



TRANSCRIPT

Anti-Racism is Fundamental to Sexual Assault Services

Image: Slide with blue and purple circles. Title: Anti-racism is Fundamental to Sexual Assault Services: A facilitated conversation. Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative: Enhancing Sexual Assault Services logo with tree.

Cat Fribley: Hi everyone. Welcome to this SADI podcast on anti-racism and sexual assault services. We're excited to have a chance today to spend some time really unpacking and thinking through one of the key lessons that we learned from the Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative. The Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative was a project of the Resource Sharing Project, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, the Minnesota Indian Women's Sexual Assault Coalition and the National Organization of Asian-Pacific Islanders ending sexual violence.

We, through the Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative, sought to figure out how local multi-service and dual programs could enhance sexual assault-specific services to survivors in their communities. And we walked away with a number of different lessons. Those lessons are key pieces that you can find either in the final report, which is linked to on this website and/or in the intro video that you'll also find on this website. We are excited today to take one of those lessons and to really expand upon some of what we learned and what we know about how fundamental it is for sexual assault programs to really have a direct response to and an understanding of racism and oppression, in order to provide services to sexual assault survivors.

My name is Cat Fribley as I said, and we are joined today by two of our partners on the Resource Sharing Project. I'm wondering, Michelle, do you wanna introduce yourself first?

Michelle Dixon-Wall: Oh, you got... My name is Michelle Dixon-Wall, and I am a TA provider with the Resource Sharing Project. I'm housed at the Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs, and I'm super excited to be here chatting with my colleagues today about something that we spent a lot of time chatting with in non-recorded sessions, about how we can improve and enhance sexual assault programs' connection and understanding with anti-racism and anti-oppression work, and that's it.

Cat Fribley: Awesome. And Tracy, do you wanna introduce yourself?

Tracy Wright: Absolutely. Hi, my name is Tracy Wright. You all look absolutely amazing. And I am a TA provider for the Resource Sharing Project. I am housed at the North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and I provide TA in ongoing capacity building for 17 different states. So my region of the country is as far as Texas up to Maryland, down the Florida, U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. And so I get afforded the opportunity to work with the statewide and territorial anti-sexual assault coalitions and dual coalitions, really having a fingerprint on their influence and what they really need to build the capacity of their constituents. And as Michelle said, we have spent a great deal of time really digging deep and having these thoughtful conversations around, how do we continue to weave an anti-racist framework into our organizations, understanding that when we do that, we are improving our service delivery to survivors across the spectrum. So super excited for this opportunity to engage in and have a rich dialogue.

Cat Fribley: Absolutely, I'm so grateful to both of you for joining us today. Tracy and Michelle and I have worked together for a number of years, and they were some of the folks that I thought would be most able to engage in this conversation from the place, not only of the SADI lessons but also from a place of organizational change and development, which is really what the SADI was all about. It was about finding ways that organizations could shift their identities, their cultures, their practices in order to best meet the needs of sexual assault survivors. And one of the things that became really clear early on was that oftentimes when we talked about enhancing sexual assault services, folks wanted very much for there to be some sort of toolkit. And I think that that's a common thing that comes up. Folks wanna know, "How do we do this? What are the exact steps that we can walk through?" And what we found, in the years of working with the six project sites that were a part of the Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative, was that it's impossible to have a toolkit for any given community. And that part of that is about the unique needs of the folks that make up your community, your city, your town. Part of that is about the fact that there's no toolkit of how to do this work generally, that would work in every locale, right, for every survivor.

When I think about that, I also am able to so ground myself in the fact that, while that is true for how we provide technical assistance and support to folks, as they think about meeting the needs of sexual assault survivors in their communities in new ways, it's also really true of anti-racism work. Folks often wish that there was a toolkit that told them how to do this work. And instead, what we have found over the years, is that it's a practice. It's a practice that we have to attend to, both personally and organizationally, and that we need to do that really daily in order to build new skills, in order to build new practices that are embedded with that deep commitment to unlearning and disrupting all forms of oppression. And very specifically today we're gonna talk about unlearning and disrupting racism.

So one of the things that I wanted to start with you all is just thinking about this as a practice. Thinking about the fact that when we talk about doing anti-racism work, especially those of us who are white, which Michelle and I are, that what we're talking about often is trying something, failing, having to make amends, and come back to the practice over and over again, and acknowledge that all of our work on this is a journey, right? But it is a journey and a practice and a commitment that is vital in making sure that all survivors of sexual violence have the services that they need.

We know that anti-racism is fundamental to sexual assault work. And I'd love to hear from you, Tracy and Michelle, about what we've learned about why that's the case. What is it that we have learned along the path of doing this work that shows us this sort of deep truth, that without a commitment to, and a direct understanding in response to racism, we're not meeting the needs of sexual assault survivors.

Tracy Wright: Absolutely, Cat. This is Tracy chiming in. Most definitely wanted to just add a layer of context in how we're thinking about it. I think, when you're talking about practices, I think you have to have that fundamental understanding that sexual violence is a tool of racism. And I think that the way we should think about the practice is from your tattoo, Cat, is we have to figure out how to do the "both and," right? The "both and," and understand that two things can exist at one time. And so that is a charge for us as advocates doing this work from a survivor-centered perspective, is to understand that, in order to end sexual violence, we also have to end racism and oppression in this country. The two cannot be parsed out. It cannot be done in silos. And so, really taking that deeper dive to think about, "How do we practice that every day?" And also, "How do we ground ourselves in understanding that sexual violence is a tool of racism?"

Cat Fribley: I love that it took about two minutes for us to reference the tattoos. Thank you, Tracy.

Tracy Wright: I do what I can.

Cat Fribley: I have "both" and "and" tattooed on my arms, as a reminder to try to approach things from a place of recognizing that there are almost always multiple truths, multiple perspectives that we need to hear about. And certainly when we think about sexual violence as a tool of oppression, and also as oppression as a way that stops us from being able to respond to the needs of sexual violence survivors, we're really talking about a "both and," right? So racism, both is a part of the cause, and it is also very much a part of a barrier to us being able to provide the services that survivors need from us often in our local advocacy programs. And Michelle, I'm wondering if you could talk some to that?

Michelle Dixon-Wall: Yeah, and I also wanna... I really just appreciate the framework around talking about this as building muscles and exercising and practicing, right? Because we often are falling into, just like we want a toolkit we're falling into these...

Especially those of us that are white folks that are trying to be perfect, and so we hold ourselves back from engaging and leaning into the awkward and vulnerability about that, which I know we're gonna talk about a little bit later on in the podcast. And I also, I think it's important for us to understand that, while we are talking about this as an anti-racism work piece, that it's not extra, and that's kind of how it's been seeming to be for a lot of people, that anti-racism work is like an extra thing that we have to do, but it's not. It's inherent and it's integrated into the work of sexual violence. Because it's a root cause of why sexual violence exists. And a part of a broader web or cage or whatever metaphor works for folks around all – how all these oppressions are connected and used to keep multiple different marginalized communities down or without power.

Cat Fribley: Absolutely. Oh, it totally makes sense that racism and other forms of oppression as we know really shape societal ideas about things like sexuality, about bodily autonomy, about relationships, all of these different aspects of our lives which have a really direct impact then when we're talking about creating a response to survivors and creating a response to ending sexual violence in our communities, right? Those are things that are not extra; they're interwoven together. And if we can really peel apart that piece, what we see is how much racism and other forms of oppression impact how our services are structured, how our organizations are structured and how we think about sexual violence even in our culture.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: And with those societal ideas about sexuality and bodily autonomy, how you're talking about racism and oppression influences that, these ideas are also internalized, right, into those of us who are doing this work; it's internalized into the survivors that we work with all the time and influence our own introspection in how we need to do our own work and things like that to do that individual work to unlearn and practice again, or build those muscles, right? Because we have these internalized ideas from the societal ideas that are shaped by oppression.

Cat Fribley: Absolutely. Absolutely, and we know that ideas that we have from society and from culture are in fact then always also interwoven in our organizations for the most part. Because our organizations are made up of individuals. Our society is made up of individuals, and all of us are really swimming in racism soup, right? In this culture. So I'm wondering – I know that one of the things that we have been really clear about is the fact that addressing racism and other forms of oppression is a key piece that is fundamental both for organizations, but also there is a personal commitment too that has to come with it. That that personal commitment and organizational support really have to work together. And I'm wondering, Tracy, if you can talk a little bit about that. What are the things that, when we talk about personal commitment and organizational support having to go hand in hand. What are some of the things that come up for you? What are the organizational pieces that support individual pieces, and what are the individual pieces that are absolutely necessary to embark upon those organizational opportunities to unlearn and unpack and dismantle racism?

Tracy Wright: Alright. So now you wanna talk about the things that I dream about and the things I have nightmares about. We can just totally do that.

Cat Fribley: Yes.

Tracy Wright: But I think when we're thinking about this, about personal commitment and organizational commitment, I think one of the things that rises to the top for me is really making sure that we are prioritizing lived experience, especially when we're talking about people of color, which sometimes is hard for this work to be able to do, but it's also a part of how we have done our work historically. Our work is built off lived experiences. We all are moved and charged and motivated when we think about the injustices and the survivor stories that we hear each and every day. And in that same breath, because two things can exist at one time, we have to understand that people's lived experiences have, particularly for people of color, have been shaped by the institutions of racism and how we've been able to function and not function and been denied access about... you know, just life experiences and that.

And so I think that organizations and personal commitments have to make sure that they value those things, and when we value those things, we have to make sure that we don't make it into an academic framework. Because oftentimes, sometimes the academic framework, right, and how we think about theory and we think about practice around social justice issues, oftentimes has a little bit more value, as opposed to people who have lived experience. And so organizations and individuals have to be on this journey, like as you said, and have to engage in this exercise in a muscle to make sure that we're prioritizing those lived experiences. Because when we think about survivors who enter into our doors and who need our help, their full self and their full lived experiences come along with them. Coupled with, that when you think about the backdrop and the climate of the country and the traumas that are associated with those things, those are the things that I think that we have to make those a personal commitment to hear and also to value.

Cat Fribley: Absolutely. That makes me think, when you said, we have to make these personal commitments, we absolutely, I think, have such individual personal work to be done, and we also have that organizational commitment that you're talking about. And not from a place of academic theory, right? But from a place of practice and reality, from a place of the lived experiences of people of color and those experiencing racism, from that practical reality of what it is that we're hearing from the survivors that we work with, and centering how we respond to the manifestation of racism that is intertwined with trauma and other forms of violence that people are experiencing. When I think about that, it makes me really think about the intentionality that we have to bring to this, right?. It makes me think about the ways that there are specific kinds of things we can do organizationally to make sure of that. And Michelle, I'm wondering if you wanna speak at all to that?

Michelle Dixon-Wall: Yeah, I think that there's a lot of spaces, like Tracy was saying, where we have this academic framework, or we're talking about... Right? We use the term "theory" when we talk about anti-oppression – "anti-oppression theory" – like it's not a real, on-the-ground experience as people every day. And when we do that, and we talk about it as a theory, then it's outside of ourselves and this concept, and we really have to humanize it so that we can start to work against it. Because if this is this big thing out in the world. And I think about Adrienne Maree Brown who talks about emergent strategies, right, Cat?

Cat Fribley: Yes.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: It's something that she says too, is like is, "Small is all." It's those little things that we do in our personal interactions and our personal learning and the small changes and successes that we have that make the difference towards dismantling a much larger system that is overwhelming if we're just looking at it as a spectator, right?

Cat Fribley: Absolutely. And in those ways, individual acts, small is all, build to organizational and cultural, right? And so, as we think about that certainly one of the things that makes me reflect back on again is part of what we were talking about at the beginning, which is that this is work that requires us to build new muscles. It's work that asks us to really approach it with vulnerability and a willingness to make mistakes. Recognizing that we have to develop those new muscles and those skills in order to interrupt racism in our lives and in our communities and in our organizations. And that sometimes those individual interruptions are what build to an anti-racist culture, right? Or what build to an anti-racist commitment in practice. And so, as you were saying, small is all, it made me think about this real need that we have to be able, especially as white people, to acknowledge that we're gonna make mistakes and that that doesn't matter. As a matter of fact, we should embrace that. We want to make mistakes, because the sort of alternative to that is not doing the work, right? Is not risking authenticity and vulnerability in interrupting what we know to be practices of racism, what we know to be micro-aggressions, what we know to be long-held organizational ways of doing our work sometimes, that really would just require us to say "Hey, wait a minute. Is there a different way to do this?"

Michelle Dixon-Wall: And I think for those of us that are white, trying to do this work, struggling through, leaning into being awkward, that we don't need to pretend to know. I think sometimes in our field there's this unspoken assumption that is a real...

Cat Fribley: Absolutely.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: Barrier to privilege, or to talking about privilege or acknowledging it, that we're meant to know all of these sorts of issues, right? And if we feel as if we have to pretend to know more than we do, then we can't get... Then it's getting in the

way of really good conversations and the growing edge, right?

Cat Fribley: Absolutely. So we know there are some really specific kinds of organizational commitments and practices, that can support that growing edge, that can support that on-going work, that there are ways that our organizations can build muscles. [chuckle] Like organizational muscles. Trace, I'm wondering if you wanna talk about what some of those practices are and some of those commitments are that we've identified?

Tracy Wright: I know, and I am so – Michelle, you so gave a tweetable – you know that this moment, anti-racist practice is not a spectator sport. So I'm gonna use that and I'm gonna build on that and ask people not to just be spectators, and just watch people of color do all the heavy lifting when talking about racism and oppression. And so, oftentimes that is really hard not to fall into being a spectator in that. And I think it's imperative that organizations, as well as individuals, know that you all have to – all of us collectively – have to hold space with each other, and it can't be the person of color's role and responsibility to lift up racist practice and really challenge and dismantle philosophies that have not been rooted in dismantling racism and oppression practice. And so I really wanna hold that and I hope people understand what we're saying it is. It is exhausting; me as a woman of color, to be the person who always has to lift race, right? And so with that, it's exhausting and it also leads it a little bit into tokenism, and then perception can be like, "Tracy is angry because I am telling about my personal lived experience, and how I live and view the world." And I think the beautiful thing that Michelle and I have been able to do is we've been able to go on what we've called the "Ebony and Ivory Tour."

So we've been able to be proper role models in space when we're talking about lifting those things, so people can actually see practice in us actually exercising muscles and us being extremely vulnerable. Because I will say that, even in those spaces where we have had to talk about race in a really intimate way with organizations and advocates, we've also messed up quite a bit too. So we've been vulnerable, and so that is our way of thinking about how to invite folks into that. And that is a charge for folks not to... Michelle, when you said that, I just thought two black people playing tennis, and what do... You know what I'm saying? How do we disrupt that? Because that is a different muscle that we need to think about, because when we're talking about racism, a lot of times people of color are the folks who are doing the heavy lifting, and it is not a spectator sport. That was dope, Michelle. I'm gonna tweet that; that's nice.

Cat Fribley: I love...

Michelle Dixon-Wall: The theme of two black women playing tennis, right?

Tracy Wright: Right, right. And I remember why people are just looking at us, and I'm like, "Oh this is not how it's supposed to be at all." That isn't a healthy practice.

Cat Fribley: Right. That – the alternative to that is to hold space with people of color, right?

Tracy Wright: Absolutely.

Cat Fribley: Not to ask people of color to hold that space, but rather to say, “This is our job as white folks, as non-people of color, to lift up the needs, lift up the work, make a commitment to it and hold the space with accountability, of course.

Some of the ways I think about that work needing to happen, especially at the organizational level, often is I think it seems to folks to be like, “Well, of course, you would do that? When in reality, some of the things that we’re about to talk about, are things that we know folks are still struggling with, right? Things like reviewing their policies and procedures, to really look at them from a lens of racism, and to see, Where is white culture embedded? Where are oppressive approaches embedded in how we actually have structured ourselves or the ways that we do our work? And how are we interrupting that then? How are we finding new ways? Because what we also know is that the ways our organizations are structured, the way we do our work, is really reflective of how accessible we are to communities of color and to survivors of color, right?

So as we think about that, we as organizations have to have that deep commitment to changing ourselves, to being reflective ourselves and to having that practice in order to be able to respond to the needs of survivors across the lifespan, across every community. I’m wondering if you all have thoughts about – specifically about organizational approaches or commitments around things like policies and procedures, hiring, promotion, supervision. Because these are really key pieces that tell, not only our staff who we are, but tell our communities who we are too, right?

Michelle Dixon-Wall: Well, yeah, Cat, I’ve been thinking a lot about supervision and human resources and a lot of those kind of pieces, because of just the nature of our work with sexual assault coalitions, a lot is about infrastructure, right? And so trying to think about how these dynamics are playing out in our organizations. And thinking about trauma-informed supervision, and also culturally responsive kind of provision and really kind of breaking it down to... Because there’s not a toolkit, right? Because I can’t tell you which way you should do something, because all... Just as survivors are whole people, staff are whole people and complicated, with a lot of “both and,” right? That we are thinking about how we’re practicing mindfulness and intentionality as supervisors of diverse staff, right?

Cat Fribley: Absolutely.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: And not just a person in terms of race, but in all kinds of ways. That we’re asking ourselves, “Is my expectation or response to the person I’m

supervising, based on the dominant culture that I live in, the dominant culture, what it's telling me, those messages." That I'm reflecting on, "What are the differences in our communication? And can some of those differences be based on the fact that we're coming from different cultures?" Right?

Cat Fribley: Absolutely.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: Thinking about the dynamics that might exist in an organization that put a burden on this employee. Because an employee can have performance issues, right? And at the same time, we as organizations, so many of us, for example, have these more token positions, like bilingual advocate, or things like that, that are not as valued. They were an extra add-on or something like that, or we tried to piece them together with little bits of money we could gather around, because we needed response to, for example, a Spanish-speaking community, or something like that. That we, instead of saying, "Okay, as a whole organization, how can we value Spanish as the language for all staff?" Right? "How can we make it a preferred qualification in our hiring process?" Or something like that, that we could actually fulfill.

Cat Fribley: Across the board, right? Rather than narrowing it to this one position that then has the responsibility for absolutely an entire culture and community. Yeah.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: And the trauma that comes with being responsible for their community, the tokenism, the internalized and externalized racism that they might be experiencing and then they have a performance issue that is definitely related to that, but also are both things that have to be addressed, right?

Cat Fribley: Right. Right.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: That before we hire this person that we start from that beginning point and say, "How are we doing this?" And then when performance issues come up that we're evaluating, "What dynamics are existing in our organization that may put a burden on these employees who are being tokenized, or who were responsible for holding, as Tracy says, the diaspora, right?"

Tracy Wright: Yes. Yes.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: Of women of color, right? In the country which, of course, your project is, right? [chuckle]

Cat Fribley: Absolutely.

Tracy Wright: Right, and it's that part, right? So when you think about, when we hire bilingual staff, and we're like, "Oh okay, so we have a Spanish-speaking staff." Are we taking into context about how many different dialects of Spanish there are? And now you've tasked one person for holding this space for an entire community, and what

that comes with, and what that comes with when you think about all the different things that exist, how that things – how that impacts how folks are thinking about immigration, and how things of, like safe spaces, for them to come forth and receive services? Are we thinking about services that meet them where they are, that are both culturally affirming and trauma informed? So, it just makes... Those are things that I think that we have to think about, practices, expectations, supervision and ongoing support, really allowing staff to define what self-care looks like for them, and understand it might not be what we have mainstream prescribed for folks. And allow folks to figure out what that means for them, and it's alright if it doesn't look like what you would do, right? And that's okay.

Cat Fribley: Absolutely. It makes me think, just hearing you all talk about all those things, that it makes me think really specifically that, actively anti-racist supervisors, whether we're talking about people of color in that position or whether we're talking about white folks in that position, have to attend to the needs and safety of their staff of color. Have to attend to the differing needs, very specifically of their staff of color, and do the same, plus support white staff, in deeply understanding how privilege and racism is affecting their work and their life, right? So to really acknowledge, if you are trying to approach supervision and support of staff from that actively anti-racist place, to really acknowledge the differing needs that staff bring, right? And to work distinctly with white staff as well in understanding how privilege and how racism affect their work and their life and their experience of this work as well.

Tracy Wright: Absolutely. And I'll just chime in.

Cat Fribley: Yeah.

Tracy Wright: Like the small things and how that just shows up in practice, right? I know one of the things that we've started to hear when folks ask for support around about, is like, "Like, if you have communities of color staff who are going into spaces where you know it might be tough, right?" Is, "How are you gonna support them?" When you think about coalition perspectives, we drive all across the state, right? And we end up in a very, very different spaces. And so, how we supporting that? What does that look like? What are... Just recommendations in support on making sure that the safety and well-being of your staff who are doing the work is at the forefront of how you're thinking about activities and engagement? Yeah.

Cat Fribley: For sure. And I think one of the things that leads me to, and Michelle, maybe this is where you're going, was about, sometimes the reality is that the leadership in our organizations, or that the staff in our organizations, have not aside the time or made a commitment to seeking information about privilege and oppression, right? Because it's hard to imagine what the differing needs of staff might be, if you haven't really had an opportunity to dig deeply into anti-oppression based management skills, for example. Or shared definitions around racism or what dismantling racism might

look like. I know that's at least one piece of what I had seen as a key learning space for folks, right? To making that commitment to doing their own learning and around anti-oppression, and very specifically, around anti-oppression based management skills.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: Yeah. And I was really thinking about the practice of reviewing policies and procedures for white culture or other oppressive approaches. And also thinking that that's a good practice, right? But it's also that, even if you had six diverse staff in a room reviewing them, that we might not all find the same things and that their approach to the need for changing and living documents. And more important than setting aside a time, I think, to a review of policies, is maintaining that openness to the feedback.

Voice: Yeah.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: And openness to make that change, right? That when things come up and say, "Oh, this is a problem for me." That you go, "Oh, well we should change that policy." That we have that flexibility in our leadership to say, "Okay, this thing is oppressive and if it's not a problem to change it, let's do that. Let's be open to being wrong and open to being... And open to change and nimble, [chuckle] in our work."

Cat Fribley: Absolutely. And one of the things I think that, just to build on what you were saying is, it is difficult to have that level of flexibility and nimbleness if we don't have relationships built on trust, right? And if we don't have the ability and the time for really intentional conversations about this work, about racism and oppression, ones that are really less reactionary and crisis-based than the majority of the work that we end up doing usually in advocacy programs, but that are really about acknowledging that how we do the work is as important as the work that we're doing, and that we have to make space, right? With each other, to have those conversations that both illuminate and provide opportunities for dialogue around really differing experiences and differing approaches and differing understandings of the world, and that also then are about teaching folks how to have those kinds of hard conversations.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: Yeah. And that openness to being corrected.

Cat Fribley: Absolutely.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: As well as a practice around just transparency and honesty, as a leader, can really help to encourage people to give feedback and encourage people to say, "I'm having a challenge with this," because you're showing your vulnerability, and that you're willing to be corrected, and make some changes and to be transparent about how you make decisions and be transparent when you're wrong. Right?

Cat Fribley: Yeah, for sure. I want us to... One of the things that I wanna do is just to really make apparent this thing that I think is what we're talking about, and I just wanna

check in with you all. One of the things that this makes me think about is, people will also often come and say, “Well, we wanna hire more folks of color.” Or, “We want to really start engaging with this other community of color to make sure that they know our services are available.” And almost always my response is, “Pause for a second, because our work starts at home.” And when we say that, I mean, have you looked at your own organizational culture? Have you looked at your own organizational policies and practices? All of these things that we’ve been talking about.

Have you committed to that kind of stable and empowering leadership that supports anti-racist and anti-oppression efforts? Where you do ask for feedback, right? Where you are able to be corrected, as you were talking about, Michelle. Where you have made a commitment to, Tracy as you were saying, to holding space with people of color and not asking people to color to hold the space to talk about racism. Where we are really, I think what we are saying – and you all please feel free to correct me if I’m wrong, and of course it’s always “both and” – but is, in order to be able to do this work with survivors and communities, we need to make sure that we’re attending to this work internally as organizations first.

Tracy Wright: Absolutely. Like absolutely. I think that’s a lot of the TA that Michelle and I have embarked upon, because we have had those same conversations with organizations that are like, “Yes, we’re ready to face or we’re ready to go. We need to do this and need to do that.” And we’re like, “You know what? It’s okay. Let’s take a step back and let’s really do some internal work. Let’s talk about...” And so, that really is unpacking, like language is something we’ve spent a lot of time talking about. Making sure that everybody is working from the same frame, and then being really intentional about how we’re gonna make this commitment to continue to learn, right? That’s a practice that we also need to have when we’re talking about facing forward, because what you don’t wanna do is tokenize a community, right? You really wanna figure out are we ready for this relationship and all that it may come with? It might be love. It might be accountability, and it might be some really, really hard truths that we didn’t know about ourselves, about... Because we can think that we got it, right, and as soon as you ask somebody, they might say, “No. You don’t have it. And here are the multiple ways in which you haven’t had it, and yeah, and now you’re here.” And that is the place for a reconciliation, right?

That has to be the process too, right? And vulnerability and figure out, “Alright, how can we move forward?” So yeah, okay, absolutely. Absolutely.

Cat Fribley: It makes me think about, as we are moving then into a conversation I think next, about the ways that we provide services, it makes me just... It made me want to just make sure that we were all stating this as clearly as possible, that this work requires internal work. It also requires us to listen to our communities. We are not saying, “Do all this work internally.” Without ever asking for feedback either. Or without asking for accountability from communities of color. I think what we are distinctly

saying is, we need to make sure, that as anti-violence organizations, as anti-sexual assault organizations, that our commitment runs deep to changing how we ourselves are moving through the world, and once we do that, then we are, I think, in a place to begin to do that outreach, right? And that different approach to engaging whole communities around services, because we've done our homework about what it looks like then. We've done the practicing. We've done the committing. And we've done the listening.

And I just wanna check in with you all, because I know for us at the Demonstration Initiative, one of the things that was so incredibly useful was an opportunity that sites had to really spend some time asking their community, "What do you know about us? What do you think about us? What do you think we do? What have we done that supports your healing? What could we be doing to support your healing?" And I think that the opportunity to really listen to our communities and to, as you were putting it, Michelle, take that correction, ended up being transformational for many of them, in terms of their thinking. And I just wanna ask you all what are the ways then, as we commit both internally and organizationally to this work, that we need to have just as strongly that corollary piece of saying, "Hey, community, and I mean, whole community, what do you need from us? How are we meeting your needs?" Is that something that you all have seen? How have you seen folks approach that? Or, what do you think is the takeaway there in terms of really centering ourselves from community need?

Michelle Dixon-Wall: Yeah. Yes, I have definitely seen this. And worked in different ways around this. I was part of the... I was working at a SADI demonstration site during the assessment period and discovered so much, just about survivors in general and about my community, just by taking that time to ask some of those questions about what helped you heal and what is justice. And who's here? Who's here in our community. Outside of some census data, that's not as valuable, right? [chuckle]

Cat Fribley: Not always reflective actually in all the ways, right.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: You bet. Yeah, you bet. And one of the things that I keep thinking about keeps kind of going through my head is to help communities build power. At one of the organizations that I worked at, we really wanted to... We really didn't have a lot of folks who were representative of the Latina community within our organization. And so just kind of following the lead of the Latina community in our area about the kind of things that they were looking for, as far as services, which a lot of it was just like, "We wanna know more about the community, about what's available to us, outside of just sexual assault information, like banks and co-ops." And really adjusting to... that we just started to try to help host some of these community educational events in Spanish and things like that. And this is how... Helping this community build their power and build their connections.

And really become integrated into the community that helps folks be able to apply

for jobs later, because they know you, and word of mouth is the most important thing in most communities, I know as somebody from the queer community that's super important to us also, is that word of mouth like, "Yeah, they're fine. They're cool. There's queer people there." And that kind of a thing that you're getting to know these communities as equal players in your area, right?

Cat Fribley: Absolutely.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: That we have things to learn from each other, and also that we have privilege that we can share to help build power in other communities. A little bit abstract but...

Cat Fribley: Yeah, no. It makes me totally think about a number of things when you're saying that. It makes me think really strongly about the fact that, we believe that we need to respond to the needs of survivors as whole people. That our work should always be holistic, and that it should not define people by the trauma that they've experienced, that we wanna make sure that our trauma, that our services, our organizations, our approach, our understanding is trauma-informed. And that at the same time, that never do we forget that what we're talking about, when we're talking about survivors, is ourselves, is our communities, our whole people who are authentically looking for opportunities to heal. So it makes me think about, when you're talking about that, the value that we place in making sure that we're understanding trauma perspectives and that we are never defining someone only by their trauma, if that makes sense.

Tracy Wright: Absolutely.

Cat Fribley: And I know Tracy, you and I have talked about this so many times, and that one of the things that has been an ongoing conversation in our work, is that when we say trauma-informed, I think people often think of that as a real mental health-based, or approach. And in fact, what we're saying is we need to understand all of the forms of trauma that people experience and the ways that that then naturally plays out in how they experience the world, right? And I'm wondering, because when we say trauma, we don't just mean sexual violence. We mean historical trauma. We mean all forms of trauma. And I'm wondering if you can speak to the ways that, when we say trauma-informed or trauma perspective, what we're really talking about, again, is that holistic approach.

Tracy Wright: And a whole person, right? And how... I think we have a lot of... I think sometimes we're really, really grounded in understanding how the brain works and how the body works, but I think we have to think about environmental trauma and historical trauma as well, too. Because one of the things I think about in this current context, is climate as a Black woman is I oftentimes feel a whole lot of trauma that predates me and my body holds that. So when we're talking about immigration practices, those

things take me back in hell, and I oftentimes reflect on my ancestors and the things that they experienced. And so in thinking about that, and I didn't even know that, right? Until as of late, and being really reflective like, "Tracy, what's going on. Why are you holding a whole lot of anxiety?" And so for me, that is environmental and historical trauma that is manifested in my body by way of me having to live in Black skin every single day.

And so, I think that folks need to just understand that it is a factor in how people show up, and what the totality of their experiences are. When they are seeking services, they're bringing their whole self, they're bringing their history, they're bringing family history, environmental history, economic history, all those things show up. And so, I just hope that we can move in a direction where we're acknowledging a whole person, and all of those experiences.

Cat Fribley: Absolutely.

Tracy Wright: Especially when we think about what we offer to them, which I think that Michelle's question that she asked herself as a steady cohort member before she came to RSP, that has grounded me in multiple ways. What do survivors need? Right? And asking that, and acknowledging all those pieces of trauma, I think, that will help all of us collectively build services for sexual assault survivors – the whole sexual assault survivor.

Cat Fribley: Absolutely. As we start to wrap up our time together, one of the things I wanna make sure we don't miss is that piece, Tracy, that you I think were referencing. And that Michelle, I know you and Tracy have talked a lot about and you've even presented on, which is that fact that the work of responding to the needs of sexual assault survivors is built on honoring lived experiences, right? It is built on meeting cultural expectations with resistance sometimes, about... I hear that that is the narrative. And I'm thinking about even, Tracy, from what you were just saying, there was a time this summer where I heard a lot of people putting a narrative forward of, "We are all immigrants." And while I understood the well-meaning-ness of that, it also invisibilized so many people, an entire, sorts of histories really, of people who did not come to this country as immigrants. But who were stolen and brought here as slaves. And so I think about the ways that our work is about interrupting cultural narratives, whether that is about rape culture or whether that is about racism. And it makes me think that there are so many actually parallels, in terms of how we do this work. And Michelle, I'm wondering if you could speak to some of that?

Michelle Dixon-Wall: Yeah, you bet. I did not – my goal was not to do anti-racism work when I started to do sexual assault work. It was not – my goal was not even in my thinking. It was not something that was present. And one of the things that really helped me to really dig deep into thinking about white privilege and anti-racism work, was my deep philosophical belief in sexual assault advocacy and the way that we do

that. That it started to make a lot more sense to me when I could really think about the fundamental kind of foundation of believing survivors, and that there's so much in why we need to do that, that has to do with rape culture, right? And that there's so much parallels to believing Black folks in their experience of racism. That there are so many parallels there. Tracy and I have presented a lot on a lot of the parallels we see in the media. Like, "Why was she drinking so much?" A victim-blaming statement. And why we need to believe survivors as a counter to that message.

And the same thing about, "Why is Trayvon Martin wearing that hoodie? Why was he wearing that hoodie? That's very suspicious?" But that's the same narrative and that we need a counter to that. That's about believing Black folks and their experience of racism, right?

Cat Fribley: Absolutely.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: That those parallels exist that helped me go, "Oh, this is my work. This is why I know this is my work." Because it's the same kind of concept when you break it down to those kind of simple media messages and the way we try to counter that. And the way we try to build power with survivors and with communities color is about helping to counter those narratives, right?

Voice: Too bad.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: To being, "I believe you." Right? The fact that healing and empowering thing that we do as advocates to say, "I believe you." And validate that experience and normalize it. And so I just feel that there's a lot of parallels in that in the way we help folks heal from things like micro-aggressions. Also, and that those daily experiences, as one of Tracy's colleagues calls the everyday traumatic stress disorder, right Trace?

Tracy Wright: Right. Right. Right.

Cat Fribley: You all, I feel like this is... I always am so grateful to be able to engage in these conversations with the two of you, with the folks that we work with in a broader way, with the Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative sites, and now hopefully with a much broader audience, to just keep thinking about, keep talking about this. Because, I feel like one of the things that we know is that, and learned especially through the Demonstration Initiative, is that strong programs who embrace change have to continually grow, and part of where we need to grow is in our commitment to and work around anti-racism. And that part of where that starts I think is reflected back by what you all were just saying, it's by acknowledging that sexual assault survivors are often not getting what they deserve, and that they and their communities have more to say than we've been able yet to listen to, if that makes sense. Or that we've chosen to listen to. And as I think about the ways that we need to continue growing, seeking out new

strategies, partnering – you all, we didn't even get to this – partnering with culturally specific agencies and lifting them up in doing this work, for communities, within communities, and by that community, right? That there are ways that that embracing growth and anti-racism requires daily work. It requires building that muscle, by each person and by the program itself or by the organization itself.

And so I'm just really grateful to the two of you for the deep thinking and the ways that you all approach this work and for your willingness to share it with us on this Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative podcast. And I'm wondering as we close, Michelle or Tracy, are there other pieces that you want to make sure that we are leaving folks with as we think about this?

IMAGE: Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative: Enhancing Sexual Assault Services logo with tree.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: The thing that I just kinda wanna say is that I wanna encourage folks to not give up when something doesn't work out, 'cause lots of things are not gonna work out, right? That you're gonna have good intention or set a good space and something's gonna fall apart. That we use that opportunity to reflect and pivot and then move forward again. That we don't say, "We tried this and it didn't work and so we're all done." That's part of that learning; the process is the actual thing, right? That's our actual work. It's not an outcome. It's not a finite process, just like cultural competency and ending sexual violence. So these are not finite processes.

Cat Fribley: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: So it just takes a lot of courage and tenacity, and we all have that ability because we've been fighting against rape culture for kind of a long time, so we can do this too.

Cat Fribley: Tracy, last words.

Tracy Wright: And I think for me, clearly folks, we could talk about this for a long time, 'cause clearly we do. I always, I think the space that I appreciate that the way that we are thinking about it is that we're just taking a lot of deeper dives and we're asking ourselves a lot of liberating and beautiful questions. And so, I would challenge the folks to do the work and do a piece of reflection and think about, what would happen if Black and brown survivors were believed and they mattered and they had services that met their needs? Like, what would our work look like? What our world look like? And how do we create the actionables and a daily commitment and the practices and come out of the stance from being spectators in really unearthing racist practices in service deliveries in organizations? And so, if we could answer that question collectively, I think that is what I'm really challenging folks to do, to ask themselves those deeper questions, those beautiful questions, that actually we can actually do, right?

Cat Fribley: Absolutely.

Tracy Wright: We can actually find the answers. Yeah.

Cat Fribley: Absolutely. And that leads us so beautifully into the closing piece, which is centering ourselves in that beautiful question that you just asked, Trace, and then also recognizing that we will be distributing, along with this podcast, a set of discussion questions for programs to undertake, for them to really begin to have an opportunity and an enhanced commitment to setting aside that intentional time to ask each other those important questions, to ask themselves these important questions. And so in the attempt to create that space, we are gonna offer some of the initial questions you all might use, I think, out in the field, to be able to do... what's the word I'm looking for? Like a, yeah, a deeper dive, as you put it, Tracy, into those beautiful questions, into the ways that we can do our work differently.

**Image: A publication of the
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Cat Fribley: You all, I can't thank you enough. This is really a conversation that is so vital and so important and we appreciate your voices, your commitments and the ways that you all do this work with us. And so, thank you for being here today. And we will absolutely be back, right, to talk about this more, whether that is in another podcast, whether that is at your organization, whether it's at your state conference, wherever it is – we look forward to continuing the dialogue together.

Michelle Dixon-Wall: We need that.

Tracy Wright: Absolutely.

Cat Fribley: Thanks you all. Have a great day.

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