

# 2014-2015 Virginia Statewide Needs Assessment on Underserved Victims of Sexual & Domestic Violence

*Virginia Partnership for Community Defined Solutions to Violence Against Women: GEAP Project<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

In 2014-2015, the Partnership for Community Defined Solutions<sup>2</sup> conducted a statewide needs assessment which included a survey of service providers and a series of focus group interviews with service providers and survivors of sexual and domestic violence (SDV) in Virginia. The purpose of these activities was to assess the needs of underserved victims and the barriers they face to accessing services that increase victim safety and offender accountability. Service providers included a convenience sampling of agencies that provide services to victims of SDV, including Courts and Court Services, Law Enforcement and Prosecution, and Community Based Advocacy Services.

An electronic survey was answered by 266 service providers. The majority of respondents were Advocates (29%), Law Enforcement Officers (21%) and Magistrates (20%). Survey respondents were asked to identify which of three populations (African American, Older Adults, and Immigrant/Limited English Proficiency) they considered most underserved in their community in regards to services for survivors of sexual and/or domestic violence. They were then asked to rate the effectiveness of their community's SDV Response System<sup>3</sup> in meeting the needs of the selected population, as well as identify specific barriers to victim safety and offender accountability in each of five service need categories:

- Accurate and timely information and referrals
- An environment that is respectful and courteous toward the selected population
- Services that are adaptable to the needs of the selected population (available, accessible, etc.)
- Policies and practices that prioritize victim safety
- Policies and practices that hold offenders accountable

A total of six focus groups (36 participants) were conducted with various service providers, including victim advocates, law enforcement officers, magistrates, juvenile and domestic relations court judges, legal services attorneys, and one group representing a mix of providers who serve together on a local coordinated response team. Service providers were invited to reflect on how cultural issues impact victim safety and offender accountability, and their experience serving the needs of the three populations. Provider focus groups were primarily conducted at statewide trainings or conferences in order to include providers from all parts of the state.

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<sup>2</sup> The Virginia Partnership for Community Defined Solutions to Violence Against Women is a statewide partnership between the Virginia Office of the Attorney General, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, the Department of Criminal Justice Services, the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance, and the Virginia Poverty Law Center.

<sup>3</sup> SDV Response System refers to the network of service agencies providing services to victims of SDV.

Six focus groups (42 total participants) were conducted with survivors of sexual or domestic violence who identified with one or more of the three populations, including three sessions with African Americans, two with Immigrants/LEP persons, and one with Older Adults. Participants were invited to discuss their experience as a survivor of SDV seeking services as an African American, Older Adult, and/or Immigrant/LEP, and what they found helpful or harmful in achieving safety for themselves, and if or how the abuser was held accountable for their violent behavior. An effort was made to convene survivor focus groups in different areas of the state, and in urban and rural settings.

## Findings

While the focus of the Needs Assessment was to examine specific barriers faced by the three underserved victim groups (African American, Older Adults, and Immigrant/LEP), the Partnership gained several general insights regarding the experience of service providers and survivors of SDV from the process itself:

- The term “underserved” has multiple meanings for service providers (underserved, un-served, inappropriately served, etc.), each with its own implications for system improvements
- Survivor participants have multiple, complex, and overlapping cultural identities (e.g., older adults who were also immigrants, women of color immigrants, etc.); issues facing older adults are especially salient because all survivors become older adults as they age
- Barriers to victim safety and offender accountability were similarly complex and often intersected (e.g., minimization of abuse by service providers breeds further distrust of the response system)
- Across the board, victims continue to experience multiple barriers or challenges due to their identity as a victim of SDV, as well as cultural identity, immigrant status, and/or age

### Who is underserved?

Across service sectors, the majority of service providers when asked on the survey to select which of the three populations were most underserved in their area selected Immigrant/LEP (71%). Depending on the service sector and region of the state, however, some providers selected other populations. For example, providers in Courts and Court Services were most likely to select African Americans as most underserved (12%); older adults were identified as most underserved most often by Community Based Services providers (23%), and by providers in the Western (31%) and Northwestern (31%) regions of the state (see Appendix for map of regions).

In addition to giving feedback about African American, Older Adult, and Immigrant/LEP populations, many providers identified other victim groups who they consider underserved in their communities. College students, LGBTQ persons, and men who are victims of SDV were all frequently mentioned by service providers as underserved.

### What are the challenges?

The Needs Assessment revealed several prominent barriers to victim safety and offender accountability. Across the board, victims of SDV continue to face significant barriers; these challenges are compounded

by additional barriers related to cultural identity. The importance of culturally responsive services<sup>4</sup> for victims of SDV-remains important and is supported by our findings, as culture is a lens through which all victims experience violence and interact with service providers. For barriers that are common across all populations, effective solutions depend on an understanding of these barriers through culture, as victims' options and decisions are impacted by their cultural identity as well as the resources available in their community.

The experiences of service providers and SDV survivors were often reflected in each other's observations, and there was high overall agreement between groups as to the most common barriers to victim safety and offender accountability in the three populations. These findings were used to compile a list of Priority Barriers (see below) for which evidence-based practices exist to improve victim safety and offender accountability for victims of SDV. The list includes four main barriers (numbers do not imply ranking), for which several prominent sub-themes exist. See the attached document for selected findings from the Needs Assessment provided to demonstrate support and agreement from participants.

### *Priority Barriers*

- 1. Distrust of the SDV Response System<sup>5</sup> due to adverse personal or historical experiences with service providers**
  - a. Personal experience receiving ineffective, inadequate, or inappropriate response to requests for help (esp. around the issue of offender accountability, such as not removing the offender from the situation, arresting the victim, or arresting the offender against the victim's wishes)
  - b. Personal or historical experience of racism, ageism, anti-immigration policies/attitudes, sexism, and/or homophobia on the part of service providers and systems
  - c. Inability of the System to adequately respond to SDV when there is no apparent physical injury
  
- 2. Lack of coordinated, consistent, reliable, accessible, affordable, comprehensive, and culturally appropriate services to ensure access to timely and accurate information about SDV, victims' rights, and available services**
  - a. Availability and appropriateness of trauma-informed language interpretation/translation services
  - b. Lack of culturally representative service providers
  - c. Victims have few financial resources (often as a direct result of the abuse), and funding cuts have reduced the availability of supports for personal/material needs or housing/childcare/job training
  - d. Service "deserts" (esp. in rural areas) where there is a lack of services, or increased response time for services (e.g., by law enforcement or emergency medical services)

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<sup>4</sup> Services that are adaptable to the culturally specific needs of victims.

<sup>5</sup> SDV Response System refers broadly to the network of service agencies providing services to victims of SDV.

- e. Insufficient cross-training/awareness to facilitate inter-agency collaboration with allied professionals (e.g. Elder Law/Services and other potential entrees for SDV victims)
- 3. Perceived or actual consequences for disclosing SDV result in pressure not to disclose or seek help**
- a. Risks to calling law enforcement (e.g., escalating violence, removal of children, removal of financial provider, legal/immigration concerns), including fear of arrest for domestic assault (e.g., if their abuser retaliates by filing criminal charges)
  - b. Attitudes/beliefs in some families/cultural groups about discussing “private” matters or seeking help outside the community
  - c. Community/familial pressures to protect/preserve the family (e.g., in some faith communities)
- 4. Community, familial, and/or provider minimization of SDV**
- a. Poor recognition of emotional/psychological and sexual abuse
  - b. Beliefs/attitudes that promote victim-blaming/silencing
  - c. Widespread failure to speak out against SDV

## Conclusions and Next Steps

The diversity of viewpoints captured in the Needs Assessment highlights the importance of adapting services to each SDV victim’s unique needs. In 2015-2016 the Partnership will be working to introduce statewide trainings and resources to address the Priority Barriers, with special attention to culturally responsive services that address the unique needs of African American, Older Adult, and Immigrant/LEP victims of SDV. The wealth of information collected through the Needs Assessment will form the basis for future collaborative projects to improve services and systems that impact victims of sexual and domestic violence. Examining and making efforts to improve the cultural responsiveness of Virginia’s services for victims of SDV is a perpetual process that the GEAP partnership hopes to support at both the state and local levels by its ongoing efforts.

The GEAP Partnership recommends that service providers responding to domestic and sexual violence in Virginia seek opportunities to discuss the findings in this summary and develop culturally responsive approaches to improving victim safety and holding abusers accountable. Communities can find resources on best practices through the Community Defined Solutions website (below), and through future training and resources developed by the GEAP partnership as a result of this Needs Assessment.

***A note on sexual violence:*** Victims of both sexual and domestic violence were invited to participate in focus groups; however, participants were not asked to self-identify what type of violence they had experienced. While survey and focus group questions consistently referred to both sexual and domestic violence, discussion of sexual violence is conspicuously absent from our findings. While there is no doubt that both service providers and survivors had experience with this issue, it is likely that stigma or other barriers prevented this from becoming the focus of conversation. The Partnership recognizes that

sexual violence remains an important issue—both in itself, and in the context of domestic violence—and will include sexual violence-specific training and resources in its next steps.

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