

# Sexual Assault Coalitions and Pathways to Civic Engagement

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**“How are we going to move from conversation to action?”** It’s a question that comes up again and again in our Resource Sharing Project coalition community call spaces. Many sexual assault coalitions are versed in training and supporting advocates to help individuals navigate their personal, friend, family, and close-knit community responses. Yet, coalitions may feel less confident in the face of trying to change policy, cultural norms, and the broader state of how community-level decisions are made. This type of change is outside the scope of what individual advocacy can accomplish. This is where civic engagement enters.

Civic engagement definitions vary, but many use the term to include things like voting and voter education, fighting to pass or block laws and policies, community

organizing, mutual aid, and leadership development. For our purposes, when we talk about civic engagement, we're meaning actions taken by an organized group of people to reach a shared goal that benefits a community of people. By this definition, civic engagement takes core tenets of sexual assault advocacy – connection and empowerment – and applies them to create healing at a larger scale.

Funding limitations, non-profit regulations, and a lack of familiarity with civic engagement practices combine to discourage coalitions from attempting this work. However, in this publication, we look at how civic engagement can be an important part of survivor healing, how coalitions can support it, and provide examples of what coalitions are already doing. Whether a coalition is exploring civic engagement to deepen survivor healing, expand community partnerships, address a complex social barrier, or something else, there are resources available to help coalitions succeed.

## Civic engagement complements sexual assault coalition work, but it is different from both lobbying and individual survivor advocacy.

Sexual assault coalitions exist to build relationships and make change. Some coalitions focus on building relationships with local sexual assault advocacy programs through training and technical assistance. Other coalitions focus on building relationships at the statewide or territory-wide levels with decision-makers representing the criminal legal, medical, mental health, and housing systems that survivors so often interact with. Yet other coalitions work to build relationships with legislators to influence statewide or territory-wide policy to support survivor healing. Many coalitions do a little bit of all of these things and more.

Often, however, this work is led by staff who work at or for the coalition. This is what distinguishes lobbying from civic engagement. Lobbying happens on behalf of someone else. In these scenarios, the sense of victory or success when change is made is mostly limited to the staff level. Survivors and their communities may appreciate the work but they may not feel empowered by it. Civic engagement flips this dynamic. Civic engagement asks coalition staff to partner with survivors and communities to address problems and issues together. It is like individual survivor advocacy, but focused on addressing problems that affect a whole group of people.

Supporting survivor leadership in civic engagement can look like having meaningful decision-making power, leading or participating in conversations about goals, strategies, actions, and recruitment, and creating ways for survivors, community members, and coalition staff to practice accountability with each other. This doesn't mean that everyone who participates in coalition civic engagement needs to disclose that they've experienced sexual violence. It does mean that coalitions should try to include a wide cross-section of people, including people from communities that have historically and currently experienced high rates of sexual violence, in the leadership of their civic engagement projects.

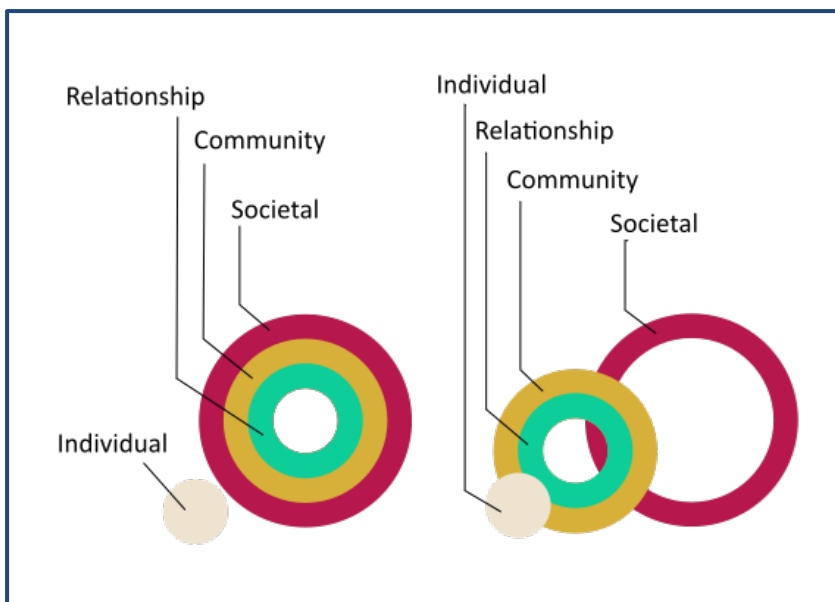
By including civic engagement in coalition work, coalitions can become an additional resource for the healing work led by local sexual assault programs. Local programs can connect survivors who want to take collective action to sexual assault coalitions, knowing they have a way for people to channel their energy to make change. Local programs are often overwhelmed by survivors' crisis needs and while they can recognize the systemic barriers survivors face, they often don't have the fundraising resources or the time to effectively organize survivors to change these problems. Coalitions have broader relationships and are not tasked with focusing on crisis response. They can take the time to work with community members in a different way.

Civic engagement work can also strengthen the ties between coalitions and the communities they exist in. Participating in civic engagement projects or coalitions

can increase coalition name recognition, expand the circle of community partners, and can help people understand the value of the sexual assault coalition in a new way.

## Civic engagement supports individual and community healing when it focuses on empowerment and connection.

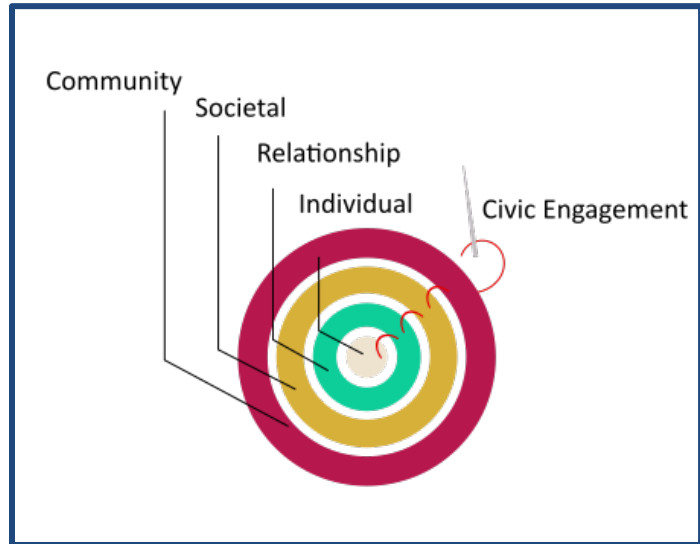
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) social-ecological model is most often used to plan sexual violence prevention efforts, but it can show how civic engagement can support healing from sexual violence too.



Sexual violence isolates survivors from themselves, their families, and their communities. It can sever survivors from their cultures and their histories. When used in a targeted way against a specific community or ethnic group, sexual violence can also isolate whole groups from

connection with each other and other communities. Sexual violence tells people that what they want doesn't matter, and by extension, that they don't matter. It can fragment the rings of the social-ecological model.

Civic engagement is like a thread that can re-connect the rings. Civic engagement practices like having meaningful conversations about what is going on in our lives brings individuals into relationship. Building organizations or groups full of people in the habit of nurturing relationships creates communities. And acting together



as communities, across communities, for the good of all, creates vibrant societies. The more we practice at each level, the more stitches there are between the rings, and the tighter the bonds become. And the effects ripple throughout every layer. For example, providing opportunities for survivors to participate in and lead projects that improve their communities, their states, or their territories based on what is happening in people's lives can strengthen the "individual" ring by helping people develop a sense of pride or confidence in their own abilities. Feeling ownership over what a community looks and feels like can help survivors feel like they belong and strengthen the "relationship" ring. Teaching survivors how to have conversations with people in power can be healing, strengthening the "community" ring. It can also affirm that they have the right to ask questions and be taken seriously, again strengthening the "individual" ring. These impacts are further solidified when these actions result in concrete improvements for communities.

Looking at healing from a holistic perspective, like the social-ecological model provides, is also important for living out our anti-oppression values. Not tending to the healing of cultures and communities risks ignoring a central aspect of who people are, particularly for survivors who come from more collectivist cultures.

## How civic engagement connects survivors

### **Sharing stories**

Civic engagement projects often begin because people find commonalities between their life experiences and want to make changes together. As people gain more experiences doing civic engagement work together, stories of past successes and challenges become part of the fabric of the organization too, strengthening a sense of ownership.

### **Doing something together**

Working towards a common goal can help people build relationships with people they might not otherwise meet or know so well. Civic engagement projects may or may not be based specifically on telling stories of sexual assault survivorship, so people may learn about other aspects of each other's lives.

### **Creating shared purpose**

Having a shared goal can create a sense of belonging and foster a sense of mutual support and caring. This team building aspect of civic engagement can benefit survivors and communities beyond whether or not they are able to reach their shared goals.

## How civic engagement empowers survivors

### **Informs**

Some civic engagement projects can include research phases, such as learning about why a certain problem keeps recurring. Other civic engagement projects many include phases where the civic engagement team is stepping into the role of "leader" or "expert" to inform others based on their shared experience and knowledge.

### **Supports their leadership**

People may come in as volunteers to later become volunteer managers to campaign coordinators and beyond. People can choose what level of leadership and responsibility works for them and have opportunities to increase their responsibility.

### **Gives people lived experience of democracy**

Having a voice and making a difference is what both empowerment and democracy are all about. Many people can feel disconnected from the practice of democracy because of the ways it is framed as voting once every four years in a federal election. People are much more likely to feel the impact of their actions at the local, regional, and state/territorial levels that sexual assault programs and coalitions work at.

## Civic engagement and individual survivor advocacy make each other better.

Too often, the separation of funding sources for individual advocacy and civic engagement obscures the symbiotic relationship between the two. We need individual healing services to help people find stability and safety. We need civic engagement projects to make safety and healing more possible for both individuals and communities.

Civic engagement work is more likely to be funded by less stable sources of money like private foundations and individuals. Crisis services, advocacy, and coalition technical assistance are more likely to be funded by government grants or faith-based funders and are more likely to provide multi-year support. This division leaves coalitions resourced and skilled at supporting people who want to do crisis services and advocacy and less resourced and skilled at supporting people who want to do civic engagement work.

Because survivor advocacy and civic engagement are funded by different sources, they are also being further developed in isolation from each other, to the detriment of both. Civic engagement works best when it is trauma-informed. Individual advocacy works best when it acknowledges there are systemic forces shaping each survivor's unique experience.

This division has also led to very real tensions between the values of civic engagement projects and survivor advocacy work. Individual advocacy values privacy and confidentiality. Civic engagement focuses on telling personal stories publicly. Social services look at the impact on an individual. Civic engagement looks at the impact on groups of people. Social services meet immediate needs. Civic engagement may not. Social services honor an individual's ability to choose. Civic engagement relies on group negotiation and compromise. Bouncing between these tensions can be disorienting; it can feel like riding a see-saw when groups aren't clear on why they're using each strategy and what they're hoping to achieve. Bridging these tensions takes effort and leadership.

Each coalition will bridge those gaps differently. Coalitions can organize their own civic engagement projects and/or they can join larger coalitions. Civic engagement projects can focus on making changes at local, regional, statewide, territory-wide, multi-state/multi-territory, national, or international levels. Coalitions can search out training to deepen their ability to practice civic engagement skills. What coalitions decide to do will depend on the organization's capacity, knowledge, and network.

Not every survivor or person will find that civic engagement is a necessary part of healing or coalition work. What's important to remember is that it is people of color, people with disabilities, and other targeted groups who pay the steepest price when healing focuses only on individual impacts and needs. By learning about and implementing civic engagement practices little by little and focusing on building strong, diverse community relationships, coalitions can build the power needed to create systemic healing. No policy or single campaign can prevent or address all violence. What civic engagement can do is build an infrastructure that allows coalitions to say, "I've got your back" and be able to follow through. Civic engagement puts hope in the power of people to create social change. And isn't that why sexual assault coalitions come together in the first place?

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