



Resource Sharing Project Rural Training & Technical Assistance

Facilitator's Guide: Conversations on Rural Helpline Services

This guide was developed from the “Rural Sexual Assault Crisis and Support Line Roundtable” hosted in Phoenix, AZ in June 2018. This roundtable brought together 20 rural advocates and program directors from across the country to discuss strong helpline services in rural communities.

Over the course of two days advocates and directors shared their thoughts and experiences providing helpline services to sexual violence survivors in rural communities. Quotes from these participants are shared throughout this facilitation guide. During these conversations we repeatedly heard from participants that this conversation was invaluable; for most it was the first opportunity they had to examine helpline services in depth. Participants couldn’t wait to take these questions back to their home programs to try to replicate these eye-opening discussions. It was clear from this roundtable that helpline services are one service for sexual violence survivors that we rarely build in the opportunity to discuss, plan, or evaluate.

This guide uses ‘helpline’ to encompass all crisis intervention provided via telephone or text/chat. Programs use many different terms to refer to telephone based services, such as a hotline, crisis line, or 24-hr line. We choose to use ‘helpline’ because we feel it most accurately summarizes the support survivors will receive when they call. Terms such as hotline or crisis line imply that survivors need to be in active crisis in order to call. This simple word change opens up this service to sexual violence survivors who need to use the helpline to receive emotional support or information.

This guide can be used to facilitate conversations with staff at your own rural program. These are the same questions and activities used during the roundtable and have been adapted for your use. Depending on schedules and other activities, you can set aside an entire day to discuss helplines, or infuse these questions into staff meetings and regular supervision to continue the conversations. At the end of this guide, you will find worksheets that you can print for your team.

Facilitation Tips

The key to fruitful conversations about our work is strong facilitation skills. Facilitation skills don't come naturally to everyone, but with a few skills you can start practicing to become an expert facilitator.

- Take turns speaking. Don't allow folks to talk over one another. This ensures that everyone can be heard and understood. Some facilitators find it helpful to keep a list of the order in which people raised their hands to contribute; this can aid in keeping participation equitable.
- Find a way for everyone to contribute. Not everyone will have the same comfort level in sharing. For a small close-knit group, consider calling on folks who haven't had a chance to share much. For larger groups consider providing multiple ways to contribute to the dialogue, such as small group work, a round robin, or a write-in option.
- Get comfortable with silence. There will be lulls in the conversation and that is okay. This gives time for folks to reflect and give thoughtful answers. If the silence goes on too long (try counting to ten or twenty to yourself), consider restating the original question or posing a new question to the group.
- Ask open-ended questions. Open-ended questions are designed to inspire longer and more meaningful answers instead of simple one word responses. Most of the questions we pose throughout this guide are open-ended. As you design more specific questions with your program in mind, use our questions as inspiration.
- Don't be afraid to re-focus the group. Conversations naturally diverge and head in different directions. When the diversion no longer seems productive, gently refocus the conversation back to the original question or stated goal.

What Inspires Our Work?

Before diving in to deep and reflective conversations about helpline services it is important to get staff thinking about this service from a larger perspective. Opening up this conversation by placing it within the context of our movement can help folks see beyond the current parameters of your program and help them start to envision new realities. Allowing advocates

to enter this discussion from a personal perspective helps staff take ownership of the conversation and the service as a whole.

“Having these conversations gave me the opportunity to reignite my passion for this work.”

-Director from Kansas

Activity: Allow staff 10-15 minutes per question to reflect and journal. Then discuss as a larger group.

- *What first drew you to the anti-sexual violence movement and what has most inspired you to stay?*
- *What do you hope to accomplish or contribute in this field?*
- *What do you value about our movement?*

What is a Helpline?

The following questions will help your program talk through some basics about helpline services. During this discussion, try to question your inherent assumptions. These questions may never have been considered by you or others at your program. Working through these questions and defining collective language will help staff start this discussion from the same shared point.

“I want to take back to my program the feeling of everyone’s voices being valued at the table.”

-Director from South Dakota

Activity: As a staff discuss the questions below. To get the most nuanced view be sure to include all staff no matter what department or role they play at your program. You may want to include helpline volunteers now or at a later time. Sometimes it is the folks with the least knowledge who provide the most profound insight.

- *If someone came to our program and had never heard of a helpline, how would you describe it?*
- *What do we call our helpline (helpline, hotline, crisis and support line, 24-hr line)? What implications does each name bring to mind?*
- *What needs does a helpline fulfill?*

- *What services are offered on the helpline?*
- *What is the purpose of a strong helpline?*
- *What makes a helpline strong?*
- *Who is encouraged to call a helpline?*

What is the State of Our Helpline Services?

Who calls our helpline? Many programs haven't had the opportunity to pause and think about this question. Examining who has been calling your helpline will assist your program in determining who hasn't been calling your helpline. Exploring your program's helpline services together will also highlight what aspects of helpline work have been going well and ultimately inform how you move forward.

“This roundtable has helped me figure out we’re doing the right stuff. We just have to keep doing it.”

-Advocate from Alaska

Preparation for Activity: Gather data based on program reports and demographic information about your community to help inform this discussion.

Activity: Discuss the questions below with all staff. To get the most nuanced view be sure to include everyone who answers the helpline, including volunteer support.

- *Do helpline callers typically represent our entire service area? Do we receive calls from one county or community more than another? Do we receive calls from outside our service area?*
- *Do we have repeat callers? If so, what needs are being met and how do we meet that need?*
- *Is there an age group, gender, or other demographic more likely to call our helpline?*
- *When you think about survivors of all different types of sexual violence (adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, survivors of intimate partner sexual violence, etc), are there some that are more likely than others to call our helpline?*
- *Are there any unmet needs on helpline calls?*

- *How often do calls transition into in person services? What does this transition look like?*
- *Are we supporting family members and friends of survivors on the helpline? If so, what does that support look like? What types of folks receive this support (family members, allied professionals, faith leaders, etc)?*

The Big Picture

“When I first saw the opportunity for this roundtable I thought it would be interesting, but I wondered how it would impact our organization or our services. And it has, in more than one way.”

-Director from Alaska

Activity: Choose one or two questions from the list below. Allow staff 15-20 minutes per question to reflect and journal. Then discuss as a larger group.

- How do you determine if a call was a success?
- What could make our helpline a strong service?
- How do we market the hotline to the community? How does our community know what and who this line is for?
- How could we reach more survivors?
- What do you think survivors want from our helpline services?
- How do you think survivors define healing and supportive helpline services?

Being Comfortable and Confident on the Helpline

“The questions we discussed really bring helpline services into perspective. I have been doing this for so long, you start to do the work in robotic mode. I don’t pause to think about how the call was successful. Discussing together helps me realize how we can improve.”

-Advocate from North Carolina

Activity: In pairs or small groups discuss the questions below. After the discussion, report back to the larger group.

- What skills are necessary to do strong helpline work?
- How do you learn and practice helpline skills, like active listening?
- What part of helpline work are you particularly good at?
- What part of helpline work do you struggle with?
- How do you maintain confidentiality when you move about your community or home while on-call?
- What does self-care look like when you are on call?

Helpline Infrastructure

“I really like the idea of intentionally bringing helpline conversations into staff meeting more often. It made me realize I don’t have to figure out this stuff alone.”

-Volunteer Coordinator from Montana

Preparation: Schedule a specific time to discuss with the Board of Directors or the program’s leadership team. Gather data on the budget and grants or other income sources.

Activity: As a leadership team or with the Board of Directors discuss the questions below.

- How do we budget for the helpline and its staffing? For example, do staff get a stipend for on-call time? What expectations and restrictions on helpline services are set by our funders?
- What does supervision specifically for helpline work look like? What kind of supervision is provided to volunteers staffing the helpline? How can we help folks feel comfortable and confident in answering the helpline?
- How does our program evaluate helpline services? In what ways could we improve our helpline evaluation?
- What feedback have we received from survivors and community members about the helpline services? What have we done with this

feedback? What structures can we put in place to ensure we utilize feedback more consistently?

- How do we handle intake and/or data collection related to helpline calls? Describe the expectations and guidance provided by funders on intake and/or data collection.
- What training do we offer to those staffing the helpline?
 - Is any of the training specific to the helpline?
 - Is there continued education specific to the helpline?
 - Are there different expectations for volunteers?
 - What training could we provide in the future to help those staffing the helpline?
 - What structures do we have in place for staff to debrief calls?

Closing and Next Steps

As these conversations come to a close, consider the questions below.

Discuss together as a staff and record the answers. Return to these questions at future staff meetings once staff have had time to consider in light of ongoing work on the helpline. Keep returning to your answers as you continue to build and strengthen your program's helpline services.

- *What ideas or concepts from these conversations are important to return to?*
 - *What continued training and technical assistance does our program need? Who can provide this (state/territorial coalition, program leadership, national TA providers, continued staff discussions)?*
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Creating a shared vision of strong helpline work is an important part of building comprehensive sexual violence services. We hope this facilitator's guide will help your program hold eye-opening conversations about one of the most important services we provide for rural sexual violence survivors.

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