

Sample Community Needs Assessment Report

I. Overview of the Needs Assessment and Project Partners Involved

The following information was gathered in a community-based needs assessment conducted in the Cumberland County, Maine, area during December 2009 and January and February 2010.

Project partners include Family Crisis Services (FCS), the Portland (Maine) Police Department, and the South Portland (Maine) Police Department.

II. Methods Used To Gather Information

Methods used to collect data included written surveys, individual interviews, and focus groups.

III. Participation

Of the surveys distributed to Portland and South Portland Police Department law enforcement officers, 100 completed surveys were returned. Additional surveys were received from staff at Strive University, Alpha One (Center for Independent Living), adult protective services (DHHS), and Maine Medical Center's Social Work Department. A total of 20 surveys were received from disability service providers. Of the surveys distributed to staff of victim service agencies, including FCS and Sexual Assault Response Services of Southern Maine, 16 completed surveys were received. Two focus groups were conducted with consumers of the Maine Center on Deafness, and two with students of Strive University; in total, 25 individuals participated in these four focus groups. Interviews were conducted with five individuals responding to fliers distributed throughout the Cumberland County area.

IV. Strengths and Limitations of Needs Assessment

A strength of this needs assessment includes the partnership between the lead agency (FCS) and the Portland and South Portland Police Departments. The deputy chief of the South Portland Police Department and the captain of patrol at the Portland Police Department worked to ensure that surveys were completed during roll-call by the law enforcement officers of these police departments. Forty-seven percent of the law enforcement officers responded to this community-based needs assessment through surveys.

An additional strength exists in the strong relationship forged between FCS and the Maine Center on Deafness. The center distributed surveys to its staff and recruited for and hosted two focus groups. Another significant strength exists between FCS and Strive University, which recruited for and hosted two additional focus groups in addition to distributing surveys to its staff. An additional strength occurs in the lead agency's staff response to the survey—a 67-percent return rate for the survey.

Limitations of these activities include the poor survey response from many service providers, including disability service providers and victim service providers in Cumberland County.

Additionally, the lead agency had a difficult time recruiting community members for individual interviews and focus groups.

V. Key Findings

Persons with disabilities face myriad obstacles in regard to reaching out for help. Self-identification and trusting “outsiders” were reported throughout the groups, interviews, and

surveys. Persons with disabilities are a largely underserved population that either does not identify domestic violence or sexual assault as a crime and/or are largely unaware of the services and resources available. Education and training were stated as a need to learn about domestic violence and sexual assault as a crime and to be made aware of available community resources. Many reported not knowing the telephone numbers to call for help beyond calling the police. Suggestions for services to be more welcoming to persons with disabilities include the following: placing videophones at various locations, including shelters and police departments; using a relay service; making computers available in shelters that can be adapted for low-vision users; and producing brochures that include pictures of persons with disabilities and distributing them to various disability service providers where they would be accessible.

Poor experiences with service providers, shelters (including the FCS shelter), and law enforcement were on par with fear of not knowing what to expect when involving systems. The vast majority report the importance of privacy and confidentiality. Many participants believe that family or friends would be contacted without the victim's permission; and not having any control over the process was widely acknowledged as a significant concern. A shared experience of being condescended to was reported with a strong expectation of respect as an important aspect toward building the trust necessary to increase the reporting of crimes or contacting outside agencies for help. All focus group participants report lack of understanding by both service providers and law enforcement about persons with disabilities and urged education on the topic. Repeated suggestions were made to include a person with a visible disability as part of the training.

Both consumers and service providers shortlisted education and training as core components of enhanced reporting and increased visibility and access to the services available. Both groups report that reciprocal training is necessary; persons with disabilities need training as do service providers and law enforcement. Sixty-five percent of law enforcement from both departments surveyed and 69 percent of all service providers surveyed reported the need for further training and education and for increased promotion of community resources.

VI. Recommendations

As a result of this needs assessment, Family Crisis Services staff and partners will address recommendations to provide education and training to all stakeholders: victim services staff, law enforcement, disability service providers, and persons with disabilities and those who are Deaf.