

NATIONAL SEXUAL ASSAULT COALITION

Resource Sharing Project



The Coalition's Role as Technical Assistance Provider

by Kris Bein, Norio Umezu Hall, Michelle Dixon-Wall, Tracy Wright, and Cat Fribley

Many state- and territory-wide sexual assault coalitions were birthed from local sexual assault programs coming together to amplify their impact. Local programs, often led by survivors themselves, found the desire for healing support was so great in their communities that it left little time for addressing common barriers and trends across towns, cities, states and territories. These early groups understood that if they wanted to change the culture that supported sexual violence to happen in the first place, they'd need to be coordinated and connected. So they organized people and money to build coalitions and bridge those gaps, and the coalition's role as a technical assistance (TA) provider emerged.

Coalition TA is grounded in this reciprocal relationship. It is through building relationships with local programs and their community partners that coalitions are able to be of service. Brokering relationships between local programs, community providers, and others helps each group make meaning of their work and invites in new perspectives. Making space for connection and reflection is what TA is all about. Coalitions offer additional context, information, and support to empower local programs to make the best decisions for themselves in ways that mirror the advocacy work local programs do with survivors. Coalitions develop this context and information by having relationships across the whole state or territory. These relationships help coalitions synthesize a wide range of programs' experiences to find out why common barriers arise and normalize them when programs feel stuck or discouraged. They are also able to help celebrate and share joys where they arise in this work.

Defining Technical Assistance

Technical assistance is simply helping people have the information and resources they need to serve and be accountable to sexual assault survivors. Often, this means facilitating processes for learning. This learning can come from asking local programs helpful questions, struggling with local programs to figure out their community contexts, and bringing people together to generate insight and connection. The specific activities coalitions do to support learning and connection will vary based on context. What's important to remember is this field was started by survivors for survivors; survivors who knew "a paradigm shift occurs when a question is asked inside the current paradigm that can only be answered from outside it" (Goldberg, 2007). The answers to ending sexual violence and healing lie outside the isolation and systems of power and control that create and enable sexual violence. We are creating the paradigms that facilitate healing together. This spirit of empowering exploration drives the service modalities we still use today in advocacy and the approach that coalitions bring to TA. This assortment of TA definitions from coalitions gives further insight:

- "ACESDV staff is available to support direct service providers to survivors of sexual and domestic violence, dating violence and stalking. We can help you: find a resource, problem solve, listen, identify and implement best practices, manage your board and organization. ACESDV acts as a sounding-board for a variety of issues that arise when operating an organization that provides direct services to survivors of sexual and domestic violence, dating violence or stalking." [Arizona Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence](#)
- "Expert advice." [Kanas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence](#)
- "MECASA staff members support direct service staff with a range of research and resources, reach out to other state or national providers

for additional resources and support, or simply help to brainstorm solutions to the challenges providers face. In addition to the support they provide Maine's sexual assault support centers, MECASA staff also provide a significant amount of assistance and support to statewide and national partners on a range of issues, including human trafficking response, media engagement, and innovative primary prevention practices." [Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault](#)

- "MCADSV provides technical assistance, which is direct, problem-solving services, to Missouri's domestic and sexual violence service providers. These technical assistance services are tailored to the needs of the program or individual requesting help. MCADSV operates a toll-free helpline for Missouri's advocacy community. Advocates can call the helpline to receive direct, problem-solving services in a variety of areas, from best practices and enhancing skills in providing direct services, to nonprofit management and governance." [Missouri Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence](#)
- "Direct, problem-solving services." [Nevada Coalition Ending Domestic and Sexual Violence](#)
- "We define TA as providing consultation to support (an advocate's) work. This may be sending you some resources via email, talking out a complex advocacy situation with you over the phone, or visiting your program to provide more intensive support." [Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs](#)

Types of Technical Assistance

As coalitions build relationships with people in local programs, TA providers may find that requests for partnership fall under broad umbrellas, or types. Though the structure of each type of TA may change, the emphasis on relationship and empowering local programs does not. Many TA topics

cross multiple types of TA. For example, coalitions should be thinking about oppression and internal dynamics of a program in all the TA they offer. Thinking of TA in categories is most helpful as a framework for reflecting on where TA providers are spending their time and to assess trends in the ways coalitions and local programs, or other groups requesting TA, are relating to each other. Types of TA include:

- **Proactive:** TA that is initiated by the coalition for the purpose of strengthening relationships, coalition learning, or addressing particular trends and issues. Proactive TA is often a coalition staff member reaching out to programs to check in; some coalitions do this for all programs every quarter. This is one of the primary ways coalitions learn from programs about trends and common barriers and successes. Taking responsibility to reach out to local programs and others sets up or reinforces the reciprocal nature of coalition and local program relationships. Proactive TA might also occur when there is an external event that will affect programs in some way. For instance, new legislation might allow programs to offer a service they couldn't before. The coalition would want to contact programs to discuss and provide support. Coalitions may also be able to identify overarching TA needs for a group of programs and see patterns that require a proactive approach to new learning.
- **Responsive:** TA that is initiated by a program, usually on a specific question. Examples of responsive TA include connecting programs struggling with similar issues to each other, providing a list of support group curricula, reviewing and commenting on a program's revised personnel policies, or advising an advocate on a challenging situation with a survivor. Learning from the process of responding to one program's request helps the coalition be better prepared to provide those resources or concrete examples of success and challenges if other programs need them.

- **Intensive:** TA in response to a significant challenge or issue; it can be initiated by the program or coalition, or rarely, a funder. When providing intensive TA, coalitions often meet frequently over the phone and/or in-person. Examples of intensive TA include recovery after financial mismanagement, helping a board manage an executive transition, or guiding a program towards implementing activities in a new grant. While most coalitions provide intensive levels of assistance to programs who need it, they do not step in to solve problems directly for member programs. Instead, coalitions maintain their roles by offering to brainstorm with the program in crisis to identify potential solutions and help programs see what potential outcomes might be from the crisis. How local programs respond then shapes the coalitions' capacity to provide similar intensive TA to other programs.
- **Directed, or on a learning track:** a type of proactive TA where the coalition determines a course of learning activities for programs. The Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault, for instance, recently offered specialized TA on enhancing sexual violence services in dual/multi-service advocacy agencies. A small group of programs participated in a series of discussions, webinars, and site visits with the coalition. The programs got the same broad information and were able to support each other, along with tailored support from coalition staff. Coalitions learn from the experiences of programs that complete the learning track to provide more tailored support for others in the future.
- **Crisis support:** a combination of proactive, responsive, and intensive TA after crises such as natural disasters, major media attention, or trauma to the organization. In these crises, coalitions provide emotional support and resources for managing the event. Depending on the crisis, the coalition may liaise with funders on behalf of the program, help arrange coverage for services, or provide access to crisis counseling for program staff, among other tasks.

- **Information and referral:** a type of responsive TA where the program has a simple, clear question for which they need information, such as whether crime victim's compensation will cover an expense for a survivor. The coalition may provide the information, a referral to another source (including other local sexual assault programs), or both. When providing information, remember that there is often a deeper question underlying it. Coalitions often provide information and referral following some proactive or responsive TA. For instance, a coalition goes to visit a program, and afterwards, the TA provider remembers that the program director mentioned an interest in transformative justice. The TA provider sends the director a packet of resources and information, along with an offer to discuss further.

There is, naturally, a great deal of overlap between these categories. For example, a coalition may see a pattern in responsive TA needs, and decide to offer a learning track or proactively produce a training for all programs. Or a coalition may find that a crisis brings many more staff from a local program into contact with them, and they now provide more responsive TA to the staff of the program.

Assessing Technical Assistance Needs

It is not always obvious at the onset of a conversation or TA request what the depth of the issue at hand is; TA providers may only receive partial information about the challenge the requestor is facing, or the requestor may not know that what they are asking for is a common symptom of a larger problem. For example, a local program might call the coalition with a specific request to see samples of other programs' conflict of interest policies. This may sound simple and concrete. However, there may be a larger problem with multiple board members engaging in a number of conflicts without their knowledge. The coalition can send samples back to the person making the request along with an invitation for further conversation. Every time someone from a local program reaches out is an

opportunity to build or strengthen relationships. Engaging in conversation to find out more can reveal other ways the coalition can support that the person asking for help may not have thought to bring up and can reveal strengths the local program has that coalitions may not have learned about if the TA provider didn't ask more questions. Ongoing conversation may also reveal areas where the local program distrusts the coalition or there is work to be done to strengthen or repair the relationship.

As coalitions and programs assess TA needs, they may wish to collaborate with or refer to content expertise from others. The collaborative work starts with the partnership between coalition and program (or other partner). Sometimes learning is enhanced when the collaboration grows to involve more participants. Oftentimes, the best source of collaborative learning is the local programs. One method of TA is connecting two or more local programs or other partners to learn with and from one another.

Building relationships extends beyond working with local sexual assault programs. No coalition can know everything there is to know on every single issue that may arise for programs. Each one can, however, learn how to assess their own scope of knowledge and evaluate resources for programs. It's helpful to be prepared with relationships and referrals available to external consultants and contractors that specialize in particular areas of crisis, such as HR consultants, organizational trauma specialists, financial experts, and nonprofit management consultants.

Coalition TA can also include helping local programs strengthen their own local networks of care. Helping programs find resources in their own community who can provide support and relationship in a different way creates local allies and provides a connection that may be more easily accessible for in-person support. A coalition could, for example, help a program generate interview questions for hiring an attorney. Or, in another

example, a coalition might participate in the first several meetings with a program and their new financial consultant, and then taper off the coalition's involvement as the program feels more comfortable with the consultant. A collaborative TA approach benefits everyone involved. It enables the coalition to learn alongside the program and provide follow-up TA to the program as they apply what they learned.

When bringing in outside specialists or other TA providers, coalitions can do an initial phone call with them first to ensure the external person is a good fit, and then set up the collaboration or referral. When evaluating external specialists and referrals, consider*:

- Are they aligned with the coalition's and local program's or community partner's values? Is that necessary for this TA request?
- How well-versed are they in anti-oppression? Trauma-informed care principles?
- What is their capacity and willingness to provide support?
 - Take special care to respect the time and resources of TA providers/experts from marginalized communities, as they are frequently expected to provide help immediately and for free. Does the coalition have resources to compensate experts from marginalized communities if the people providing consultation want compensation?
- Is the program ready and willing to learn from this TA provider/expert?

Organizational Considerations for Providing Technical Assistance

Working with local programs and community partners through technical assistance can be intensely rewarding. It can also be full of complex scenarios and ethical challenges. Just like coalitions help advocates

develop the skills needed to provide effective advocacy, coalitions can be intentional about developing their own skills to offer consistent support. Having proactive conversations about the focus of the coalition in providing TA and the ethics and values that guide TA helps coalitions create a shared foundation for all coalition TA providers. This can create consistency in TA so that local programs and community partners receive the same quality of support regardless of who the TA provider is or the challenge they are facing.

These proactive conversations are particularly helpful in preventing conflict, confusion, and triangulation (using a third party to deliver a message rather than communicating directly). For example, coalition TA providers are often asked for help in addressing issues that arise from communication challenges or power dynamics between staff members at local programs. Proactive conversations about the focus of TA may help TA providers concentrate on offering options, empower the people asking for support, and focus on the well-being of the whole organization. With this approach, the power to make decisions stays with the individuals asking for help and conversations are naturally directed back to the organization's well-being.

Having clear ethics and values* helps TA providers learn how to navigate situations like these. Values such as “honoring multiple ways of knowing” (Network Weavers Learning Lab, 2019) and “moving at the speed of trust” (brown, 2017) can help remind TA providers that TA is a partnership between coalitions and local programs or others. It is not solely about becoming a content expert; it's also about helping programs find the wisdom in their own and their peers' experiences and connecting them with support when they need it. The wisdom that emerges from these interactions then teaches the coalition about effective ways to address similar issues in the future in an infinite loop of supporting and learning. Every coalition is unique in their team's composition, needs of local programs, and cultural setting so taking time to generate values specific to each state or territorial context will ensure the values fit their needs. This is

particularly important around areas such as privacy and dual relationships. There are no laws or regulations that govern privacy in the TA relationship. Instead, that rests with each coalition's ethics, guiding principles, and practices. Some questions* that can be useful in discussions about TA ethics include:

- What does your coalition think about privacy and TA? What do local programs and partners think about privacy and TA?
- Do staff at the coalition share information about programs with coworkers? Which coworkers? Why or why not?
- Under what circumstances would it be okay to share information with
 - peer programs?
 - funders?
 - other outsiders?
- What do you do with information about a program that you learn from other sources?

From these conversations, coalitions can develop structures such as practice guidelines and communication agreements. As an example, within the [Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative \(SADI\)](#), the TA team met over the course of a few months to create tenets of effective technical assistance for the project. These were shared with the local programs participating in SADI so that they could experience transparent support. The tenets also helped to keep the TA providers aligned with a trauma-informed approach to advocacy and centered in their work and purpose. The SADI TA providers would often refer back to these tenets in team meetings when someone was struggling with how to address an issue or feeling conflicted. The SADI's approach to TA was:

- Strengths-based: Change is most successful when it is based in strength. TA Providers help build on the strengths of their members to overcome challenges and honor ideas and work done by those seeking TA.

- Empowering: Empowerment enhances the personal and communal capacity to act. Programs and advocates cannot be truly empowered unless they have a hand in the design of the process.
- Survivor-Centered: TA provision considers impact on survivors, ensuring that programmatic changes are developed with the best interests of survivors in mind, as defined by survivors.
- Ethical: TA Providers consider the ethical aspects of TA requests and conduct TA in a manner that is honest and transparent and model good boundaries. TA Providers will respect the professional boundaries and ethical obligations of those who request TA, such as the responsibility to protect confidential client information.
- Collaborative: The best TA solutions are co-created with the program accessing TA.
- Competent: TA Providers should be current in their expertise, with up-to-date knowledge on best practices, resources, and current technology. TA Providers fairly and accurately represent their knowledge and skills within the bounds of their expertise. Consultation with content experts is encouraged as appropriate.
- Culturally Relevant: TA Providers offer TA that is culturally relevant and anti-oppressive, and employ a broad range of ideas, values, and diverse perspectives. TA Providers engage in conversation with those seeking TA to discern cultural and community needs to tailor recommendations.
- Responsive: TA Providers ensure that they fully understand TA requests and will respond promptly to requests with the agreed-upon requestor.
- Flexible: TA Providers embrace the use of a variety of approaches, techniques, strategies, resources and innovative thinking to find solutions to the challenges of providing excellent sexual assault services.
- Respectful: TA Providers assume the best intentions of members/those requesting it. TA Providers are committed to preserving the dignity and integrity of those requesting TA in sharing information and discussing strategies.

- **Trauma-Informed:** The aim of a trauma-informed system is to support survivors by providing trust, empowerment, choice, control, collaboration, and cultural competence. TA Providers use their understanding of trauma to communicate the vulnerabilities of trauma survivors for delivery of services that will avoid inadvertent re-traumatization.
- **Sustainable:** TA Providers provide TA with an eye toward the long term rather than quick fixes and will work to institutionalize the progress (RSP & NSVRC, 2011).

Marriage and family therapists offer other examples of communication agreements and practices that may help coalitions address ethical concerns and avoid triangulation, particularly ones that arise from communication challenges amongst staff or when power dynamics may prohibit a staff member from speaking out for fear of retaliation:

- Having different TA providers at the coalition for different staff members (e.g., Padma supports program leadership while Isobel supports advocates) allows TA providers to focus on the needs of the individual. When needed, TA providers working with different staff members can then collaborate to address the needs of the organization as a whole while maintaining confidentiality or privacy.
- In some circumstances, agreeing that topics are off-limits unless all parties are present decreases the likelihood of using TA providers to triangulate polarized conversations.
- Addressing the communication and organizational dynamics rather than any one specific issue allows TA providers to maintain the individual privacy and confidentiality of TA while still supporting the program as a whole to do its best work.

Clarifying the role of coalitions and the role of funders in providing TA is another important piece of this discussion. Funders and coalitions have distinct roles in supporting local programs, and it's important that both

parties understand the role and value of the other. TA is most effective when coalitions and funders, particularly those distributing federal sexual assault services grants, have a collaborative relationship based on communication, trust, and respect. Coalitions are identified as technical assistance providers in part because coalitions are non-profit and non-governmental organizations. This distinction allows coalitions to provide support and information rooted in shared values, not partisan politics that state/territory administering agencies function within. Having regular conversations with your state or territory funding offices about each other's roles and responsibilities can help both coalitions and the funder provide consistent support to programs. RSP's [Sexual Assault Services Program TA](#) can help coalitions strengthen relationships with their state SASP administrator, while the TA to coalitions team can help support coalition collaborations with STOP administrators.

TA documentation and evaluation can help coalitions further refine the conversations and structures they put in place to guide TA and develop the skills of new TA providers. Documentation plays a dual role of capturing learnings that can strengthen future TA for all programs and acts as a way to share information to improve or coordinate TA to the specific program in focus. The [RSP Evaluation Toolkit](#) offers tools and discussion guides to help coalitions in evaluating their technical assistance.

Enhancing Capacity for Technical Assistance Provision

Many of the supportive skills advocates use with survivors are at the core of strong technical assistance as well. Spending time with local programs, learning about and wrestling with their local contexts together, and maintaining relationships with other community agencies helps TA providers build relevant skills and expertise over time. Offering TA from the same empowerment-based framework as advocacy reminds TA providers that their role ends at presenting information and dialogue or other forms of support. Local programs or advocates are the ones who are ultimately

responsible for decision-making and taking action. Because turnover among staff can be high, building relationships and sharing information amongst multiple staff members ensures institutional knowledge and sustainable TA provision. While it is normal for some level of expertise to be held by individual staff, there should be overall expectations for what TA entails, what potential referrals and resources are, and a comprehensive understanding of the basic TA subjects. Working to enhance organizational supports for staff self-care and addressing the ways vicarious trauma impacts coalition staff differently can also reduce rates of turnover and enhance capacity at coalitions. RSP has two resources to help coalitions understand [vicarious trauma in the context of their work](#) and [organizational strategies to help alleviate it](#).

Attending RSP's meetings and conference calls can be another great way to build expertise on a variety of issues quickly and build a network of peer support with which to consult on more challenging issues. Spending time reflecting on instances of TA personally or with colleagues supports ongoing learning and evaluation.

In Closing

The poet Adrienne Rich wrote, "It isn't that to have an honorable relationship with you, I have to understand everything, or tell you everything at once, or that I can know, beforehand, everything I need to tell you. It means that most of the time I am eager, longing for the possibility of telling you. That these possibilities may seem frightening, but not destructive, to me. That I feel strong enough to hear your tentative and groping words. That we both know we are trying, all the time, to extend the possibilities of truth between us" (as cited by Popova, 2014). Technical assistance is a relationship based in wonder and exploration. Coalition TA Providers do not need to know every single fact about sexual violence and advocacy. Rather, with grounding in values and an openness to learning, TA Providers are fully capable of working collectively with member programs and others towards new possibilities.

*there's a worksheet to help you guide this conversation on the RSP webpage for this publication.

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