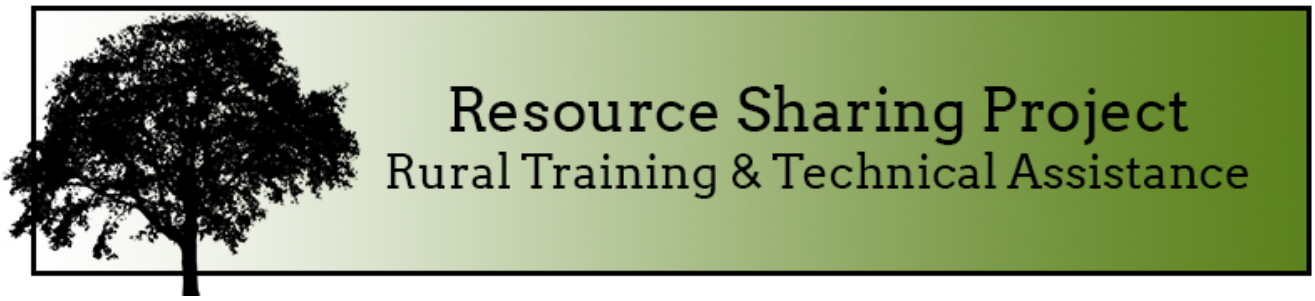

Support, Connection, Healing: Rural Helplines Today

It is the middle of the night and you wake from a violent nightmare in a panic. You need to go back to sleep but you just can't shake this awful feeling in your chest and a sickness in your stomach. Turning on the light, you reach for the phone.

It's Sunday afternoon and your granddaughter comes to you in tears. She says her new boyfriend keeps pushing her boundaries when they are kissing and she is worried one of these days he won't take no for answer. Unsure of what to say, you reach for the phone.

It's morning and you've just left your dreaded dentist appointment. You are proud of yourself for not crying even once during the exam but who will you share the good news with? No one will understand how big this is. As you steady your breath, you reach for the phone.

Through our 24-hour helplines, advocacy programs provide a powerful resource for our community. Across the country, advocacy programs assist survivors of sexual violence and their friends and family in navigating healing, learning about resources, and celebrating strengths and accomplishments -- no matter the time of day. Rural helplines in particular can offer support and connection to our communities, when and where people need it most.

Defining a Helpline

The first 24-hour phone line in the United States was established in 1958 as a suicide prevention helpline (Office of the Surgeon General, 2012). In the following years several other 24-hour lines were established around the country, including helplines at the first formalized rape crisis centers forming in the early 1970's (Bevacqua, 2000). Along with support groups and peer support, helplines were some of the first services that were ever formally provided to survivors of sexual violence in our country.

Today, helplines still provide the backbone of services for survivors of sexual violence. Helplines allow survivors, their family and friends, and professionals 24-hour access to connection, information, and supportive services. This publication, filled with quotes from advocates and directors of rural dual/multi-service advocacy programs from across the country, will guide you through management of a caring, survivor-centered helpline. The Resource Sharing Project (RSP) is grateful to have the expertise and experience of rural programs to inform and contribute to the success of this publication.

Helpline is an umbrella term that encompasses all phone, text, or chat based support services. Rural helplines should include options for Deaf and hard of hearing survivors to access this service.

Helpline services, more than any other service, give sexual violence survivors unencumbered access to trauma informed support in rural communities. We asked a director of an advocacy program in Alaska what she finds so powerful about helplines. She shared, "There is always someone available 24 hours a day. Survivors know if they call that number, a soft kind voice will be on the other end,

willing to help in any way they can." A 24-hour helpline provides the community an opportunity to:

- seek support from a place of emotional safety (underneath the covers clutching a stuffed animal or walking along a favorite path)
- create plans for emotionally and physically safety
- receive support outside of office hours, often when it is needed most
- ask questions and receive education about sexual violence and supporting loved ones and community members
- break the feeling of isolation
- receive resources and referrals for trauma informed services in the area
- learn more about the breadth of supportive services offered by the local advocacy program
- brainstorm solutions or paths forward in healing

Helplines also allow rural survivors to remain anonymous in areas where anonymity can be hard to find. An advocate from North Carolina shared, "The [helpline] gives survivors the opportunity to remain anonymous. Oftentimes survivors aren't ready to come forward and have someone look at them while they tell their story. They are worried we are seeing someone who is incomplete. Being anonymous allows them the freedom to put it all out there and not feel judged."

Our helplines can do so much for the survivors in our communities. Discussing the purpose of your program's helpline with the entire staff can help everyone get on the same page about the goal of this service. Only in focused deliberation can we best determine how to strengthen helpline services for all members of our community. In conversations with rural programs it became evident that we rarely build in the opportunity to discuss, plan, or evaluate helpline services. To facilitate a dialogue with your program about helpline services see the RSP's Facilitator's Guide: Conversations on Rural Helpline Services.

Working internally to define our helpline strengthens this service and defining a helpline for our community makes it accessible to everyone. We often make the assumption that our community knows 1) what a helpline is 2) who can access the helpline and 3) what kind of support they will receive. However the rural programs we spoke with made it clear that this isn't always true. An advocate

from Alaska told us that in her community survivors of sexual violence often don't know they are able to receive supportive advocacy services over the phone. She shared, "Finding something else, another name or another way to identify that resource for people, is important. We have a crisis line, but I have started calling it our after-hours number. I like 24-hour number because that's what it is. Anything you can't get from 9am-5pm from me, here is the number you call."

It is clear that how we refer to our helpline has a deep impact on who reaches out. An advocate from Kansas shared, "The term 'hotline' meant different things to different people in our community. Calling it a helpline allows people to call us no matter what." Consistently we heard from rural programs that the terms "hotline" or "crisis line" signaled to the community that only those in immediate danger were able to access the line. This tends to leave out sexual assault survivors who are often using the line for support, grounding, or to explore long term healing options. A director from Oregon is in the process of making a change to the vocabulary her program uses. She shared, "We have been looking at changing 'hotline' to 'helpline' because it seems to say to people, if you aren't in immediate danger right now, this isn't the service for you. Calling it a helpline invites more people to call, find out about options, or just call for information."

Marketing the Helpline

This change in language provides the perfect opportunity to speak with your community about helpline services. As you update your website, social media, community presentations, and brochures your program can describe what helpline services look like and who can benefit from them. Helpline services are so much broader than just support during an immediate crisis and our community needs to know that. A director from Iowa shared, "Whenever I give presentations to other professionals I always have ending PowerPoint slides that share our [helpline] number. I always say '*I want you to know the [helpline] is for you too. To ask questions, process your feelings, because someone you love is experiencing abuse, because you are a police officer and you are struggling because you couldn't press charges*'. I always tell them, try it! Call our [helpline] right now just to test that we will always answer and support you."

Many of the rural programs we spoke to shared that their community does not take full advantage of all of the ways the helpline can benefit them. By intentionally taking the time to outline helpline services for our community we can ensure that everyone feels invited to use our helpline. An advocate from Mississippi shared, "On our flyers we provide descriptions of all of our programs and services. But for our [helpline], we only provide the telephone number and indicate that "it's a 24-hour service." I plan to revisit the flyer and provide a description or state the purpose of our helpline." When we do describe our helplines well the results can be profound. A director from Oregon shared, "We now get a lot of calls from significant others and family members wondering how to support a survivor. They are terrified of saying or doing the wrong thing. They call so they can feel comfortable in their interactions with loved ones."

In speaking with our community about helpline services we should remember to include our entire service area. As an advocate from Montana put it, "We get ten times as many calls from the county we are physically located in compared to the county we aren't located in. That's disappointing." Take the time to create a plan to advertise your helpline services in all of the many rural communities your program serves. Utilize your community connections across the area to determine the best way to advertise these services. Sharing our helpline services across our entire service area helps advertise our work to the larger community and invites survivors of sexual violence, their family and friends, and professionals into our healing services.

Welcoming Sexual Violence Survivors to the Helpline

Our rural communities often know about the domestic violence services we offer but don't always understand the full range of services we provide for sexual violence survivors and their loved ones. This extends to our helpline services as well. Often our communities are unaware that our 24-hour helplines can offer more than crisis-based resources and emergency shelter for domestic violence survivors.

A director from Kansas shared, "We get so many more domestic violence calls than sexual assault calls. If I'm not really listening or paying attention, it's easy to try and fit sexual assault survivors into domestic violence services. I've had to learn to train myself to pay close attention. When we started, it was all domestic violence and we shoved sexual assault clients in to our domestic violence services, until the last few years. Now we're trying to structure things differently so volunteers, staff, and advocates know that services shouldn't look the same." This speaks to a reality many programs struggle with- helpline services are often structured for domestic violence survivors. So how then do we welcome sexual violence survivors, their family and friends, and professionals to access our helplines?

As programs we can re-imagine what our helpline support looks like. Helpline advocacy isn't just about offering shelter, dispatching advocates to the hospital, and arranging for survivors to come in for services. We can offer so much more, and survivors benefit when we think broader. Crisis intervention and support play an important role in what we offer to sexual violence survivors, particularly adult survivors of child sexual abuse. Many adult survivors of child sexual abuse struggle with flashbacks, nightmares, or triggers of the abuse. These crises are different from crises we may be used to in our work with domestic violence survivors. The survivor is not in any

immediate danger, and may not need any immediate services. The survivor might just need to talk, and find their way through the current emotional danger. Sexual violence survivors find comfort and connection in the supportive 24-hour services that our programs can offers, whether or not they seek any other type of services.

As we meet with sexual violence survivors around our community, and in our program offices we can intentionally talk through our helpline services. When speaking with a survivor for the first time make clear the purpose of the helpline and share what kind of support they can receive. Giving examples of reasons the survivor might access the helpline puts the service in context of their life. An advocate from Iowa shared how she likes to describe the helpline to survivors she works with. She says, "I'm so glad we were able to meet today and that we will continue to work together in the future. I want you to know that even though we met today and I'm going to see you next week, you are still always able to call our 24-hours helpline anytime you want. The person answering the line most likely won't be me, but whoever answers is there to support you. A lot of the survivors I work with call the helpline when they are having nightmares or a particularly hard moment. I know with the holiday coming up this week that you will be going home to visit your family which might be hard. I want you to know that you can call our helpline anytime during your visit to process or just get some validation. That is what our helpline is for."

As you meet with sexual assault survivors continue to thread helpline services into all of your interactions. In rural communities our options for resources and community partners can be limited. It is an unfortunate reality of rural living that we sometimes have to refer survivors to unsupportive community resources because they are the only service available. When these circumstances arise, we can lean on our

strong helpline services to meet the needs of sexual violence survivors. Before, during, or after visits to dentists and doctors' offices, therapy appointments, and job interviews sexual violence survivors may benefit from strong support on the helpline.

Answering the Helpline

How we answer the helpline sets the tone for the rest of the interaction. How we engage with a survivor, their friends and family, and professionals in the first few minutes can determine whether they stay on the line and if they will use the helpline again in the future. Orienting callers to helpline services alleviates some fear of the unknown and gives them more confidence in asking for what they need.

Some sexual violence survivors know exactly what they need when they access our helplines. They may need no prompt and will speak at length about their experiences and what they are struggling with in the moment. Active listening could be all they are after. Becoming a good active listener takes practice and patience, but in time, everyone can develop this important advocacy skill. For more information about active listening in-person and on the helpline, check out our publication Tips for Active Listening.

Some folks may be searching for answers to questions big and small. Some questions, like '*is support group meeting this week?*' will be easy to answer. Other questions, like '*when will I be healed?*' we can't answer for survivors. Yet we can always explore with them and offer what we have learned about trauma and sexual violence. We may be the only person in a survivor's life that they can speak to about their experiences of sexual violence, work through issues related to the abuse, and explore the answers to these big questions. Our helplines offer a unique space to assist survivors in wrestling with complex feelings while remaining anonymous.

Other times survivors are simply feeling out whether we really offer a supportive space. An advocate from North Carolina shared, "Some callers just want to see how we handle the call before they come in for services. We had a male survivor that called last week and when we handled that call like we would anyone else, he felt comfortable coming in for services." When these survivors access our

helpline it is a reminder to make sure we are providing the best support we can during every interaction.

It is not uncommon for survivors of sexual violence to be unsure of what they need when they access the helpline. They may be completely unfamiliar with your program or that services exist for survivors of sexual violence. Many a survivor has accessed a helpline for the first time after a quick internet search. Rather than asking invasive questions or expecting them to state their needs at the beginning, we can warmly orient them to helpline services.

No matter the purpose of the call there are a few simple ways we can warmly start an interaction on the helpline.

- For telephone based services, answer the phone in a clear and warm tone of voice. No one feels welcomed when we mumble!
    - *"Good afternoon. You have reached the 24-hour helpline for Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Services of Rural County."*

- Introduce yourself and your program. This is particularly helpful when folks seem uncertain how to proceed once you answer.
    - *"Hi there, my name is Leah. Can I tell you a bit about where you have called? Our program is called Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Services of Rural County. We offer supportive and healing services for survivors of violence. I'm here to help in any way I can. "*

- Check in about safety and make sure this is the right time to have the conversation.
    - *"I'm so glad you called. Do you have a good amount of time to talk about that question right now or should we be quick? Our helpline is 24 hours so you can call back any time if you are interrupted."*

- Let them know that it is okay to not know where to start. Talking about trauma and our reactions to it is complicated. There aren't many spaces where you are invited to discuss such personal and intimate feelings.

- *"If you just want to spend some time talking about your frustration with not knowing how to talk about this, we can definitely do that."*

- *"I want you to know that I'm really comfortable with silence so if it takes a few minutes to figure out where to start that is okay."*

- Offer a way in to the conversation.
    - *"What is coming up for you right now that caused you to reach out?"*

    - *"Do you want to tell me a little bit about how you are feeling right now?"*

- Remind them that they can call back anytime.
    - *"I am so glad that you are feeling ready to go back to sleep. Just know that I'm here all night so if you need to call again I will be here."*

Helpline Advocacy Skills

We asked rural advocates from across the country about the skills necessary to provide strong helpline serves to sexual violence survivors. They provided answers that ranged from practical (the ability to wake up quickly!) to philosophical. Below we share the aspect of helpline advocacy that these rural advocates felt *particularly* great at:

"Staying calm when the caller isn't. I'm able to de-escalate and remember to take deep breaths."
–Advocate from Tennessee

"Breaking something down into smaller parts."
–Advocate from Idaho

"I'm good at offering non-judgmental space. I have no expectations going in to any interaction with a survivor. I'm just present with them in the moment."
–Advocate from Alaska

"Believing they are giving me the information they want me to have."
–Advocate from Montana

"Allowing and embracing silence."
–Advocate from Alaska

"I'm good with the tone of voice that I use. It's real smooth."
–Advocate from South Dakota

"Patience."
–Advocate from Idaho

"I'm good at reminding survivors, the decision on next steps is yours. They can call as many times as they want and I'll always support them."
–Advocate from Puerto Rico

"I'm good at asking questions to help survivors clarify what they want."
–Advocate from Montana

"Being aware and informed of things going on in the wider community and world. After #MeToo our calls escalated quickly."
–Advocate from Kansas

"Authenticity is important. Figuring out how to be yourself as you're responding to people."
–Advocate from Alaska

"I am good at reminding folks they own their stories. I try to focus not on having them tell me every detail about what happened to them, but instead look at, 'what else do you need that you aren't getting from others?'"
–Advocate from Kansas

Staff Support and Training

A director from Tennessee told us, “What makes a strong helpline is making sure the people answering it are well trained.” We couldn’t agree more. Programs need training specific to serving sexual violence survivors on helplines. When helpline services are set up to meet the needs of domestic violence survivors it can be confusing to know how to help survivors of sexual violence. Train and orient new advocates to supportive helpline services and provide continued education specific to the helpline for all staff and volunteers. This training should also include information on language access and options for Deaf survivors. Advocates will feel more confident and comfortable providing this service.

There are many formal and informal ways you can provide your program training on helpline services. A director from Iowa shared, “We share a lot of online training opportunities with advocates but we have heard it is not always as engaging or interesting. We provide another option where once a month we get together to watch documentaries, read articles, or listen to podcasts and we process what we would say to the characters if they called on the [helpline]. It isn’t required, but often folks are really excited to join.” Sometimes our more seasoned staff can provide these training opportunities. A director from Nevada shared, “For new staff, we have them listen in while another advocate answers the phone so they can hear an active real life call.” Shadowing another advocate answering the helpline helps advocates or volunteers understand your program’s approach to support sexual violence survivors. No matter the method of your training, the result is still intentional time spent learning about strong helpline services.

In addition to training, individual supervision and group discussion of helpline services adds to our ability to support survivors of sexual violence over the phone. One-on-one supervision provides the opportunity to discuss an individual advocate’s experiences answering the line. A director from Iowa shared, “I make it a point during regular supervision to talk about their motivations and methods of self-care. In helping process after a call I might say ‘*Last time we talked you said after a hard call you like to walk around the block. Have you done that yet?*’ Supervision helps me help them.”

Folks in leadership can help advocates focus on what is most important and put their advocacy in perspective. Individual supervision is a space where leadership

can tailor conversations, questions, and skill building to each advocate. A director from Tennessee shared her approach to supervision. “It is helpful to not just focus on the negative, but to talk about successes. Something they feel proud of so they aren’t always focusing on bad experiences.” In one-on-one supervision, leaders can help advocates sort out areas of growth as well as areas where skills are particularly strong. Supervision can be a time to provide mentorship or coaching and revisit areas of strength.

Staff meetings are also a good time to discuss strengthening helpline services for survivors of sexual violence. A director from Kansas shared, “One of the things we do to support staff, we have a weekly staff debrief. If there is recurring issue, we sit down as staff and discuss. Generally if an advocate is struggling with a call, more than one staff has dealt with it.” Recurring staff meetings can be a productive space to discuss difficult helpline interactions, advocacy skills, and trends the program is seeing on the helpline. A director from South Dakota shared, “When we are getting a lot of the same kinds of calls I find it useful to talk about what is our message or response. This way we can avoid advocates giving different answers. As a leader we can see why different advocates give different answers, but we can help unify the response for survivors.”

Not every rural program is currently providing strong group discussion about helpline services for survivors of sexual violence. A director from Nevada shared, “Our organization probably doesn’t discuss the [helpline] enough. We usually discuss it when there is an issue. We should discuss these issues prior to their being a problem.” It is never too late to start prioritizing conversations about helpline services. Including helplines as a standing item on the agenda can be a great way to formalize this topic into your staff meetings.

What Resources to Have with You When Answering the Line

When answering the helpline we need to be prepared for anything. We never know what survivors, their family and friends, and professionals are going to need or ask for on the line. So we asked rural advocates from across the country about the resources they always have with them when supporting survivors on the helpline. We found their answer insightful and we hope you do too.

- Create a binder full of the information and resources you always want to have with you when you answer the phone. These resources could include:
    - an updated list of community referrals and resources
    - written program policies and procedures that relate to the helpline
    - necessary paperwork for data collection
    - your program's language access plan
    - pieces of your training manual which feel relevant to you
    - our Crisis and Support Line Tip Sheet
- paper and pens for writing notes, reminders, and thoughts to circle back to
- fidget toys, coloring books, or other objects so long as they help you focus or hold your silence
- a mirror which helps you pay attention to your facial expressions which impact your tone of voice
- cozy objects like stuffed animals, blankets, or pillows
- water or tea
- quotes to help ground yourself
- a sound machine to create a more private and confidential space

When thinking about what resources you will have with you when answering the line, consider both service to survivors and self-care. What resources do you need to support sexual violence survivors well? What resources do you need to take care of yourself?

Confidentiality on the Helpline

In rural communities navigating confidentiality can be a challenge. Rural advocates are identifiable in so many ways. Whether it is by the logo on a t-shirt, the phrases we use, or our name and face, the community often knows who we are. It is often said by rural advocates, that 'everybody knows everybody.' So how do we navigate confidentiality as we move about our communities? An advocate from Kansas shared, "I have a distinctive voice and laugh that are impossible to hide so I am often recognized in public. Before I end a call, I explain that if the

person speaks to me out in the community, I can't guarantee confidentiality. This has limited the amount that survivors are seeking emotional support from me in public and instead they connect with me more during work time."

Rural advocates report typically being on-call for several days in a row, or as long as two weeks. Finding a balance between everyday life and on-call work can be difficult. Inevitably we must go to the laundromat, the grocery store, or even the gym. As you move about your community, be aware of the closest confidential location you can rush to if the line rings. Often this is a private room or car. If you are close enough you may be able to wait until you get to the confidential location to answer the line. If it will take you more than about 30 seconds to get to your new location, answer the line and check in with the caller. An advocate from Iowa shares with the caller, "I am moving to a more confidential space so we can talk. Can I put you on hold for about a minute? I want to make sure you get the privacy you deserve." If you are unable to get to a truly confidential space quickly, be careful what identifying information you say, such as repeating the caller's name.

Even when answering the line from your program's office we need to think about confidentiality. We must be aware that community members, volunteers, and survivors may be in the office. A private location to answer the line generally benefits all. A director from Florida shared, "Currently our [helpline] is changing but it used to be located near the front door. The person answering the [helpline], also answered the front door, the administrative line, and was taking care of people as they come in. When I started at the program I was like, '*this is overwhelming.*' So now we are relocating the line to a separate room just for the [helpline]."

There are confidentiality considerations when thinking about the use of technology on helplines. When determining what technology you will use to enhance your helpline, start by evaluating the needs of your community. For example, some rural communities have determined that adding a texting or chat-based helpline is necessary to meet the needs of their community. Next, determine what implications the technology will have for confidentiality. Be thoughtful in your search and don't hesitate to ask experts. Reach out to your state/territorial coalition for support in finding technology for your helpline that will ensure confidentiality services for survivors.

When ‘everybody knows everybody’ it feels unavoidable that we may know someone who uses the helpline. An advocate from Montana explains, “Callers can recognize you on the phone. If the person calling is someone I know, I let them know that it’s me. I had someone I manage call the line. I let her know it was me and that she could work with someone else if she wanted. I told her, ‘*nothing changes for me. Either way*.” It can feel tempting to pretend we don’t know the caller. But we also know that trust and transparency are key in building trauma informed relationships. If the survivor is uncomfortable seeking support from you, call the backup advocate or your supervisor to find another solution.

Confidentiality means creating truly anonymous services. Survivors have the right to share only the information they want you to know. An advocate from Puerto Rico shares, “If the person doesn’t want to give their name, I respect that. Sometimes they use a nickname so that if they call in the future we can pick up where we left off.” Caller ID also poses an issue when we navigate anonymity. Your program may need to do extra work to figure out how to remove identifying information such as phone numbers from your phone system.

Whatever your reporting status about child abuse, elder abuse, or threats of harm to self or others is in your state, you need to share your reporting requirements with survivors as early as possible. Survivors have the right to know who will have access to their information, and this includes mandatory reports. An advocate from Alaska shared, “In my state, we are mandated reporters. So we tell survivors up front about confidentiality, what we can keep confidential and what we can’t.”

Scheduling Helpline Shifts

Every rural agency has a unique method for scheduling on-call hours on the helpline. However we have found a few universally helpful guiding principles:

- ✓ Schedule vacation time along with on-call time. This shows an organizational support for using vacation time and models a trauma informed approach to on-call work.
- ✓ When you are not on-call, you are not on-call. Create organizational procedures and a culture that allows advocates to not be bothered when they are away from the office.
- ✓ On-call work belongs to everybody. This is a shared responsibility among everyone at the program and should never be used as a punishment. Find an equitable way to divide the workload among the entire staff.
- ✓ Designate supervisors and back-up advocates. A director in Tennessee shared, "We come together as a team and as supervisors we rotate back-up support. We make sure that we are available for advocates."
- ✓ Flexibility in scheduling can benefit everyone. Consider scheduling two staff for the same week and allowing them to divvy up the workload between them. This can be helpful for advocates with families, second jobs, or complicated schedules.
- ✓ Lean on your volunteers. Trust that you have given volunteers the necessary training, supervision, and support to do strong work on the helpline.
- ✓ Leadership should be aware of the emotional state of advocates answering the helpline. Sometimes last minute changes to the schedule need to be made. A director from Iowa shared, "If you see an advocate that is struggling today but they are supposed to take the [helpline] tonight, check in with them. Maybe have someone else take the line tonight. And be prepared that sometimes this might be you."

Utilizing Volunteer Support

Volunteers play an important role in the work of our rural programs. Volunteers help us ensure we can provide 24-hour coverage of our helplines, accompany survivors to the hospital and law enforcement, and perform other services to survivors. The kind of work volunteers can do is specific and different from what paid staff do. Volunteers do small, concise, and immediate work. For example, volunteers can answer the helpline to talk with a survivor about a recent trigger,

discuss grounding techniques, answer questions about services, and lay the foundation for paid advocates to follow up.

When volunteers are given the right resources and feel supported, we can trust them to do this work. Volunteers should be trained, supervised, and supported. An advocate from Montana shared, “As a rule, we debrief with volunteers after hard calls. It makes active volunteers feel more confident that they know what they are doing when they take calls.” Volunteer support relieves advocates from providing supportive services to their community 24/7 and prevents burnout.

For more information on creating a sustainable volunteer program at your rural program, check out our Rural Volunteer Program Guide. This guide contains sample documents like volunteer descriptions, applications, and interview questions and provides you with options to think about as your agency creates your own volunteer program.

Evaluating our Helpline Services

We learn best by engaging in service evaluation with survivors, community members, and ourselves. Evaluation paves the way for successful organizational or personal change and helps us know what we are doing right so we can to do more of it. Moreover, evaluation gives survivors and community members a voice in our empowerment-based agencies. We cannot know if our helpline services are meeting the needs of survivors, their family and friends, and professionals unless we ask and pay attention. A strong approach to evaluation can tell us how we want to improve services, determine priorities for training, and provide positive feedback for staff and volunteers.

There are many factors that go into evaluation of a rural helpline. The first is data collection. We can use the data we already collect to look at who is accessing our helpline, and who isn't. This information tells us where we need to do more outreach, provide more training, and have more intentional community conversations. Here are a few questions to ask when looking at the data for your program.

- Broken down by county, who is accessing your line?
- What percentage of callers are survivors of sexual violence or asking questions related to sexual violence?
- What is the average length of time for a helpline interaction?
- How many callers transition into survivors who seek services?
- What percentage of folks accessing the helpline call back to continue seeking support?

Another way we can evaluate our helpline is to look at individual experiences of advocates and volunteers answering the helpline. This relies on honesty and openness from helpline staff to conduct critical self-reflection. It can be difficult to give formal evaluations to folks who access our helpline so informal evaluations can give us a glimpse. Reflect after you have spoken to someone, *do I feel like I helped this person? Did I meet their needs? What could I have done better?* Even being able to report that someone said, 'thank you, this was helpful' can assist us in determining what is working on our line and what isn't.

Evaluating your own skills while on the helpline will determine your areas of strength and growth. We asked rural advocates from across the country how they determine if an interaction on helpline was successful. Knowing this answer for yourself will help you focus your advocacy and internally evaluate your work. Here are a few of the answers we received:

- "Just the person being able to call is a success in itself." *–An advocate from South Dakota*

- "I won't be able to meet every need the survivor has during the call, but it's successful if the caller feels heard, believed, and supported during the call." *–A director from Tennessee*

- "What I see as a success may not be what they see as a success. If they hung up in an emotionally escalated space, that might be the first time they felt they could do that." *–An advocate from Montana*

- "A call is successful if you are able to listen and allow survivors to speak, just the simple things... when you are able to provide resources and referrals requested by the survivors." *– An advocate from Mississippi*

- "Let the caller guide it. It's easy to rush in to listing our services, and the person is like, '*that's not why I called*.'*–An advocate from Tennessee*

- "It is important to ask survivors 'have I helped you? Is there anything else I can help you with?' " *–An advocate from Mississippi*

- "Revelations come to survivors as they're talking, so just being that present person to just talk through what they need to, and then reiterating what you're hearing them say. It can add clarity for them when they have things that are jumbled. That can give them direction for what kinds of resources could be beneficial to them." *–A director from Oregon*

In addition to informal individual evaluation, we can provide formal evaluation of survivor's experiences on the helpline. When folks transition into in-person services we can ask for feedback on the helpline services they received. Frequently and intentionally checking in with survivors during each step of advocacy lets survivors know how important their feedback is to us. For more information on evaluation and data collection, check out Program Evaluation: Knowing is Half the Battle.

Rural helplines provide support and connection to our communities when and where people need it most. On the helpline, advocates give non-judgmental space with patience, belief, and authenticity. On the helpline, advocates help survivors break problems down into manageable parts, support survivors' decisions, and remind survivors of their own strength and resilience. On the helpline, we connect.

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