



Resource Sharing Project

Rural Training & Technical Assistance

Cultivating Inclusive Practices:

Working with Rural Immigrant and Refugee Communities

by Elizabeth Balcarcel, Hibo Jama, and Mira Yusef, with Leah Green

According to the U.S. Census, an estimated 58,179 refugees arrived in the United States in 2012 (Martin & Yankay, 2013). People immigrate for many reasons: to be near family, to find better work opportunities, to provide for children, or to seek safety. Refugees and asylum seekers are immigrants who need to be safely resettled in another country because they are experiencing persecution due to race, religion, or nationality. Refugee status means the person applied to seek safety in the United States when they were living in another country. These refugees joined an estimated 39,956,000 immigrants currently living all over the United States (Grieco et al., 2012).

Historically, advocacy organizations working with sexual violence survivors have often struggled to meet the complex needs of immigrants and refugees. Immigrants and refugees have been increasingly settling in rural areas due to work opportunities and the similarities in the setting of their home countries. Increased numbers of immigrants in our rural communities provide us with new opportunities to expand our sexual assault services and to make them culturally relevant. Experiences of sexual violence are extremely common in countries struggling



after centuries of colonial oppression and civil conflicts. These horrific experiences connect immigrants and refugees from all over the world. It is critical we are aware of the demographic changes in rural areas to ensure the sexual assault services we provide continue to be relevant to the entire community.

There is often silence about sexual violence in immigrant and refugee communities. Silence leads to denial, non-reporting, or hesitancy in seeking services. The trauma of silence is mixed with the oppression experienced in home countries at the hands of those with privilege. In our rural communities, immigrant and refugee survivors may not know that our sexual assault services exist or that we can provide culturally and linguistically specific services for them. Both are aimed at bringing awareness to gender-based violence and

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building a movement to end sexual violence. Families and communities should also be seen as a resource and support for the survivor. Our whole communities should be encouraged to recognize the roles they play in preventing sexual violence and supporting survivors.

Immigrants and refugees bring not only their physical self to their new home but also their culture, traditions, and histories. Their histories may include past violence through the oppression of colonizers as well as violence by partners, family, community, or the state. This violence includes war, subjugation through rape of women and the land, and violent assimilation that stripped indigenous populations of their language, tradition, and culture.

To explore the needs of all immigrant and refugee survivors, this paper will present the experiences of immigrants from Asia, Africa and Latin America. Most immigrants in the U.S. today come from these three large regions of the world. We will explore these communities through the eyes of culturally specific statewide agencies in Iowa serving immigrant and refugee survivors of sexual violence. We will learn about the innovative approaches these programs use when working with the immigrant and refugee communities. These same approaches can be applied to our mainstream programs in an effort to expand sexual violence services nationwide.

Introduction to Asian & Pacific Islander Communities

Asian & Pacific Islander (API) communities in United States are extremely diverse. They are made up of more than 40 distinct ethnicities, such as Cambodian, and speak more than 100 languages, such as Khmer. API communities continue to grow in the United States because the largest wave of new immigrants comes from Asia. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, an estimated 11,284,000 Asian immigrants and refugees were living in the United States as of 2012 (Grieco et al., 2012).

The immigration history of API communities is as diverse as the community itself. In the 18th century, Filipinos deserted Spanish Galleon trade ships and settled in Louisiana. They were followed by the Chinese around 1849 during the California gold rush and to help build the Transcontinental Railroad. Around 1885, the Japanese began to immigrate to Hawai'i as farm workers on plantations. In 1898, the United States acquired former Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and the Pacific after the Spanish-American War. The Philippines and the island of Guam became

colonies of the United States. From 1910 until 1940, Angel Island in San Francisco became the point of entry for emigrating Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and Koreans. Hence, a large number of API families have been in the United States for many generations. Anti-immigration policies and practices, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and Japanese internment camps of World War II, have been around for just as long.

In Iowa, there have been different waves of modern migration. In the 1960s, API immigrants arrived as students, doctors and nurses, or wives of United States military men. From the mid-1970s through the 1980s, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong refugees emigrated after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and were resettled across the state. In 2000, there were a large number of individuals emigrating from South Asia as the

number of international students and marital partners continued to climb. Since 2011, refugees from Iraq, Burma, and Bhutan have made Iowa their home. These new community members often settled in small towns for reasons including jobs in meatpacking plants or as spouses of farmers.

Creating Safe Spaces for Dialogue

API communities are diverse in both culture and history and include people from many different countries. How then do we provide services to survivors of sexual violence from such diverse backgrounds?

First, we must create a safe space to begin a dialogue with the community. One of the strategies used by Monsoon United Asian Women of Iowa, a nonprofit advocacy organization in Iowa, is oral history. Sharing stories is a common pastime in the Asian



communities such as elders telling family stories to youngsters, or community members offering their individual takes on a common cultural event. Oral history is an excellent method for older community members who are eager to share their experiences but may be uncomfortable writing or who are unable to write.

Monsoon's 2012 oral history project focused on the stories of Asians who came to Iowa as refugees in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the stories of their children and grandchildren. The project became a healing space for histories from both the elders and the younger generation, resulting in a collection of stories. When creating a space for dialogue, we must build an entry point to start discussing sexual violence directly. The entry point Monsoon used for the project was puberty and gender roles. Through this storytelling space, many people ultimately disclosed experiencing or witnessing sexual violence to Monsoon.

Using age-appropriate methods to create a safe space can be especially effective. In 2009, Monsoon used digital storytelling with youth to discuss identity and violence. The youth responded particularly well in using technology to combine images and sounds to share their stories. Monsoon used creative expression as a strategy to address college-aged gender-based violence. The project was called the Yoni Chats program because "yoni" is the Sanskrit word for vagina. Yoni Chats was used to discuss body image, sexuality, sexual orientation and reproductive rights. Many of the participants were international college students with varied backgrounds and who follow proscriptive norms on sex. These backgrounds often make it difficult for survivors to disclose sexual violence.

The first session was facilitated by a female gynecologist whose presence and calm attitude sparked a sense of trust within the group. The methods used during the ongoing monthly meetings include sharing stories, artwork and performances, journaling, and holding discussions on topics related to sexuality.

The first response a survivor receives after disclosure can greatly determine the survivor's actions on seeking services and safety, and the potential for healing. This is why it is imperative we proactively provide our community with the tools and skills to understand the roots of gender-based violence. Teaching this to our communities helps them respond to sexual violence in ways that empower survivors. Take for instance the work Monsoon has been doing with the Karen community. The Karen community is part of diverse Burmese ethnic refugee group in Iowa. A Monsoon multilingual advocate from the Karen community has been meeting with a group of Karen women twice a month to address their concerns as Iowa's newer immigrants, including sex and sexual violence. Monsoon has discovered that as trust develops and grows between the participants, disclosures about sexual violence in the community emerge.

After building a safe space and beginning a dialogue, service providers can then move to the next crucial step: recovery and healing.

"I have shared my story, but what now?"
– API sexual assault survivor

Strategies Learned and Adapted

There is a compelling need for culturally specific, trauma-informed approaches beyond traditional talk therapy. Underreporting of

sexual violence in API communities has led survivors to overcome their trauma by using silence as a coping strategy. However, because of this kind of internalization, the trauma is stuck in survivors' bodies. Sexual violence at its core is a violation of one's body space, so it is important to create a space to heal the physical. Tai Chi, yoga, meditation, and other healing practices are deeply rooted in Asian communities, but are still often not recognized as helpful remedies. According to the National Community Listening Report from the National Organization of Asians and Pacific Islanders Ending Sexual Violence, the importance of traditional practices for individual and collective healing and wellness should not only be reclaimed but reimagined (2013).

Introduction to African Communities

African immigrants and refugees entering the United States come from almost every country on the African continent and include people from all different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. Nigeria, Ethiopia, Egypt, Ghana, and Kenya are the five most common countries of origin for African immigrants to the U.S. (African Immigrants in America: A Demographic Overview, 2012). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, an estimated 1,607,000 African immigrants and refugees were living in the United States as of 2012 (Grieco et al., 2012).

Africans in the United States have had a complex and violent history. From the 16th to

“After building a safe space and beginning a dialogue, service providers can then move to the next crucial step: *recovery and healing*.”

Monsoon has implemented a culturally specific program called the Samsara Healing Project. This project is based on the [Capacitar Multicultural Wellness Model](#) in healing traumatized bodies, using simple and safe techniques to improve the mental, emotional, spiritual and physical well-being of individuals through holistic tools. The Samsara Healing Project uses techniques such as acupressure, Emotional Freedom tapping, which is an alternative counseling intervention, and fingerholds to manage emotions based on Indonesian and Japanese traditions. This individual healing is strongly linked to community healing, so Monsoon has found it important for any trauma-informed care to also be offered to a survivor's family and community.

19th centuries, Africans were captured and sold to the trans-Atlantic slave trade which brought large numbers of Africans to the United States against their will. Africans in the United States suffered at the hands of white slave owners for hundreds of years. In 1865, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution made slavery illegal. One hundred years later, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, along with the decolonization of many countries in Africa, led to a significant voluntary migration to the United States starting in the 1980s. Today, Africans make up 4-5% of the roughly 38.5 million immigrants in the United States.

In recent years, the African refugee population in Iowa has been growing. Refugees from Eastern Africa, specifically from Sudan,



Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Kenya, have been resettled in Iowa since 1997. In 1999, refugees from Burundi, Rwanda, and Congo were also resettled in Iowa. African refugees living in other states have begun moving to Iowa for work or to join their family.

Employed African immigrants in Iowa are professionals, business owners, and factory workers. Many refugees begin work at meatpacking plants in mid-size towns with an abundance of factory work available, but many nurture goals to save and start businesses of their own. African immigrants tend to work at meatpacking companies because they offer higher salaries than other unskilled labor opportunities and require no experience or proficiency in English.

Many African immigrants have ignored, denied, or been forced into silence about

sexual violence in their native lands. These immigrants have also experienced centuries of colonization, militarization, civil wars and natural disasters. Furthermore, in public and private contexts, rape, wife battering, and female genital cutting are permitted, justified or encouraged through customs and laws in some cultures. While female genital cutting does impact African immigrant and refugee communities, it is important to note surgery is not a universal experience. The rate of female genital cutting can be as low as 1% in several African countries (World Health Organization, date unknown). Religion, as a major part of Africans' lives, is often used by perpetrators to defend gender-based violence as allowed by their religion. Due in large part to Western influence, 38 countries in Africa have made homosexuality a crime. This makes LGBTQ communities particularly vulnerable to sexual violence.

These traditions continue after immigration to the United States. It is not uncommon for African men to believe physically assaulting their wives to “discipline them” is acceptable or for female genital cutting to be carried out with almost no consequence. Security and survival are of prime importance to Africans who lack privileges. African women in general are practical, resilient and not passive collaborators with abusers. African survivors’ strategies of resistance and self-protection through management of suffering, support networks, or escape, may be invisible to many advocacy organizations seeking to end gender-based violence.

Supporting Survivors by Building Community

Nisaa African Women’s Project is an advocacy organization serving sexual and domestic violence survivors in Iowa which seeks to build healthy communities through transformative justice and social change. In early 2014, Nisaa conducted a community assessment of Africans in central Iowa to redesign strategies on erasing sexual and domestic violence from the community. In the assessment, African community members attributed sexual and domestic violence to stress, jealousy, economic hardship, lack of family support, responsibilities of taking care of children and elderly parents at home or long-distance in their home country or in refugee camps. Nisaa has used the results of this important assessment to structure services and outreach moving forward.

Sexual violence is particularly underreported in African communities for several reasons. First, African refugees are hesitant to seek help from law enforcement because of the discriminatory and oppressive treatment from authorities in refugee camps. Second, African

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refugees are aware of the victim-blaming, stigma and shame survivors and their families may experience from their own community if they report. Third, African religious values stress the importance of forgiveness and maintaining the traditional family structure.

A challenge Nisaa has faced has been sustaining support to sexual violence survivors after they become depressed when they are isolated from their communities. One approach Nisaa has found successful is building trust and a new sense of community with survivors by providing transportation. Although many African community members have private transport, Nisaa has discovered driving with them and discussing their concerns creates a bond that allows them to open up about their trauma. Providing this service also allows survivor and advocate to sit beside each which reinforces the peer level support Nisaa offers.

First-generation African refugees often do not have strong English language skills. Lacking English language skills can result in refugees feeling as though they can only speak to

members of their own community. This also means African refugees have limited access to the services available for sexual violence survivors. To counteract these feelings of isolation, Nisaa started the Women's Sewing Circle. This program teaches sewing skills, helps them improve English language skills, and acts as a support group. Weekly sessions involve wellness activities which helped participants to take more interest in their physical health and autonomy. It also has forged a connection and camaraderie among the members of the group.

“The silence on sexual violence is even more pronounced among African children of recent immigrants. This is due to a lack of education, information, and resources on sexual health and violence.

Addressing Gender-Based Violence with Younger Generations

Nisaa African Women's Project joined Monsoon United Asian Women of Iowa in hosting an annual API and African youth summit. The interactions with young African immigrants and refugees, whose experiences are unlike their parents and grandparents, underscored the need for Nisaa staffers to be more involved with youth. The silence on sexual violence is even more pronounced among African children of recent immigrants.

This is due to a lack of education, information, and resources on sexual health and violence. As a result, Nisaa staffers are performing outreach with a Somali youth group aimed at character building and building resources.

Nisaa has also started organizing educational events with African immigrants and refugees to explore issues of patriarchy and girls and women not being valued. The intent of these events is to create a community transformation and establish a non-violence movement carefully and gently.

Introduction to Latino Communities

Latino immigrants are a diverse community including people from Mexico, Central America, South America, Brazil, and the Caribbean. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, an estimated 21,224,000 first-generation Latino immigrants and refugees were living in the United States as of 2010 (Grieco et al., 2012). Economic hardship, as well as natural disasters, civil wars, and escaping persecution due to political views, gangs, and organized crime leads them to immigrate to the United States. A large number of Latino immigrants do not have a legal immigration status, have a lower level of formal education, and are considered to be living in poverty by U.S. guidelines.

Rural communities in particular are experiencing a large growth of Latino immigrants. These immigrants are looking to improve their economic situation, job opportunities, housing, children's education, and family's health. Rural communities offer Latino immigrants close community networks, more opportunities for spacious living and affordable housing, cleaner environments and less crime. The job opportunities for undocumented Latino immigrants in rural

communities are typically limited to farming, meat processing, and factory work. These job opportunities are generally minimum wage or less and extremely physically demanding. This kind of work severely limits opportunities for job security and respect from employers. It is not uncommon for immigrant workers to experience sexual assaults, sexual harassment, physical abuse, and labor exploitation perpetrated by their supervisor and coworkers. If immigrants wish to report these crimes they will face economic, language, and access barriers. The work hours generally do not allow time to pursue education or social services. However, they often provide more safety and security than in the country of origin.

Latino immigrants are more likely to be undocumented than other immigrants living in the United States (Batalova & Zong, 2015). Being an undocumented immigrant limits access to simple things such as having a driver's license, loans, car insurance, decent housing, medical and health insurance, disability and social security benefits, and education. To survive in the United States, many undocumented immigrants take risks such as purchasing a fake green card, using other people's identities, registering property under other names, and driving without a license.

A note on language: The term Hispanic refers to people of Spanish speaking origin or ancestry, which would include people from Spain but not Brazil. The terms Latino or Latina refers to people of Latin American origin or ancestry, which would include people from Brazil but not Spain. While Latino, Latina, and Hispanic are all appropriate and common terms to use, it is best to use the country of



origin, for example Costa Rican, and find out what terms are preferred by the survivor.

La Familia es Primero

For most Latino immigrants, “la familia es primero”: the family is first. Latinos tend to make great sacrifices and work long hours to ensure their families, both in the U.S. and in their home countries, are provided for. The concept of family for Latinos is not limited to a nuclear family structure. It is common to see Latino families share a small home with aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews and other extended family members. Typically, young family members are allowed to live in the family home until they marry. When making an important decision, all family members' opinions and perspectives must be taken in to consideration. This tradition has created Latino communities with closely established family and friend networks. This makes it important for our advocacy organizations to remember: if a Latino survivor, advocate, or

volunteer has a good or bad experience at one of our organizations they will likely share that with the community.

Every immigrant has left loved ones back in their home country and radically changed their life in order to find greater opportunities here in the United States. The unfortunate consequence of this sacrifice is coping with feeling lost, out of place, isolated, ashamed, defeated, guilty, and afraid. It is common to feel disconnected from both new family and friends living in the United States and with ones left behind in their home country. This

experience itself with healthy and safe mechanisms. Like many survivors, Latino immigrants may rely on unhealthy coping skills to relieve stress and assist with difficult times. Unhealthy coping skills, such as using drugs and alcohol, can lead Latino immigrants to be further exposed to physical, emotional and sexual violence. It is helpful for us to learn what tools immigrant survivors are using for healing and to introduce healthy and culturally relevant coping techniques. Using songs and movies that transport survivors to happy memories is a great technique to open conversations individually or in group settings.

“Many Latino immigrant survivors have not been given the tools to cope with trauma caused by sexual violence or the migration experience itself with healthy and safe mechanisms.

sacrifice, for the greater good of their family, also makes Latino immigrants incredibly strong and resilient. Latino immigrants use food, music, customs, celebrations, and family to feel alive. The use of popular music and movies as part of celebrations with family and friends is a common method of healing. These movies and songs include *El tren de la Muerte* Documental, *Voces Inocentes*, *La Bestia* Documental, *La Jaula de Oro* by *Tigres del Norte*, *Hoy Empieza mi Tristeza* by Joan Sebastian, *Mexico Lindo y Querido* by Jorge Negrete, and *Cielito Lindo* by Quirino Mendoza y Cortés. Latinos use these art forms to transport themselves to their memories and to feel connected to loved ones far away.

Many Latino immigrant survivors have not been given the tools to cope with trauma caused by sexual violence or the migration

Partnering with the Latino Community

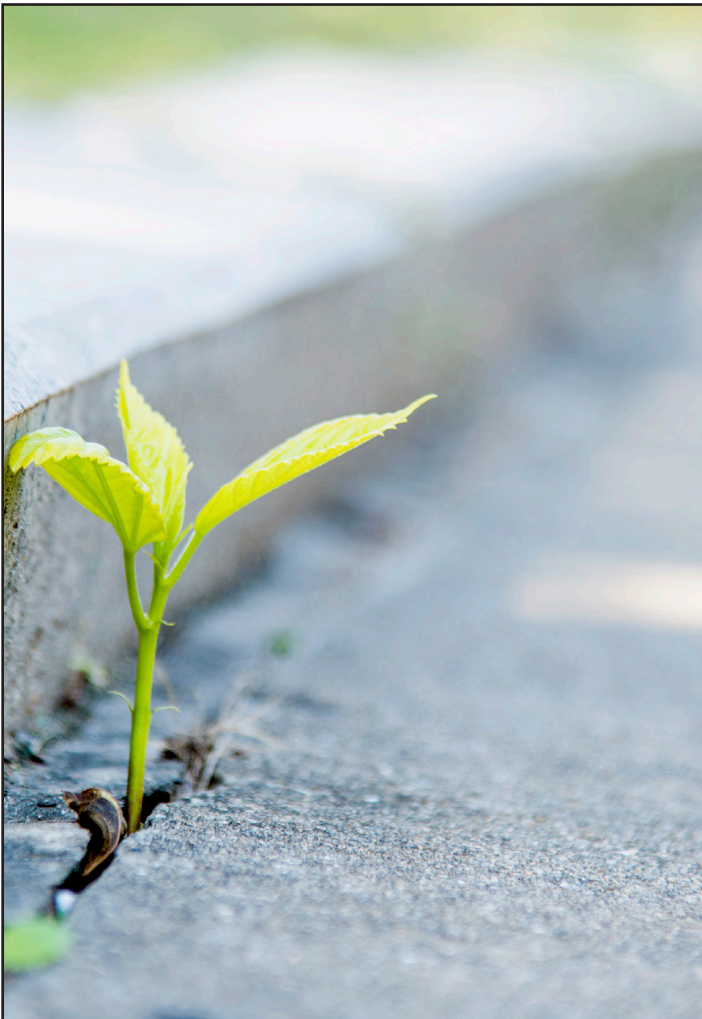
In rural areas where mainstream advocacy programs might lack culturally specific resources and multilingual staff, it benefits survivors when we engage the Latino community in helping us serve their community. Education and training for Latino community leaders on issues related to sexual violence helps create a more knowledgeable and supportive community who can spread the word about our services. For Latino communities, faith is of particular importance in gaining a sense of community and a piece of home. Partnering with spiritual leaders can be a particularly effective method of outreach for Latino community members. Churches and religious centers provide vital resources for Latinos such as classes for youth, adults, and couples planning to marry, as well

as celebrations for life milestones such as baptisms, confirmations, and quinceañeras (a celebration of a girl's fifteenth birthday). Showing respect for faith, culture, and traditions helps us earn trust with survivors in order to provide healing services.

Many organizations provide essential services for immigrants, such as computer and finance courses or schools teaching English as a Foreign Language. These are great organizations to collaborate with to reach more of the Latino community. In Iowa, the Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault has found great success in conducting "Know Your Rights" clinics with Latino communities. "Know Your Rights" is a clinic which prepares families for immigration action by covering what a family should do before a raid, how to

behave during a raid, what to do if someone is taken to a detention center, and possible immigration remedies provided by VAWA, such as U-Visas and T-Visas. Providing this essential service assists the community and offers an opportunity for dialogue leading to conversations about sexual violence. The coalition, with their member programs, has found connecting with Latino newspapers, radio stations, grocery stores, and restaurants as well as community-wide health clinics and job and health fairs a helpful way to reach the Latino community.

Language is an important consideration when work with Latino communities. Efforts to reach Latino survivors are most successful by providing written information such as brochures, and pamphlets in Spanish and by offering in person interactions such as trainings, counseling sessions and support groups in Spanish. Researching which dialects are commonly spoken in your area is helpful for translators to know what terms are most appropriate. Interpreters are necessary in providing trauma-informed services to Latino sexual violence survivors. Making it a priority to hire multilingual advocates can make a big difference for survivors, as it is best practice to provide services in the survivor's native language. However, simply speaking Spanish does not make us culturally competent. To effectively reach and serve the Latino community it is helpful to hire Latino staff and volunteers who can speak the language as well as provide culturally appropriate services for survivors. These staff and volunteers help sexual violence survivors at a peer level and in the most culturally relevant way. It is often necessary to adjust policies and protocols around volunteer and hiring practices to



welcome a diversity of life experiences and expertise, not just education requirements, which make for good advocates.

Cultivating Inclusive Practices

These are some of the innovative approaches programs in Iowa have used in supporting sexual violence survivors who are immigrants and refugees from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Although there will be differences in communities around the country, many lessons can be taken from the work being done with the immigrant populations in Iowa. Strategies for culturally relevant and trauma-informed services include:

- Taking care to build trust with the immigrant populations you serve
- Building a line in your budget for certified interpreters
- Recognizing the importance of including the survivor's family and support system when appropriate
- Making it a priority to hire multilingual and culturally competent staff and volunteers
- Creating safe spaces to initiate a dialogue with the community
- Recognizing the wisdom and clout of older or elderly community members
- Building approachable entry points to start discussing sexual violence directly
- Providing culturally specific, trauma-informed approaches to healing that go beyond traditional talk therapy
- Conducting a community assessment
- Supporting positive community building
- Providing programs and services addressing gender-based violence with younger generations
- Supporting and introducing healthy coping techniques
- Partnering with organizations and groups that are already trusted in the community

As a field, we have two important tasks: to support and advocate for sexual violence survivors, and to ultimately end gender-based violence. Using the strategies explored in this paper we have new and exciting ways to complete these tasks. The full diversity of sexual violence survivors in our rural communities will benefit from the outreach and support we give in serving immigrant and refugee survivors of sexual violence.

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The Rural Training and Technical Assistance Project, a program of the Resource Sharing Project, is available to OVW Rural Grantees that are dual/multi-service advocacy agencies or sexual assault coalitions. The rural team provides webinars, publications, tools, national conferences, training and technical assistance for dual and multi-service agencies seeking to enhance services to all sexual violence survivors. For more information and resources, visit <http://www.resource-sharing-project.org/rural-dual-and-multi-service>.

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