

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION IN THE BLUEPRINT FOR SAFETY

DEFINITION

One of the Blueprint’s distinctive features is its commitment to grounding the approach and process in the experiences of victims of battering. The Blueprint calls on advocacy organizations and criminal justice agencies to work together to develop procedures and protocols. It also calls for including and consulting with those in the community who are most impacted by such public policies. Along with practitioner-advocate partnerships, a Blueprint community engages with a range of community members, from victims and survivors to populations overrepresented and/or underserved in the system, to develop, implement, and monitor Blueprint policies and practice.

Actions by the criminal legal system affect victims in different ways, sometimes with unintended harmful impacts. The Blueprint seeks to build this awareness into policy and practice, with attention to the complex and often dangerous implications of a victim’s collaboration with interveners. The Blueprint acknowledges the realities of peoples’ unique circumstances and experiences and seeks a criminal legal system response that best fits victims’ needs as it helps stop violence, reduce harm, and save lives.

To keep victims of battering at the center of the Blueprint requires connecting and talking with survivors and others in the community as a matter of routine practice. In other words, community consultation must be a regular, sustained way of doing the business of the Blueprint. In the context of the Blueprint, community consultation is the process of engaging with and seeking guidance from survivors of battering and others in the community who represent the broadest range of life experiences, circumstances, and identities. Community consultation is not a one-time meeting or focus group or the presence of a token survivor on a team or work group. It is an active, intentional, and ongoing process that utilizes a variety of methods to help keep the Blueprint grounded in the realities of living with battering and the experiences of those who are overrepresented and/or underserved in the criminal legal system. A fully developed and sustainable Blueprint for Safety rests on community consultation.

FORMS OF COMMUNITY CONSULTATION USED IN THE BLUEPRINT

ADAPTATION

Community consultation can be informal, via the encounters that advocates have with battered women and with one another and other practitioners. Sharing what we are hearing and seeing in the moment can point to questions that need to be answered or potential problems that the Blueprint might need to address. In addition, community consultation must take more specific forms in order to build the ongoing practice into a local Blueprint. Some of these forms overlap. Your community is likely to come up with a customized version that fits local conditions. While not all of the forms need to be developed and utilized—or in place simultaneously—the first two are essential. The Blueprint cannot proceed as intended without active leadership by community-based advocacy and the first-person perspectives of survivors.

1. Essential: Regular conversations and policy/practice review with community-based advocacy organizations

Community-based advocacy located in nonprofit, nongovernmental or tribal organizations, such as a local program for battered women, is essential to grounding the Blueprint in the scope and scale of battering and in victims’ lives and experiences. Community-based advocacy provides a setting where victims of battering can speak confidentially, freely, and openly. No one else plays this role, which is distinct from that of the important support provided by victim assistance or legal services within government agencies. Community-based advocacy typically has broader access to victims and survivors, many of whom are fearful of and try to avoid public institutions such as the criminal legal system.

The Blueprint advocate has the key role of ensuring that the voices and experiences of battered women are represented at all stages of developing a local Blueprint. This role is fulfilled in part via regular consultation with a wide range of community-based advocates. It includes frequent and focused conversations about what advocates are learning from the victims of battering that they work with. What is working and not working for battered women in the criminal legal system response? Are victims of battering getting arrested? What is happening for immigrant women? What are victims’ experiences with no-contact orders?

The Blueprint advocate is a bridge between advocacy organizations and the adaptation team. Ideally, the adaptation team and related work groups will include several community-based advocates. At a minimum, the Blueprint advocate, together with the Blueprint coordinator, ensures that a wide range of advocates are fully informed about proposed changes in policy and practice and have ample opportunity to review the proposals and recommend revisions. Consultation with community-based advocacy is not limited to those organizations that are the most well-known for working with victims of battering. It includes seeking out organizations that may have a great deal of contact with victims in different advocacy settings, such as housing, health care, and economic security. Because of their distance from the criminal legal system, these “non-DV” advocates might offer particularly useful insights into survivors’ experiences.

2. Essential: Regular conversations and policy/practice review with survivors via individual interviews and group discussions such as listening sessions and talking circles

While community-based advocates can provide critical information about victims’ needs and experiences, talking directly with survivors adds depth and confirmation to what advocates report. First-person conversations are particularly important in understanding when and how the criminal legal system is experienced as unhelpful or unsafe by survivors from overrepresented or underserved communities. The

RESOURCE

Discussion group guide and related information at <https://praxisinternational.org/institutional-analysiscommunity-assessment-2/the-logistics-guide-2/logistics-guide-3-complexity-of-life-social-standing/>

Blueprint advocate has a key role here, too, in organizing and ensuring direct feedback from survivors. Note: interviews or other direct conversations with survivors are not about grilling women on the details of the violence that they have experienced. The purpose is to learn about experiences with and

problems in the system’s response and to review and make recommendations on how the Blueprint can address those problems.

3. Essential: Regular conversations and policy/practice review with communities that are overrepresented and/or underserved in the criminal legal system.

The ongoing consultation with community-based advocates provides one link to communities that are overrepresented and/or underserved in the criminal legal system. In addition, a more direct and focused consultation with individuals and organizations from specific communities will add to the understanding of current and historical experience with the criminal legal system in general. Regular conversations with diverse communities helps connect the Blueprint coordinator, organizers, and adaptation team with local and national efforts to reduce disparity within the criminal legal system overall. Such conversations also encourage those focused on criminal legal system change to pay attention to the experiences and needs of victims of battering and the impact of proposed changes on women from marginalized communities.

4. Useful: Questionnaires

Questionnaires can be quick and inexpensive ways of surveying a large number of survivors about a specific issue, such as access to advocacy at the time of a police call, the use of mandatory no-contact orders, or experiences with one or more steps in the criminal case process. Many people are familiar with giving feedback in this way and are often more open in their responses because of the impersonal and anonymous format. A questionnaire can be designed so that it is easy to fill out and questions can be asked in a uniform way that makes it easy to tabulate and summarize responses. The availability of low- or no-cost online survey tools (such as SurveyMonkey, Zoomerang, or Google Forms) means that survivors, other community members, and practitioners can complete the survey at home, at an advocacy office, public library, or place of employment. Advocates can distribute or call attention to flyers and posters with information on the website and process. Questionnaires can also be distributed via postcards or paper forms that are deposited at a convenient collection point or returned via regular mail.

5. Optional: Survivors’ advisory group

Communities that are positioned to bring survivors’ together in a formal advisory role will benefit from the insight and guidance that this form of community consultation can provide. Establishing a survivors’ advisory group for the Blueprint is more likely when community-based advocacy programs already have a similar approach in place within their organizations. Survivors’ groups oriented to policy and practice review rarely emerge spontaneously, but grow from the intention—and attention and facilitation—of advocacy organizations that value survivors’ voice and guidance. Such a group can be challenging to establish and maintain over time as a fixed body with consistent membership. A more ad hoc approach can be more sustainable, with a group brought together as needed several times a year to analyze Blueprint adaptations and recommend

RESOURCE

Blueprint for Safety Survivors’ Advisory Group: Role and Activities (see pg. 5)

changes. This approach can take advantage of any core membership and leadership that has emerged while also providing flexibility to bring in new members. For example, two or three times a year the Blueprint coordinator and advocate could partner with advocacy organizations to hold a dinner program that invites a diverse range of survivors to comment on specific questions or aspects of the Blueprint or criminal legal system response.

6. Optional: Disparate impact advisory group

The benefits and challenges in establishing a disparate impact advisory group to the Blueprint are similar those for a survivors’ advisory group. There is the potential for deeper insight and guidance that will help adapt and implement the Blueprint in ways that reduce unintended consequences and disparity of impact. It can be equally challenging to establish and maintain such a group over time as a fixed body with consistent membership. It can perhaps be even more challenging.

The experience of being overrepresented in and/or underserved by the criminal legal system has left many people and organizations representing

RESOURCE

[Blueprint for Safety Disparity Impact Advisory Group: Role and Activities \(see pg. 6\)](#)

marginalized communities wary about the motivations and sincerity of that system. Their participation in policy discussions and development has often been at a token level. Blueprint communities that are positioned to form and sustain a disparate impact advisory group will most likely have already begun such work in meaningful ways elsewhere in the community. Blueprint organizers will have a foundation of relationships and trust that persuade individuals and organizations to join the effort.

CONFIDENTIALITY – CONSENT – SAFETY

Community consultation in the context of the Blueprint and its focus on people’s experiences with battering requires specific attention to confidentiality, consent, and victim safety. Anyone completing a questionnaire or participating in an individual interview or focus group, for example, should be clearly informed of the purpose of the activity and how the information collected will be used. Victims of battering and others in the community—including those charged with domestic violence-related crimes—must understand that their participation in such activities is voluntary and that refusing to talk or otherwise provide information will have no impact whatsoever on their ability to use advocacy services or their case or any criminal legal system action. While the purpose of direct consultation with survivors and others is to learn about experiences with and problems in the system’s response, personal information about their lives and circumstances may be revealed. Personal information must be treated confidentially and collected in such a way that individuals are not identified (unless a person has granted clear, specific permission to do so).

Consultation with victims of battering should not put them at risk for further abuse. For example, when contacting victims by phone or mail with interview requests, focus group announcements, or questionnaires, consider who else is present in the home and has access to mail and phone messages. The Blueprint advocate and community-based advocacy organizations should be involved in planning any direct consultation with victims.

OPTIONAL: SURVIVORS' ADVISORY GROUP – ROLE AND ACTIVITIES

Role

A distinctive feature of the Blueprint for Safety is its commitment to ground policy and practice in the experiences of victims of violence, with particular attention to the complex and often dangerous implications of a victim's collaboration with the criminal legal system. Because community-based advocacy is uniquely situated to bring victims' experiences and concerns forward, it has a central role in Blueprint leadership and partnerships. Another way the Blueprint stays grounded in victims' experiences is via an advisory group of survivors who provide ongoing guidance and help direct the process of adapting and implementing the Blueprint. The Survivors' Advisory Group (survivors' group) acts as a touchstone to uncover problems that the Blueprint seeks to solve and test the Blueprint's solutions.

Members

The Survivors' Advisory Group should reflect the broadest, most diverse range of battered women in the community. Recruiting a broad range of members requires reaching out to culturally-specific and other organizations working with survivors, perhaps around issues that are not directly identified as a "domestic violence" program, such as employment or post-incarceration programs. The structure and format of meetings should be established in consultation with the Blueprint Advocate and other advocates who can strategize on how to best provide flexibility and consistency, meet any necessary childcare and transportation needs, and compensate members for sharing their expertise.

Activities

1. Meet regularly with the Blueprint advocate and the coordinator to provide guidance on strengthening victim engagement and avoiding unintended harmful consequences.
2. Review Blueprint policies and protocols from the perspective of survivor experience to identify potential harmful consequences of Blueprint interventions.
3. Contribute to building a knowledge base about violence against women in the community and the impact of criminal legal system intervention on the lives of battered women.
4. Act as a kind of "standing" focus group that can provide feedback on specific questions related to Blueprint policy and practice. Note: This is not in place of community focus groups with battered women.
5. Support ongoing conversations with victims of battering in the community by contributing to the organization and facilitation of focus groups and similar discussions.
6. Participate in policy and practice assessment activities, such as case file reviews and observations.
7. Recommend changes in Blueprint policy and practice to address any unintended consequences.
8. Contribute to ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and revision of Blueprint policy and practice.

OPTIONAL: DISPARITY IMPACT ADVISORY GROUP – ROLE AND ACTIVITIES

Role

The Blueprint for Safety faces three complex interconnected realities as it seeks to honor Principle Six: (1) the deep and pervasive harm of mass incarceration and its impact on marginalized communities, (2) the deep and pervasive harm of violence against women, and (3) the ways in which victims of battering are routinely caught up in the criminal legal system. The realities are interconnected.

BLUEPRINT FOR SAFETY FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE 6
 Act in ways that reduce unintended consequences and the disparity of impact on victims and offenders.

The Disparate Impact Advisory Group (disparity impact group) identifies and analyzes issues of disparity in the community in relation to the Blueprint. It recommends adjustments to Blueprint policy adaptation and practice in order to avoid magnifying disparity. The disparity impact group provides an avenue for direct involvement in the adaptation process by communities that are overrepresented and/or underserved in seeking help from the criminal legal system.

Members

The disparity impact group’s core members include individuals affiliated with community-based organizations that represent and work directly with marginalized communities. The group includes meaningful representation from those most affected by disparity in the criminal legal system (i.e., sufficient numbers so that one or two individuals are not expected to represent an entire community). Possible sources to recruit core members include culturally-specific advocacy and civil rights organizations, legal aid services, and faith-based justice system reform groups. The specific make-up will depend upon local conditions related to current and historical disparity. The Blueprint coordinator and advocate also participate, along with a mix of Blueprint organizers and practitioners. The disparity impact group might also include one or more local researchers who study issues of disparity.

Activities

1. Provide analysis and recommendations related to unintended consequences and disparity of impact in the criminal legal system’s response to battering.
2. Contribute to building a knowledge base about the current and historic nature of disparity within the larger community and the criminal legal system.
3. Hold focus group or similar community discussions to gather information from victims of battering about the criminal legal system response and recommendations for change.
4. Participate in policy and practice assessment activities, such as case file reviews and observations.
5. Review Blueprint adaptations to policy and practice for any potential harmful consequences or disparity of impact.

6. Recommend changes in Blueprint policy and practice to address any unintended consequences or disparity of impact.
7. Contribute to ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and revision of Blueprint policy and practice.

This project is supported by Grant No. 2010-TA-AX-K008 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions and recommendations expressed in this document are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Justice.