paragraph of your letter, describe the bill you want your elected official to consider. Whenever possible, refer to a specific bill by name and number, and not just to a vague issue. Make clear what your position is, and what exactly you want your legislator to do (vote for or against the bill).

• In the next paragraph or two, explain who you are. Tell your legislator how the bill would affect you, your agency, the people you serve, or your community. Express your thoughts in your own words, and make specific references to key points in the legislation. A personal story is very effective, and is your best supporting evidence.

• In the last paragraph, reiterate your support or nonsupport of the bill and ask the elected official to state her or his position in a reply. Thank the legislator for taking the time to read your letter, and express the hope that he or she will give this important issue due consideration.

• Finally, sign your full name and address so your legislator can respond.
Here are some general tips on how to make your letter effective and get your point across, whether you’re writing to an elected official, a TV program sponsor or a letter to the editor of your local newspaper:

• Keep your letter short and to the point. Write about one issue in each letter. Remember, some recipients may read hundreds of letters each week.

• Letters should be in your own words. Petitions and letter-writing campaigns with identically worded contents are not as influential.

• Type or write legibly on your own personal stationery or letterhead. The envelope should be plain white and hand-written (don’t use pre-printed labels).

• You may write to any elected official, but you have more influence in your own district where you vote. If you are a constituent, say so. If you supported or voted for the legislator, say that also. (If you didn’t, say nothing.)

• Be polite. Avoid language that demonizes or insults the reader.

• Remember to say thank-you.

References


Herman, J.L. (1997). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York: Basic Books.
