

Improving services to sexual assault victims in Olmsted County

*1999-2000 evaluation report of a MN
Model Protocol Project test site*

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Summary

Several agencies in Olmsted County have formed a Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council to improve their response to victims of sexual assault. These agencies have demonstrated that learning more about other agencies within the sexual assault response system and the community at large is valuable to understanding their own role and improving their own services. They have also demonstrated that perseverance can result in community recognition and support.

The Model Protocol: Test Site Project was commissioned to improve the investigation and prosecution of sexual assault cases through protocol development. It is funded by the Minnesota Center for Crime Victim Services, a division of the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, with federal STOP Violence Against Women Act grant funds. Victim Services of Dodge, Fillmore, and Olmsted Counties is administering the grant. Olmsted County is one of six Minnesota “test sites” implementing an eight-step process for protocol development as a part of the Model Protocol Project. Wilder Research Center contracted with the Rochester Police Department, the principal sponsoring agency of the Council, to conduct an evaluation of the Council’s implementation of the eight-step process. This process, developed at the national level, is intended to help community agencies, particularly law enforcement, medical providers, advocacy agencies, and prosecution, work together to develop a more victim-centered protocol for serving victims of sexual assault.

Method

In fiscal year 1999-2000 Wilder conducted the following consultation and evaluation activities for the Olmsted County Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council:

Consultation activities

- Conducted a workshop on monitoring and evaluation
- Co-facilitated immigrant focus groups and analyzed the data collected

Evaluation activities

- Observed three Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council meetings
- Reviewed meeting minutes and site coordinator teleconference minutes
- Conducted and analyzed key informant interviews with Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council members

Findings

Olmsted County's Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council has made a great deal of progress during the last fiscal year with the support of a skilled coordinator. The Council's members accomplished the following tasks this past fiscal year:

- Completed a community needs assessment
- Drafted protocol – or guidelines – for most participating agencies
- Increased the Council's visibility in the community
- Increased the support of leadership from Rochester's globally recognized medical facility, the Mayo Clinic
- Renewed interagency commitments
- Conducted a research project on sexual assault with members of several local immigrant communities

Wilder Research Center's evaluation of Olmsted's Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council this year focused on the value of the process in which the Council is engaged, as well as the accomplishments that the team made towards improving their response to sexual assault. While the process has not been completed at this site, the work that they have done thus far suggests that the 8-step process can make real change in policies and practices of individual agencies, as well as improve the interaction between various agencies that serve victims of sexual assault. The Olmsted site has been unique among Minnesota sites in that they first tried to do the work without project support, but they did not make a great deal of progress. Therefore, the Council applied for and was awarded funding to support their efforts. Several key factors contributed to their success:

- A funded site coordinator
- Committed team members
- Persistent outreach to the community and agencies that serve victims of sexual assault
- Technical assistance from the project administrators.

Recommendations

Olmsted's Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council will need to seek out funding to keep their Council operative after the next fiscal year. One of the keys to their success has been the site coordinator. The Council will likely find it difficult to maintain its momentum without the support of a coordinator. Therefore, any grant proposals for funding should include funding for this position.

While Olmsted's Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council has heard from sexual assault victims via public hearings, and attempted to gather information through a victim experience survey and potentially through the immigrant focus groups, the Council would benefit from gathering more feedback directly from victims of sexual assault. The Council would both benefit from hearing victims' perspectives of the sexual assault response system in Olmsted County prior to the implementation of the guidelines. The Council could compare this perspective with one provided by victims after guideline implementation, and determine if victim's perceptions of their treatment improves. The Council would also be wise to get feedback from victims on the guidelines that they developed before they are implemented, to ensure that victims have a voice in the process, and therefore ensure that the process is, in fact victim-centered.

Olmsted's Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council broke new ground when they consulted with several immigrant communities about their perceptions of sexual assault and the system that is in place to serve sexual assault victims. To ensure that they make use of the information that they collected the Council should look at ways that they can support the efforts of the outreach workers at Victim Services and IMAA. For example, training agency personnel about the culturally appropriate services in the community and when working with victims from communities of color, ensuring that they are offered the culturally specific services available in the community. While there are staff who currently work very diligently at doing outreach in these communities, it was clear from some of the groups that more could be done. The Council could invest in more outreach to inform these communities about the agencies that have culturally competent services, or do more to support the outreach workers who are already involved with these communities to help them avoid burnout. Council members should also keep these issues in mind when they implement and refine the guidelines that they have written.

Background

Wilder Research Center contracted with the Rochester Police Department to conduct an evaluation of the Olmsted County Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council's implementation of an eight-step process for developing a protocol for handling incidents of sexual assault. The Rochester Police Department is the principal sponsoring agency of Olmsted County's Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council. The Council began its work without formal ties to the Model Protocol: Test Site Project, which has five other test sites in Minnesota currently implementing the eight-step process. Connections with the Model Protocol Project were strong however, as the Model Protocol Project Administrators are housed in Olmsted County Victim Services. These administrators have provided formal and informal support to Olmsted's Council in the past two fiscal years to help it succeed in implementing the eight-step process. It was initial work done in Olmsted County on a multidisciplinary protocol in the early 1990's that led Olmsted County Victim Services to apply for funding to develop and administer the Model Protocol Project.

Brief program description

Olmsted County and the other Model Protocol Project test sites are using an eight-step Protocol Development Cycle, developed by Boles and Patterson (Sage 1997). The intent of the eight-step process is to help community agencies, particularly law enforcement, medical providers, advocacy agencies, and prosecution, to work together to develop a more victim-centered response for serving victims of sexual assault.

The steps included in the eight-step Protocol Development Cycle follow:

1. Inventory of existing services
2. Victim experience survey
3. Community needs assessment
4. Write protocol
5. Renew interagency agreements
6. Train agency staff
7. Monitor protocol implementation
8. Evaluate protocol effectiveness

The Olmsted Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council addressed the first three steps prior to fiscal year 1999-2000. Council members focused on finalizing and disseminating the community needs assessment, signing interagency commitments to the process prior to guideline writing, holding focus groups with members of immigrant communities, and drafting protocol during fiscal year 1999-2000.

Method

The Model Protocol Project administrators expect test sites to work with an external evaluator to measure the effectiveness of the eight-step process – from a Project-wide perspective – as a method of improving the response to sexual assault victims. They also expect sites to engage in some evaluation activities that help the Model Protocol Project Administrators better understand the 8-step process, particularly what factors contribute to effective collaboration and improvements to the sexual assault response system.

Wilder Research Center worked with the Olmsted Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council to develop a flexible consultation and evaluation plan. The Council requested a flexible plan because they were not certain how much progress they would make in the 8-step process. They were also unclear as to what additional activities they would undertake this fiscal year. Therefore, Wilder agreed to plan several consultation and evaluation options and follow through with as many as could be accommodated by the Council's budget and accomplishments. In this report Wilder researchers have included discussions of the consultation activities and their results as well as results from the data that Wilder collected in its evaluation activities.

Consultation activities

Wilder Research Center provided two consultation activities to help the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council members better understand their sexual assault response system and their community: a half-day workshop on monitoring and evaluation, and co-facilitation of focus groups with members of several immigrant communities in the Rochester area. Wilder Research Center conducted the half-day workshop in November of 1999 to help educate Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council members on the purpose and benefit of developing internal monitoring and evaluation plans before they started to draft their guidelines

Wilder Research Center, Victim Services and the Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association facilitated several focus groups with immigrant populations in Olmsted County. Staff from Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association and Victim Services recruited participants for the groups, and provided staff to co-facilitate or translate for the Wilder research facilitator and the respondents. The Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association also provided funding for participant incentives, some translations of focus group data, and Victim services assisted the Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association with the provision of refreshments for focus group participants. Wilder Research Center staff analyzed the results of this data collection effort.

Evaluation activities

Wilder Research Center collected data and reviewed existing data to get a perspective of how the 8-step process unfolded in Olmsted County during fiscal year 1999-2000.

Wilder assessed the Olmsted County Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council's protocol writing process by attending three protocol-writing meetings in the spring of 2000. In addition, Wilder staff reviewed all of the meeting minutes from the 1999-2000 fiscal year, as well as transcripts of site coordinator teleconferences in which the Olmsted site coordinator participated. Wilder staff gathered additional process information directly from the site coordinator as issues arose. Finally, Wilder conducted and analyzed the results of key informant interviews with Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council members.

The Olmsted County Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council site coordinator provided Wilder Research Center with notes from 13 formal meetings in fiscal year 1999-2000. Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council members attended these meetings from August 31, 1999 through June 6, 2000. The site coordinator tracked attendance and documented intra-council discussions about their process. Wilder Research Center staff used this data to assess agency and Council-member commitment and the Council's general progress in the 8-step process.

Results

Monitoring and evaluation workshop

The fourth set of meeting minutes covered the monitoring and evaluation workshop held on November 29, 1999. This session was conducted by an experienced Wilder Research Center Consulting Scientist, who has conducted similar trainings with other test sites. The trainer's goal was intended to help the team prepare to monitor and evaluate their efforts at improving their system's response to sexual assault. In retrospect, the workshop also helped the team prepare to write protocol. Eleven members of the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council attended the session.

The council members were asked to brainstorm about the following two questions:

1. Why are we engaged in this process?
2. What would be different if we were successful?

Sexual Assault Protocol Inter-Agency Council members said that they were involved in the process to make the system's response to sexual assaults more victim-centered. They suggested a number of victim-centered changes they would like to see. The facilitator summarized these changes into several goal areas. He then asked participants to prioritize which of the general goals on which these changes are based would be most important to incorporate into the protocol. A list of these priorities accompanied by the number of people who selected them is presented below in Figure 1.

1. MOST IMPORTANT GOALS TO INCLUDE IN PROTOCOL

Idea	Number of votes
Victims are full participants in the justice making process	6
Victims experience a more knowledgeable and respectful inter-agency response	6
Victims feel believed and accepted	5
Victims are knowledgeable about roles, responsibilities, and timelines	5
Increase in community knowledge of sexual assault and how it is handled	5
Respectful of victim's needs for health care and cultural competency are addressed	4
Victims are knowledgeable of rights, services available, and they are able to provide feedback	4
Victims have a primary contact person who is competent and well-trained	2
Victims have a safe place to go	2

While there is a fair amount of overlap in these ideas, the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council members are clearly committed to empowering victims by involving them in a collaborative process, treating them with respect, keeping them informed about the process and their rights, and meeting their needs for cultural competency, professional service, and safety. Representatives from all four core agencies agreed that they would be able to facilitate these outcomes by including the services of sexual assault advocates throughout the process, ideally as early as possible. The Council has since affirmed the importance of involving advocacy in the process in Council meetings and in their written protocols. Participants were also interested in educating the public about sexual assault and the services available to victims.

Participants identified some barriers that the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council needs to overcome to realize their goals. They felt that there might be resistance to developing a victim-centered response from professionals who believe that this approach would conflict with the effective investigation and prosecution of sexual assault cases. Participants also suggested that collaboration might be difficult for some agency staff who have misperceptions about other agencies or agency staff. Participants who felt that the involvement of an advocate early on in the process was important also suggested that other agencies might not appreciate the potential value of having an advocate available to support victims as they go through the system. This might be a result of staff misperceptions about the value of advocates or simply lack of training or experience in handling sexual assault cases. Therefore, participants felt that it is important to educate the front line people who are typically the first responders about the protocol and the collaborative efforts of the Council.

The last part of the session was spent identifying potential sources of data to evaluate how well the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council is meeting their goals. Three options that Council members considered for future discussion were agency records to track service use (such as advocacy), inter-agency debriefings on cases, and surveys with victims. Figure 2 presents the outcomes that Council members would like to see, and the data source they would use to measure the outcome.

2. MONITORING AND EVALUATION GOALS AND MEASURES

Outcome	Measure
Victims will use the services of an advocate	Victim services records
Victims who initially refuse an advocate will be offered an advocate multiple times in the process	Debriefing
Victims will become more knowledgeable about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How different agencies work on sexual assault Roles and responsibilities of each agency Realistic view of timelines Why some cases are not charged 	Victim survey
Victims will be given the opportunity to submit a Victim Impact Statement	Undetermined
Victims will be kept well informed	Victim survey
Guidelines will be applied consistently	Undetermined
Treatment will be culturally sensitive	Victim survey
Sexual assault response system staff will be more knowledgeable about sexual assault and the protocol	Undetermined

Progress in the 8-step process

During this fiscal year the team members completed and distributed the community needs assessment, regained agency support for the project through renewed inter-agency commitments, expanded the team membership, and are well on their way to completing a full draft of their protocol.

According to notes from meeting minutes and site coordinator transcripts, the site coordinator expressed some concern about the time that it took to develop the executive summary for the community needs assessment. The final approval of the executive summary was delayed by the way that the Council went about getting agency approval on the document from supervisors. They chose to use active consent, rather than passive consent. On one hand, using active consent ensures that all agencies are truly committed before they move on; however it can cause delays and rewriting of documents that may be detrimental the process and its timeline.

The Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council has been diligent in reaching out to agencies on the Council and other members of the community who may find its work relevant. While the site coordinator was concerned about the difficulty of getting commitment

from Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council members to participate in subcommittee activities, several council members have shared the Council's accomplishments with members of committees unrelated to the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council. For example, after hearing about the work of the Council the coordinator was asked to join the Violence Prevention Council, a county based council focused on helping agencies within the violence prevention community collaborate, Mayo Clinic's Abuse Prevention, Awareness, and Education Committee discussed the Council's work, and eventually invited the site coordinator, along with other Council members, to present at their meeting. Council members have also kept member agencies up to date when turnover occurs to ensure that the agency leadership remains committed to the process until a replacement is found. The coordinator reported that it was always easier to get agency leaders involved when contacts were made by multiple representatives on the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council. This gave the representatives on the Council ownership of the process, and showed the other agencies that it was an important process to which many agencies were committed.

During the 1999-2000 fiscal year Olmsted Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council members attempted to get feedback from victims of sexual assault about their experience with the system. The previous year they were unable to get feedback from many victims using the victim experience survey due to some technical difficulties and time constraints. They decided not to attempt the survey again this year, but instead they decided that they would hold focus groups with immigrant communities. They gathered information that provided them with a better understanding of what sexual assault means to members of these communities. In addition, they learned how some members of these communities deal with sexual assault or think they might deal with sexual assault, as well as their perceptions of, and interest in accessing the sexual assault response system. The Council should be commended for their efforts in reaching these communities, however, it is still important that victims from Olmsted County are given the opportunity to provide feedback about the sexual assault response system including the work of this Council. The team discussed getting this feedback in the future by asking sexual assault victims to sign consent forms to participate in future research. However, these efforts were overshadowed by the team's efforts at developing guidelines.

Many agencies that initially agree to participate in the Sexual Assault Interagency Council are not prepared for the level of change that is expected of them. Olmsted's site coordinator was conscious of the political nature of the protocol development process. She requested that all Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council members inform their supervisors of the intent of the protocol in order to avoid misunderstandings later. One issue that arose at this time was an agency representative's concern about the legal ramifications of using the term protocol. To ease these concerns the Council members agreed that they would adopt the term "guidelines" rather than protocol. The Council has

been drafting and reviewing the member agencies' guidelines during the latter half of the fiscal year. They have compiled guidelines from all four core agencies and will also include guidelines from the Women's Shelter, the Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association, and the Community Corrections Sex Offender Unit

One of the greatest successes that the Olmsted Sexual Assault Protocol Inter-Agency Council accomplished this fiscal year was the relationship that the Council developed with the Mayo Clinic. Mayo's global reputation for medical expertise, their role as the only providers of evidentiary exams in the community, and their overwhelming presence in the greater Rochester area, makes them an extremely important institution to have involved in any system-wide process. While the Council had representation from Mayo during the first fiscal year of work, leadership from Mayo was not involved in the process. During this past fiscal year Mayo has been working to improve their own response to sexual assault by investigating a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner program. Mayo also responded to the Council's persistent invitations to participate in the 8-step process. Mayo shared their existing protocol for handling sexual assault with the Council and agreed to involve the group in the revision of their protocol once the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner program is implemented. Mayo also agreed to sign the inter-agency agreement, once it makes it through their legal department.

Immigrant focus groups

The Olmsted Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council was interested in understanding what sexual assault means in the cultural context of local immigrant communities in the greater Rochester area. Olmsted has several resources to serve these communities, including a language line available to law enforcement dispatchers that will provide a three-way call in which the victim's concerns are translated to dispatchers who respond to the translator, who passes the dispatch information back to the victim. Victim Services and the Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association provide crisis support for victims who do not speak English or face cultural issues that make them feel isolated. However, Council members fear sexual assault victims in these communities do not get the support that they need when they are assaulted, because they are unaware of what is available, or they do not trust the system. The Council worked with Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association, Victim Services and Wilder Research Center to develop a focus group design to assess different immigrant groups' attitudes about sexual assault and accessing the sexual assault response system.

Olmsted Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council, the Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association, Victim Services, and Wilder Research Center developed a focus group script that they hoped would stimulate conversation about culturally appropriate responses to

sexual assault and the use of community services. The Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association recruited focus group participants to the groups through word of mouth, or from existing groups of immigrants taking English as a second language classes. The Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association also secured funding to provide focus group participants with \$20 gift certificates to a local grocery store. The Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association staff, Victim Services staff, or hired consultants co-facilitated the groups with a researcher from Wilder Research Center. The Council and its collaborators also decided to hold separate groups for women and men to facilitate open conversation as much as possible, given the sensitive nature of the focus group topic.

The Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association's and Victim Services somewhat arbitrarily selected immigrant communities to include in this wave of data collection. Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association staff felt that they had the capacity to assist with Somali, Mexican, and Bosnian groups. A staff member from Victim Services of Olmsted County provided facilitation for another set of Vietnamese groups. Because the Somali community is so large in Rochester, Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association and the Olmsted Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council decided to conduct two sets of focus groups with members of the Somali community. It is possible that additional groups will be held with other immigrant communities in fiscal year 2001-02.

Figure 3 shows the number of participants who attended each focus group, as well as the group members' average tenure in the United States. The Somalis immigrated to the United States most recently, followed by the Bosnians. The Vietnamese group of immigrant participants had been in the United States the longest. This data was not collected for the Latino groups, and it was not recorded for two of the Somali groups. However, the tenures that were recorded for the other groups are consistent with recent immigration patterns. Therefore, it is likely that the Bosnian men, many of whom were married to the female participants, had similar tenures to the Bosnian woman. It is also likely that representatives of the Somali groups with missing data had been in the United States, on average, between one and two years. The only groups for which we have no information on tenure in the United States, are the Latino groups. It is difficult to estimate how long the Latino participants have been in the United States, since their immigration to the States was not the result of an internal conflict in Mexico – the country from which most Latino participants immigrated. These participants differ from the other immigrants in this respect, and also frequently in respect to their legal status in this country.

3. FOCUS GROUP CHARACTERISTICS

	Number of participants	Ave. # years in U.S.
Somali men	10	0.95
Somali women	14	Missing
Somali men	5	Missing
Somali women	11	2.07
Latino men	5	Missing
Latino women	7	Missing
Bosnian men	6	Missing
Bosnian women	6	2.67
Vietnamese men	6	10.67
Vietnamese women	9	11.44

While all of the groups have unique cultural identities, there are some cross-cultural similarities. Participants were not asked to state their religion. However, Somalia is predominantly Muslim and the Bosnian refugees from the recent conflict in the Balkans, are predominantly Muslim.ⁱ Muslim followers of Islam believe in differentiated gender roles, with men in positions of authority. There are also differentiated gender roles in the Vietnamese culture, in which men are the clear heads of household,ⁱⁱ and in the Latino culture “Machismo” may be a guiding force that supports men as the decision-makers for the household.ⁱⁱⁱ While one could argue that differentiated gender roles exist in all cultures, they may be more pronounced in these cultures, than they are in the mainstream culture of the United States, that has experienced a strong feminist movement over the last four decades. Differentiated gender roles, particularly related to sexuality may be most pronounced in the Somali culture. In addition to their religious identities, most Somali women go through female circumcision and infibulation when they are between the age of 8 and 10. This may “represent an effort to control women’s sexuality, since the practice is not required by Islam.”^{iv}

Finally, a cultural norm that exists in most western cultures is the primacy of the individual over community that is industrialized western societies, is not what prevails in the societies from which many of these immigrants come.^v In some cultures decisions are made by the family or some of its representatives, and the decision is based on what is perceived to be best for the family, or the community, rather than the individual. Therefore, some victims of sexual assault may not be comfortable with individualized services, or they may not understand the benefit of these services. Because these issues

will likely influence the behavior of a victim and her family, it is important that professionals who support these victims be aware of the cultural issues that contribute to their experience.

Staff from the Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association, Victim Services, and Wilder Research Center felt that asking focus group participants to discuss sexual assault at the beginning of the group might make participants uncomfortable, which would be counter-productive.^{vi} Therefore, they developed a focus group script that told a story of a woman from each immigrant group's community who was robbed by her brother's friend. Participant's were asked to describe what they thought the victim should do. Then they were asked what the victim should do if the brother's friend had touched her inappropriately and against her will. Finally they were asked what she should do if the brother's friend had raped her.

Results

Most participants from all of the immigrant focus groups thought that the victim of a robbery should call the police. Many of them suggested using the 911 number to contact law enforcement. However, some participants from the Latino groups, said that the victim might not be willing to report the incident to law enforcement if she was not a legal resident of the United States. Participants from the Somali and Bosnian groups mentioned that it would be important to have a translator available to take the police report. A Somali woman suggested that the victim might want to tell her story to someone who speaks her language before reporting it to the police, this would be an appropriate role for a Somali advocate. Some of the Somali men felt that the family of the victim might want to handle the situation outside of the legal realm if they knew the family of the burglar. The victim's family could meet with the burglar's family and make the burglar apologize and promise not to do this again. One Somali man was suspicious of the story. He felt that there would need to be proof that the burglar did what the victim said he did. A few members of the male Vietnamese focus group said that it would be important for the victim to collect evidence to use against the burglar, including the license plate number or a statement from a neighbor.

Focus group participants' opinions about what a victim should do did not change substantially when the co-facilitators described the scenario in which the woman is a victim of inappropriate forced touch. Participants still felt that the victim should call the police and talk to her family. Somali men suggested that the family consult the elders within the religious community and involve the parents of the assailant in the justice-making process. One Somali man was still suspicious of the story, and said he would not believe the victim without proof. He described "the weather, women, and work" as three unreliable or untrustworthy things. While he was only one person, if this attitude about

women is prevalent in a Somali victim's family or immediate community, it would be very difficult for the victim to seek help.

The Bosnian women felt that a victim of inappropriate forced touch should scream for help and fight to get away. The Bosnian men suggested that she go to the police, or talk to her brother about what his friend did. They also suggested that the victim should get his license plate number. One Bosnian man said that the victim should have used better common sense and not put herself at risk by allowing a situation to arise where she was alone with the man.

The facilitator next asked participants what the victim should do if she were raped. They viewed rape as a much more serious offense that would not only hurt the victim physically and emotionally, but also bring shame to her family. In an attempt to understand what actually takes place in these communities, rather than participants' moral positions about what they believe should happen, the facilitator asked participants if what they suggested the victim should do in these circumstances was truly what they thought the victim would do. Participants were not sure how to answer this question, and many of them said it would depend on the person and the situation. Most participants still felt that the victim would call the police, as one Somali man put it: "She would call the police – she is an adult in the United States." Most participants then took this opportunity to describe how a rape might be handled back in their home country, or in their cultural community.

A few Somali men agreed that in Somalia a rapist would get 100 lashes if the victim were married, or be killed if she were not. A Somali woman said that the perpetrator would be forced to marry the victim, because it would be very difficult for her to marry after this. In Somalia there are strict taboos against premarital sex. Other Somali women said that the perpetrator should be killed or punished by the criminal justice system. However, a few of them said that, "back in Somalia," the victim would not talk about the incident. In fact she would "die inside" and be unwilling to talk to any friends. She might even move to another state, to avoid feeling the shame in her own community. When the facilitator asked participants about the likelihood that the victim would access other help, the Somali participants felt that the victim would go to a doctor. It was apparent that focus group participants were not familiar with the concept of advocacy. The co-facilitators described advocates as people who help victims negotiate the system and provide support and referrals to victims who may chose not to report. The participants felt that this was a good service, and that it would be important for the advocate to speak Somali.

The Bosnian women were adamant that the victim fight as hard as she can to escape her assailant. If she was unable to get away, they thought she would call the police and go to the hospital to get help with both mental and physical health needs. They also recognized

that medical personnel could collect evidence of the assault. The Bosnian men pointed out that during the war many rape victims were not believed, so they may need time to come forward in this country. Both Bosnian men and women acknowledged that some women might not report the incident because they felt ashamed. The facilitator asked these participants about advocacy services. They were not familiar with advocacy, although they were familiar with the support that Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association provides. When the facilitator provided them with a definition of advocacy, they remarked that an advocate would be helpful in these circumstances if the advocate spoke Bosnian.

The Latina women felt that the victim would first speak with her parents and then tell the police. Latina women reportedly have a very strong family orientation.^{vii} A Latina victim would not tell her friends for fear of gossip in the community. For this reason, this community is probably in great need of confidential advocacy services. The women felt that the victim would go to the doctor to prevent infection, although one felt that the medical exam would be too invasive and make the victim too uncomfortable to comply. The Latino men thought that the victim should call the police, but that her legal status in the United States would be an issue. They thought that she would wait a few days before seeing the doctor, so that she could find out if she were pregnant or had an infection. The men were not aware of the women's concerns about gossip in the community, and thought that the victim might discuss the assault with a close friend.

The Vietnamese participants reported that while it is somewhat different from person to person, most decisions about going to the police would be made at the family level. Older sons of a mother who was a victim, or the parents of a daughter, would either support the decision to go to the police or not, and typically their position would be accepted by the victim. If they were against going to the police, it would likely have to do with the shame that victim status brings to the family. If a victim made a decision without family input, there is a chance that she would be ostracized by her family. Some participants said if they knew their own daughter was raped, they would report it to the police, but they were not sure if their daughters would tell them. They thought their daughters might be reluctant to talk to their parents because of their feelings of shame. Participants said that some victims might not report because they fear retaliation from the perpetrator. As with the Somali participants, these participants felt that it would be more difficult for a single woman, as no man would want to marry her. These participants were also concerned about putting the assailant in jail, as they felt that he would assault the same or another woman if he was not punished. However, Vietnamese men, in particular, were cynical about the legal system's ability to deliver justice. They mentioned the O.J. Simpson case as an example of the legal system's inefficacy.

The male Vietnamese participants felt that an advocate would be a good source of support for the victim, although it would be important for the advocate to be a woman who speaks Vietnamese. They pointed out that all of the Vietnamese staff at Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association are men, and they pointed out that confidentiality is very important in this community. They thought that some women would be reluctant to get support from a Vietnamese advocate because they are not aware that the advocates maintain the confidentiality of their clients. The participants felt that victims would fear that advocates would discuss their cases with other members of the community. One participant said that without support the victim might take her own life.

The co-facilitators asked some of the participants if there were situations in which the victim would be held responsible for the act because she had been out alone, had been drinking with the assailant, or had done something else to put herself at risk. The facilitators asked other participants what circumstances would make a victim be unwilling to report. Participants from each of the groups identified shame or saving face as issues that would keep a victim from reporting. A Somali woman addressed the issue of blame, saying that “it does not matter that it was not her fault that this happened to her. It is that it happened at all.” Therefore, the stigma is not necessarily related to the woman’s actions, but the fact that she is a victim of sexual assault, and therefore considered “tainted” or “damaged goods.” On the other hand, some Bosnian women felt that it would have been inappropriate for the victim to drive with a man who had been drinking, as the consumption of alcohol is not acceptable among Muslims. They felt that this type of activity might be something the younger generation would do, which concerned them. The Latino men said that “no” means “no” and a victim of assault should not feel responsible even if she was flirting or drinking. One Bosnian woman pointed out that the long trial period makes some victims feel like they are to blame, and it may keep some victims from reporting. The Vietnamese men and women felt that fear of revenge, and language barriers would inhibit victims from seeking help.

At the end of the focus group, participants were read the following statement:

The criminal justice system in Olmsted County considers the following to be sexual assault: forced or tricked touch or sexual conduct without consent. These are examples of sexual assault:

- Child pornography
- Exposing oneself to others
- Sexual harassment or obscene phone calls

- If a victim is between 13 and 16 and the perpetrator is more than 3 years older than the victim, that victim is not considered able to give consent.

Participants were asked if they believed that this definition was appropriate. Almost all of the participants felt that this definition made sense, with a few exceptions.

- The Vietnamese men reported that everybody receives obscene phone calls, which may be a reflection of their longevity in the United States
- Latino men and women were skeptical of the aspect of the law that states that 13 to 16 year old boys and girls are not able to give consent when their sexual partner is 3 or more years older than them.
- Vietnamese women report that while they believe that 16 is too young for girls to be sexually active in their community, people may not realize when this is happening to younger sister, niece, etc. The implication was that incest may be an issue in this community.
- Somali men accepted the definition, but claimed that members of their community do not commit these types of acts.

Implications for outreach and education:

According to these focus group participants, there is a general belief that sexual assault occurs rarely or not at all in their communities, particularly the Somali and Bosnian communities. Perhaps there is a lower incidence of sexual assault in these communities, or, perhaps victims of sexual assault within these community are unlikely to report their victimization. If the community generally believes that sexual assault does not happen internally, that belief may perpetuate a culture of silence, as a victim of sexual assault would feel truly alone. While there is no concrete evidence available to support either theory, sexual assault response professionals should be aware of the unique challenges that victims from these communities face.

Barriers to seeking help

Figure 4, below presents the barriers to seeking help described by focus group participants. Checkmarks indicate that a particular immigrant group mentioned the barrier. However, simply because members of a given community did not mention a barrier, does not mean that they are not challenged by that issue. The two most prevalent barriers are language barriers and the shame of being a victim. Olmsted County could work to better address language barriers in these communities. The issue of shame, as well as many of the victims' fears listed below will be difficult for Olmsted County to

address as they are part of the cultural fabric (with the exception of fear of deportation). However, Olmsted could do educational outreach to these communities around these issues. In addition advocates can address these issues individually with victims.

4. BARRIERS TO SEEKING HELP

	Somali	Bosnian	Mexican	Vietnamese
Language barriers	✓	✓	✓	✓
Shame of being a victim	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fear of being unmarriageable	✓	✓		✓
Mistrust of or lack of faith in the criminal justice system			✓	✓
Fear will not be believed	✓	✓		
Fear of community gossip			✓	✓
Fear of perpetrator revenge				✓
Fear of deportation			✓	
Fear of forced marriage to perpetrator	✓			

While focus group participants did not mention lack of knowledge of services as a barrier to seeking help, it is clear that many new immigrants are not aware of the services available to them. They are also not aware of the policies and resources that some of these agencies have to protect and support immigrant victims. These resources and policies include: staff who speak immigrant languages, confidentiality about individual cases, and discretion for illegal immigrants. Therefore, it is important that Olmsted county reaches out to these communities and informs them of the agencies that have culturally competent services.

Youth issues

Most of these participants described the crime of sexual assault as something that would effect their daughters or other young people. Some of the participants felt that the laws in the United States make it more difficult for them to prevent this from happening. They see their children growing up under a system that does not condone physical punishment, and allows for a great deal of freedom. In addition, some immigrants' described a feeling of loss for the culture of their homeland in which the members of their community were aware of and monitored all children's activities. This aspect of their culture has reportedly disappeared in the United States, and they see their children taking advantage

of their freedom, or lack of accountability, particularly those children with a good grasp of the English language. Following are comments made by two focus group participants:

Somali man: “Too many kids are told that they can do too much by the system. The kids speak English and the parents don’t. In Somalia, if any of the kids are doing something wrong, they will be reprimanded and behave – but here they have too much control.”

Bosnian woman: “In Bosnia, people wait until they are married, but here they have sex much earlier.”

As children become acculturated at a faster rate than their parents due to exposure to school and other youth activities, these issues may become more complex. Children from the Muslim communities are not supposed to date or drink. If they do these things, and get sexually assaulted, members of their community may blame the victim for the assault. It will be important for professionals in these fields to become aware of the issues that the parents and children in these communities face, and do their best to come up with ways to support both the victims and their families and communities.

Feedback from sexual assault inter-agency council members

The Project Administrators and the Olmsted Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council wanted to give Council members an opportunity to provide confidential feedback about their experience with the Project. Wilder Research Center collected this information by conducting key informant interviews with 14 of 16 current council members identified by the Project Administrators. All participants were asked the same set of base questions, and site leadership, consisting of the site coordinator, and the head of the agency responsible for administering the grant funds, were asked several additional questions.

The first question Wilder Research Center staff asked survey participants was why they got involved in the Project. Eleven respondents said that they became involved because they were interested in, or had experience working with victims of sexual assault, nine reported that they became involved as part of their job, and four respondents each said that they became involved in the Project because they were interested in supporting victims of sexual assault, and they wanted to work towards creating systemic change. Two participants report that they got involved to help minority victims in their area. Several examples of their comments follow.

Assigned by my supervisor. I have a general interest to make our job go smoother. Obviously, if it’s easier for the victim, it’s a better case for me. But my supervisor assigned me to this, but it’s not something I sought out.

Because of my agency, we work with crime – we serve people that are victims of sexual assault, and because I am a member of a minority community, I wanted to make sure that these voices were heard in the development of the protocol.

I had been an investigator for several years by that point and working primarily with sexual assault cases, and I saw a lot of room for improvement and I wanted to be a part of that.

Next, Wilder Research Center interviewers asked participants if they thought that the 8-step process to develop protocol was worthwhile. All but two of the participants felt that the process was worthwhile, and the others had mixed feelings about the process. Seven participants reported that the process was good in general, three felt that it was good because it was systematic, two said it improved collaboration and communication between agencies in their community, two said it helped victims, and one participant was pleased that the process addressed the issue of cultural diversity. Five of their comments follow.

I think it is making some progress – it is working.

I have mixed feelings. Yes, I believe it is worthwhile, but not as worthwhile as some of the participants do. I'm not expecting the concrete results that some of the members of the committee are.

I think that it's well thought out, and it's a step-by-step process that's very well defined as to how to go about creating good changes.

I just feel it is a learning process. It gives me an opportunity to learn more so I can serve the people I work with, and also the people on the committee are learning more about the people I work with, about the minority community.

I do feel it's worthwhile. I think it will benefit victims and families who are involved in the system. And I wouldn't be investing time in it if I didn't feel it was important.

Wilder Research Center interviewers asked the site leaders what the benefits and drawbacks were to being involved in the project versus doing the work by themselves. They cited the connection to the other sites, and being able to learn from their experiences. They also valued the technical support provided by the project administrators. Neither of the leaders were able to think of any drawbacks to being connected to the project, in fact they said that the connection was essential for any new start-up site. One of their comments follows.

The drawbacks of having them? I don't see any. I can only imagine that it would be a very lonely, confusing spot to be in without that technical assistance. I think it's critical for the start up for any site.

Interviewers also asked the leaders whether or not the project administrators have been helpful. Both of them reported that the project administrators have been extremely helpful. They cited their emotional support, the information they provide about relevant issues at the state and national level, their provision of invaluable technical support, and their help in referring sites to agencies or consultants that have helped them as they go through the process.

The Project Administrators have had some difficulty in getting the message across to all team members at some of the other test sites that this process is intended to improve the system's response to sexual assault victims by changing agency practice. Wilder Research Center assessed the attitudes of Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council members attitudes about internal changes to agency practice by asking them if they thought that change was feasible at their agency. Thirteen of the 14 respondents reported that they thought change was feasible at their agency and one respondent had mixed feelings. Eight respondents said that they have a progressive administration at their agency which is committed to improving their response to sexual assault victims, three said that the collaborative experience ensures that change will occur, two respondents reported that their agency is committed to the process and its outcomes, and one reported that because his or her agency is small, it will be easier for it to change than some of the larger agencies. Two survey participants mentioned being concerned that their agency has an existing protocol for handling sexual assault from which they cannot deviate, and one participant was concerned about how cultural differences make it difficult for victims to benefit from the current or an improved system-wide response. Several examples of respondents' comments follow.

In the last several years we've had a change in administration and upper management, and we have a commitment from all of us at management level to get more involved in the community, and we also have that with the city leaders – it kind of helps push us in that direction.

We have a progressive administration that wants to make change happen, and with a progressive administration, it doesn't matter what others think – change is going to happen.

The agencies are attempting to work together, and we have a common goal.

We already have a protocol written.

It is possible, however it is a little bit [of a] struggle. Because we came from a different country, we do not know that in the United States women have equal rights with the man.

The project administrators wanted to get an idea of what kinds of changes that the Olmsted Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council expected to see happen in their

community. To get Council members' perspectives on this change interviewers asked them what the shift from a case-centered response system to a victim-centered system means to them. Eight respondents reported that they thought the shift would help the system better meet the needs of victims, and five said that it would result in agencies training their staff to treat victims with courtesy and respect. Three respondents reported that the shift would make the process easier for victims, and one each said that it would empower victims, and ensure that victims had the opportunity to have support from an advocate. One respondent felt that the shift to a victim-centered response system would not change the way that his or her agency functioned. Several of their comments follow.

What the words mean is that we should be focusing on the needs of the victim and what's going on with the victim, not on what's going on with the perpetrator or what's going on with the process.

Focus on sensitivity and respect when working with the victim, and maybe giving victim a voice in the process.

I see it as being more personalized, or less "revictimizing" for someone who has been assaulted. More individualized – each person is taken as an individual, and it's not just a system that is applied to a person.

It's about making sure the victim has choices, and is informed, even if their choice is not to be involved. And it's making sure they always have access to – at any stage of their case – an advocate.

For the care we have given the survivor, we have always been "victim-centered," so it doesn't mean much of a shift to me. For the most part, the only agencies that are "case centered" are law enforcement and prosecution, but I think they've been very receptive to making that shift.

Wilder Research Center interviewers asked respondents what barriers they have encountered in making the shift to a more victim-centered approach to handling incidences of sexual assault at their agencies. Respondents identified a variety of barriers, none of which stood out as being greater than others. Two or three respondents each mentioned agency size and bureaucracy, cultural barriers, and that the new focus conflicts with the agency mission. One person each said that his or her agency's staff were unaware of the impact that sexual assault has on victims, lack of access to interpreters, and that time is a barrier. Three respondents reported that their team did not face any barriers. Several of these responses follow.

The sheer number of staff here – there's so many staff people, and how do you ensure that they are all trained properly and up-to-date and informed, ensuring that supervisors are telling all those below them all the right information?

I haven't sensed anything in our agencies, but in the community the hierarchy and bureaucracy of agencies. I think frontline people on the protocol committee are all on board, but some of the higher-ups have some concerns about the process, and might not always understand everything that's going on.

In my agency and community, in the community there are cultural things – in my community we do not discuss openly sexual things.... and the language barrier.

Accessing interpreters on a timely basis... on rare occasion, accessing law enforcement to respond immediately. The need for more trained officers to conduct forensic interviews, or to work on child sexual abuse cases.

I think that "case-centered" philosophy and really the fact that law enforcement and prosecution represent the state, as opposed to representing individual victims.

Just the amount of time people can commit to working on this project, along with the regular duties that people have.

Participants were asked what barriers they expect to encounter in the future. They described several barriers, many of which were the same barriers that they had already encountered. Four respondents each mentioned agency policies and size, and inadequate commitment from all of the agencies involved to follow through on the process. Three respondents mentioned lack of funding, two mentioned time, and one each mentioned cultural sensitivity, and social change. Three respondents did not expect to encounter any barriers in the future.

For our agency our fundamental barrier is legal obligation. The reason for our agency's involvement at all is the [handling] of these cases. Our involvement with the victim is only indirect.

I guess, to reiterate, making sure everyone's on the same page in the agency, and that it's not just a few people who are victim-centered, or trained on the victim-centered guidelines. Definitely making sure that it's not a select few who are aware of Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council guidelines.

Funding is a huge barrier. Ongoing funding from VAWA, from the state level, the issue of whether we'll ever be able to seek funding from outside sources.

To continue the work of the SAIC and the guidelines, and revise and update those guidelines so they reflect the community goes hand-in-hand with having a coordinator. If that position can't be maintained, I would see that as a great barrier to the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council continuing.

Maybe not having enough time to train.

Possibly to hire more bilingual employees – if you have bilingual employees, it will increase communication and increase trust in confidentiality. That way, the woman will trust that the information she shares will not get back to the husband.

I don't think we'll have any barriers, because my agency already has this as a priority.

I see a need for a societal attitude shift, I guess.

Wilder Research Center interviewers asked Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council members how comfortable they have been with the composition and commitment of the team members from the four core agencies (advocacy, law enforcement, prosecution, and medical). All of the participants expressed some level of comfort with the participant agencies although four respondents were not completely comfortable with composition of the Council and the commitment of its members. Six participants said that they were comfortable with the composition and commitment of the core agencies in general, and four each were comfortable with the level of commitment that particular agencies have shown, and the representation of agencies in the community. One respondent each mentioned being pleased with the level of cooperation that the group shows, and the level of trust on the council. Two council members expressed concern about the lack of commitment that some agencies have demonstrated, and one person each mentioned agency policy constraints and turnover. Several comments are included below.

Overall, I think we've had the right people involved from the different agencies, and they were committed to the process. I think in the beginning it was difficult getting the commitment from the administrators at the four core agencies. But overall, I think it's working well now.

The comfort level has actually improved over time and that's just from getting to know other members of the team. I would say I'm pretty comfortable with them.

I do feel that the people who are going are very interested; I feel they're putting all their effort there.

I have very mixed feelings about medical providers in that while some have shown willingness and desire to make change that is necessary, other providers are so locked into their processes that change is not possible. And honestly I think that's the first step in the process.

There are other agencies, and I don't know what category they'd fall under, that haven't been involved at all. And I think that's the most disappointing of all.

Wilder Research Center interviewers next asked Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council members if they have had participation from agencies outside of the four core agencies. Ten of the survey participants were aware of additional agencies, three did not think that there were additional agencies involved and one was not sure. The respondents who were aware of additional agencies identified the women's shelter (n=8), Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association (n=7), corrections (n=5), social services in general (n=4)

and child protection specifically (n=3), probation (n=4), and the court system (n=1). These respondents were asked how valuable the participation of the additional agencies they listed had been. Four of them appreciated the unique perspective that these representatives brought to the process, three appreciated their commitment and cooperation, and one each reported that the additional team members have educated the team on additional resources available, worked to accomplish special tasks for the Council, and spread the news about the project to their agency. However, one respondent felt that the additional participation was not valuable, although this respondent did not say why he or she felt this way. Several of their comments follow:

Extremely valuable. A victim doesn't just go through the 4 core agencies for information. Our Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council has worked really hard at identifying where one's job interfaces with another person's job, and those are the agencies we want involved on the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council.

It's been helpful, because there are times when we will interact with these organizations, and if they are aware of the guidelines/project then... it helps us all to work together more effectively.

Very valuable, because they bring a different perspective for victims, as well as for other cultures.

Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association has been extremely valuable. [They have done] anything we've asked them to do.

Wilder Research Center interviewers asked survey respondents if there were members of the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council who were particularly helpful to the process or particularly difficult to deal with. If they mentioned that there were such people, the interviewer asked from which agency the members came, and how they were helpful or difficult. All of the participants either said that all of the agencies involved were helpful or identified specific agencies including victim services (n=6), law enforcement (n=6), Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association (n=2), medical (n=1), and the coordinator (n=1). Seven of them said that these members were particularly committed to the process, two each said they did a good job of communicating, and that they understood the process and helped other team members understand it. One respondent each said that these team members provided leadership, focus, and camaraderie. Following are several of their comments.

I think victim services has been particularly helpful. I think because they're the ones right at the heart of this. They've been a good resource, and I think the fact that they're very focused on this has been very helpful, whereas the rest of us have other focuses within our jobs.

We've been working with Mayo, which is a huge hierarchy to deal with, but nurses have been particularly helpful with bringing stuff back from Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council to Mayo and opening some doors and building relationships.

Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association because they've volunteered countless hours to help us with communities of color in Rochester.

With law enforcement and victim services, a co-chair comes from each agency, so they each have a vested interest for the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council to succeed, and for the goals to be met. Therefore, they're more than willing to go out of their way, to go the extra mile, whatever that means.

[Coordinator and Victim Services staff] have both spent time helping me and my agency get up to speed on the purpose and origin of the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council.

As stated earlier, one of the intents of the 8-step process is to create systemic change, by having the participant agencies improve their policies and practices for handling sexual assault. Members of the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council worked hard during this fiscal year to engage representatives from the Mayo Clinic in the 8-step process. They have been successful, although they had to be very persistent. This effort is reflected in the number of people who reported that it was difficult to work with medical institutions (n=11). Three Council members were somewhat frustrated with the inflexible policies at the county attorney's office, and two were frustrated with law enforcement for the same reason. Two respondents were concerned about turnover in some of the agencies. Several of their comments are included below.

Well, from the beginning, medical's procedures/policies have often made the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council's work go more slowly than we wanted, and that's because they need to have everything checked out through their legal department, and that takes a long, long time. By the time it's gone through whomever it needs to go through, 2 months may have passed – or longer.

My own agency – the medical agency – the fact that being from the institution that we are, there are certain guidelines we must follow, and that's been a very time-consuming thing.

I guess there was some reluctance to move away from the case-centered philosophy, because that's sort of [prosecution's] reason for existence. I think a reluctance to give up some control over the case, when they included the victim and considered the victim's needs when making case decisions.

There was turnover [in prosecution], and it took them a long time to assign a new person to the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council.

One that I struggled with was law enforcement. I saw when they were going through their draft they were struggling with some changes – so they did some changes, but not the drastic change.

Next Wilder Research Center interviewers asked Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council members to describe the biggest barriers their council faced this past year, and how they dealt with those barriers. Four participants said that they did not face any barriers this past year, although a few others mentioned a wide variety of barriers. Two or three respondents each mentioned the amount of time the process takes, keeping the Council members motivated, and agency politics. One respondent each mentioned barriers related to project coordination, getting up to speed as a new member, the organization, the availability of resources needed to accomplish tasks, the support of their agency leadership, cultural barriers, getting feedback on the system from survivors, and revising protocol. Several of their comments follow.

I've told the agency what I've been doing, so they know about that, but I suppose more support for what I've been doing from the agency.

The victim experience survey – that's a big thing we haven't done so far. You know, getting information from survivors.

Before we had a coordinator, just being organized.

I think it's necessary for agencies to realize the problems that are faced by other agencies. Putting it colloquially, there's a tendency to say that "My problem is your problem" and we need to recognize that we all might not have the same goals. Institutionally, again, not individuals.

Not knowing what was expected of me as a representative from my agency – not knowing where my input was going to come in.

Keeping everyone motivated. I think it's a much more involved and time consuming process than anyone expected when we first started.

The Council was effective, for the most part, at resolving or at least addressing the barriers that it faced. Six Council members said that communication was an important way that members resolved problems, two said that hiring a coordinator was a good solution to some problems, and one respondent mentioned changing the track of a research project that was unsuccessful. A few of their comments are included below.

Feedback loops. We made a conscious effort to go to those agencies that we didn't think were as committed and do extra presentations to their staff and supervisors to make sure they – the supervisors – were receiving minutes and agendas to the meetings. Just making sure they were informed and involved in the process. It also helped that [several] agency supervisors presented on the importance of the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council.

Open discussion – I think that’s the most productive way we’ve dealt with this is open discussion, and setting aside time to discuss issues openly. The process of working through issues is the most valuable part of this project. The open discussion between agencies is more valuable than the written product we’re trying to produce.

We hired a coordinator...We have someone whose job it is to keep us on track, and if we’re not doing our part, we have someone to keep after us.

We tried to redo the surveys again. We’re trying, but right now we’re having focus groups, so we can hear what people think.

Interviewers next asked survey participants if they thought the Council had done enough to address the issue of cultural competency. Most respondents (n=10) said that they felt that the Council had adequately addressed the issue of cultural competency, two respondents did not believe that the Council had adequately addressed this issue, and two were unsure or had mixed feelings. Those who felt that the Council had adequately addressed cultural competency were asked how they had done this. Four of them cited the work that they have done to collect information from diverse groups through focus groups, one mentioned conversations with agencies that serve diverse communities, and two reported having a diverse team. Several of the respondents’ comments are included below.

We’ve had focus groups, with Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association’s help – they’ve been presented in native languages of the people attending.

We’ve tried to get our Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council as diverse as possible, representing different races, genders.

Gained input from various committee members from different cultures – sought out feedback from community members. Sought out people of color for committee. Separate section in protocol about cultural sensitivity.

The respondents who did not feel that the Council had adequately addressed the issue of sexual assault or weren’t sure were asked to explain. They reported that the issue is so large it is difficult to adequately address it in their community, particularly with the limited resources available to the Council, and that their agency may not have a full understanding of cultural competency. One respondent felt that it is too early to know how well the Council has addressed this issue adequately. Their responses are included below.

Because our community is so incredibly culturally diverse this is a problem that far transcends sexual assault. It transcends the focus of the committee. Rochester has such a large immigrant population and visiting foreign population that these issues are things we deal with day to day. As a community, we have not found a way to address these adequately.

Given our money and our resources, I think we've done a very good job. Could the job have been done better? Yes – if we had more time, money and resources.

I'm not sure at this point if our agency has a full understanding of the issues in the community related to issues of sexual assault.

Hard to define adequate at this point. I think we are addressing this, but it's going to be very hard to say until we have a protocol in place and we can come back and evaluate it. We aren't going to know until we're further into the project and have implemented the protocol so we see how effective it is.

Wilder Research Center interviewers asked survey respondents to reflect on the most positive changes that the Sexual Assault Protocol Inter-Agency Council has been a part of during the past year. Nine respondents mentioned the team member's successful efforts in collaboration, five mentioned that their agency is more victim-centered now, two mentioned increased awareness of cultural issues among council members, and one cited changes in agency practice. A few of their comments follow.

To see the team effort from medical, law enforcement, victim services and county attorney working together in the best interest of victims.

The most positive thing that's occurred is a better awareness and teamwork between agencies. That we're there to work together, and not against each other.

I really see good communication and a willingness to really work towards victim-centered guidelines. I see the agencies really working hard towards making change, and that's really positive.

It's been a driver to try to get us to coordinate everything that's going on in our agency, and challenges us to make some formal practice changes.

Interviewers then asked the site leaders only about the problem of staff turnover, which has been very challenging at other sites. Interviewers asked what turnover their site had experienced, what effect it had on their site and how they dealt with it. This site has had turnover in prosecution, law enforcement, and probation. One of the site leaders pointed out that while it is somewhat difficult to get new participants up to speed, it can help to remind the standing Council members of the purpose of what they are doing and re-invigorate the process. In addition, when turnover takes place the Council becomes aware of how much that representative has been bringing back to their supervisors when

they request a new representative, which can lead to greater awareness at that agency. Their comments follow.

Well, it's been a two-pronged effect, I guess. On the one hand, it's always difficult to bring someone up to speed on what the group is doing and re-establishing that trust and bond with the group. But on the other hand, it definitely disseminates the information to more people and hones our skill on how to articulate effectively what we're doing, and why we're doing it, and why it's important. And when you see brand new people on the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council get that, and become excited, it's infectious – it spreads throughout the group. They're kind of reminded themselves why they're there, and that it's special.

In some cases we had to have meetings with the agency to ensure that they were planning to assign a new member to the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council...Turnover tends to highlight if the [Council] member was regularly informing their supervisor of the [Council's] activities, and if they weren't informing their supervisor regularly, it's more difficult to immediately have a new [Council] member be assigned from that agency. Kind of forced to re-explain the purpose of the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council to the supervisor. So, ironically, turnover, in that regard, is a good thing, if that's the only way to find out if a supervisor is being informed.

Interviewers asked all survey participants to describe the lessons they have learned while working on the process that would be useful to pass onto other sites. Five participants said that it is important to be persistent, four participants identified the importance of clear communication, three participants identified the importance of having the appropriate agency representation, three recognized the need to have the support of agency leadership, two mentioned that agencies need to commit a fair amount of staff time, and two recognized the importance of having a good coordinator. One participant each felt that it is important to let other sites know that the process requires good working relationships between agencies, being open to change, and being aware of conflicting agency goals. Several examples of their comments follow.

Working in the project, they have to be very patient and work consistently, especially with special population, immigrants and refugees, where there are language and cultural barriers.

It's critical to get commitment from all 4 core agencies as soon as you can...commitment means coming to meetings, participating, going back to your agency and reporting, communicating.

You have to have people who are really willing to talk about difficult issues; and to come to the meetings regularly,... they [must] go to their supervisors – so that the changes that need to be made really do get made.

Make sure you have a coordinator; we tried to do without, and it was just hard to sustain the energy.

The biggest single issue I would raise is that these types of projects get raised from victim services types of agencies, and they have an institutional bias towards “victim-centered” policies. Need to start the process realizing there are competing goals in the system. Victim services needs to realize other agencies have different focuses and can’t make changes that conflict with other agencies’ reasons for being.

That it takes time. That you have to be open to change. For me, it would be, as a team would be forming, to make sure that really the right people are on it.

Interviewers asked the site leadership what strategies worked best to keep team members engaged, and what strategies worked best to keep agency staff, who do not serve on the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council aware of the project. One respondent felt the coordinator was a key actor in keeping them engaged, and the others felt that it was important to make sure that all of the members had the opportunity to speak and that the work be shared by all of the team members. This gives the full team ownership of the process and its products. This Council has done a number of things to keep agency staff, particularly the staff leadership, informed about the process, including presentations on the products that the Council has developed, regular communications with agency leaders, focus groups with agency staff, and informal communication about the council’s efforts with co-workers and in meetings with committees formed to tackle issues other than sexual assault.

Interviewers asked site leaders if they thought that the advisory board had an accurate understanding of their site’s challenges and successes. They were also asked to describe what they thought was the role of the advisory board. Both participants thought that the project administrators provided the board with an understanding of what their site experienced. They felt that the board’s role was to provide information and support and be involved in larger planning issues at the project-wide level, rather than the individual site level.

Interviewers asked site leaders to think about the future of the process. They asked the leaders what kind of impact the release of the state-wide model protocol would have on their site, what they understood the future goals of their site to be, if they had the staff to accomplish these goals, and what additional resources they would need in the next year or so.

One of the leaders thought that the release of the state-wide model protocol would motivate the Council to complete the 8-step process, and both thought that the release of the protocol would bring more publicity to their sites, which might result in their Sexual

Assault Inter-Agency Councils acting in an advisory capacity to new sites attempting to work through the same process.

The two leaders report that the immediate goals are to finish the protocol, start training staff in the protocol and then conduct monitoring and evaluation activities to see how well the process is working. One of the leaders mentioned that this will be an ongoing process, with regular updates to the protocol, and that the Council will remain intact to serve as a forum for discussions about how best to help victims of sexual assault. One leader thought that it was very likely that they would accomplish these goals because they have the commitment they need from the agencies involved. However, the other leader thought that it was only somewhat likely that they would accomplish their goals, because funding for the project is never secure from year to year.

In terms of future resources, both leaders felt that funding would be the most important resource to have. The process demands a fair amount of staff time. Therefore, the state or the local community needs to support the process with funding for the coordinator position and other resources, so that the staff time is not wasted. One of the leaders would also like to see the state support the project by funding a central agency or staff, that takes on the tasks that the project administrators have been responsible for thus far, including setting up workshops and providing other support and technical assistance to the Model Protocol Test Sites.

Interviewers asked the leaders if they thought that they had the representation from agencies on the Council that they needed to accomplish their goals. One of the leaders felt that the Council has the representation it needs, but the other leader felt the Council needs to expand, and described the plans the Council has to do this: “We’re looking to start some advisory groups, media, education, legal profession, clergy. We’ve had kind of unofficial representation from all of those groups, but I think we need to formalize them more.”

Finally, the leaders were asked what recommendations they would make to help the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council be successful in accomplishing their goals. They suggested that the Council members should continue to promote the team approach to handling cases, remember that the goal is to better serve victims, increase coordinator hours, and maintain communication within the Council and outside of the Council with agency staff and the broader community in Olmsted County.

Conclusions

Olmsted County's Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council has made a great deal of progress during the last fiscal year. With the support of a skilled coordinator the Council members completed their community needs assessment and moved into writing guidelines. They have gained visibility in the community and the trust of Rochester's globally recognized medical facility and sole provider of medical evidentiary exams in the area, the Mayo Clinic, which is no small feat. Most of the members of the Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council appear to be committed to continuing to work through the process. They are also interested in continuing to evaluate and improve the guidelines after the federal funding ends. The Council is interested in getting more visibility and potentially funding from local or state governments.

Olmsted County is home to a broad array of cultural groups, and these communities are growing. The Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council got feedback on how to best serve victims of sexual assault from members of these communities. They conducted several focus groups with Somali, Latino, Bosnian, and Vietnamese men and women. The focus groups revealed some of the challenges that members of immigrant communities face, including language barriers, shame of being a victim, fear of being unmarriageable, not being believed, community gossip, perpetrator revenge, deportation, and fear of forced marriage to the perpetrator. While focus group participants did not mention lack of knowledge of services as a barrier to seeking help, it is clear that many new immigrants are not aware of the services available to them. They are also not aware of the policies and resources that some of these agencies have to protect and support immigrant victims. These resources and policies include: staff who speak immigrant languages, confidentiality about individual cases, and discretion for illegal immigrants.

One of the goals of this evaluation is to determine if the 8-step process that the various test sites are following is a good method of making the sexual assault response system more victim-centered. While the process has not been completed at this site, the work that they have done thus far suggests that the 8-step process can make real change in policies and practices of individual agencies, as well as the interaction between various agencies that serve victims of sexual assault. The Olmsted site has been unique among Minnesota sites in that they first tried to do this work without project support, but they did not make a great deal of progress. With the help of a funded site coordinator and technical assistance from the project administrators, this site has been able to move forward at a steady pace. The only task that they have attempted with limited success is getting feedback from victim survivors who have been through the system. This is something they will need to do to get an understanding of how well the system is working. It is likely that they will integrate this into their monitoring and evaluation plans.

Recommendations

Olmsted's Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council will need to seek out funding to keep their Council operative after the next fiscal year. One of the keys to their success has been the site coordinator. The Council will likely find it difficult to maintain its momentum without the support of a coordinator. Therefore, any grant proposals for funding should include funding for three-fourths time or fulltime coordinator.

Olmsted's Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council and the Model Protocol Project would both benefit from hearing victims' perspectives of the sexual assault response system on Olmsted County prior to the implementation of the guidelines. The Council could compare this perspective with one provided by victims after guideline implementation, and determine if victim's perceptions of their treatment improves. The Council would also be wise to get feedback from victims on the guidelines that they developed before they are implemented, to ensure that victims have a voice in the process, and therefore ensure that the process is, in fact victim-centered.

Olmsted's Sexual Assault Inter-Agency Council broke new ground when they consulted with several immigrant communities about their perceptions of sexual assault and the system that is in place to serve sexual assault victims. To ensure that they make use of the information that they collected the Council should invest in outreach to inform these communities about the agencies that have culturally competent services. Council members should also keep these issues in mind when they implement and refine the guidelines that they have written.

Endnotes

- i Elzbieta M. Gozdziaik, John J. Tuskan, Jr., "Operation Provide Refuge: The Challenge of Integrating Behavioral Science and Indigenous Approaches to Human Suffering." 2000 In Rethinking Refuge and Displacement, Selected Papers on Refugees and Immigrants, vol. viii. Elzbieta M. Gozdziaik and Dianna J. Shandy, eds., Arlington, VA: American Anthropological Association.
- ii Minnesota coalition Against Sexual Assault: Program Against Sexual Violence's Intervention Manual, 1999. Katie Bauman, ed.
- iii Minnesota coalition Against Sexual Assault: Program Against Sexual Violence's Intervention Manual, 1999. Katie Bauman, ed.
- iv Putman, Diana Briton, and Noor, Mohamood Abdi. The Somalis: Their History and Culture. The Refugee Service Center (Washington, D.C: 1993).
- v Edward Said, Orientalism. New York: Vintage, 1979.
- vi According to the Program Against Sexual Violence's Intervention Manual's suggestions for discussing sexual assault issues with refugee victims, advocates have victims use "fictitious friends" to help them get their stories out. "The use of indirect helping styles has been widely supported in interventions with many people of color."
- vii According to the Program Against Sexual Violence's Intervention Manual, a Latina's world view and self-identity are based on being a member of a family which makes her life decisions.