

## ***Was this helpful?***

Survivors tell us what they need. Are we listening?

At a recent week-long advocacy skills building class, participants were offered the following foundation on which to rest our advocacy practice:

***Justice demands the truth be told  
to whatever extent possible the harm be repaired, and  
the conditions that produced injustice be changed.***

-adapted from Archbishop Desmond Tutu by Ellen Pence

Justice. Yes, certainly that is our highest aspiration as advocates. But how do we know if we are making progress in our quest to achieve justice; that is, for us, a community free from domestic violence?

In recent years, I traveled around the state talking with advocates about all the ways we talk to survivors about the effectiveness of our advocacy. This does not seem as high-flying as talking about justice, but it is, in fact, related. In the broadest terms, we ask survivors a lot of questions to help us understand if how we are doing our advocacy actually addresses what justice demands.

This is not to say we ask survivors “were you able to tell your truth” or “was the harm done to you repaired.” No, we ask questions more along the lines of “did you feel listened to” and “did you feel that we addressed your top concerns?”

I am impressed by the amount of energy advocates put into gathering survivor feedback. And I’ve been moved, a few times to tears, reading the comments that survivors have shared about how much of a difference we are making in their lives.

As much as all of this is true, there is still lots of room for critical thinking about how we draw survivors into the conversation about advocacy, and how we use what we find out to get a little closer to the capital J Justice we all desire. Survivors not only appreciate being asked, but when engaged in a meaningful feedback process, they become members of the movement to end the violence. Survivor feedback can enable a community to *change the conditions that produce the injustice*.

Let’s explore how to reach more of our full potential by engaging with survivors more openly to get feedback. The remainder of this article pivots around a statement of our very best intention: *We want to know what survivors have to say.*

## **We want to know what survivors have to say.**

Who's we? The "we" here is both DV agencies, and we as individual advocates.

One of our biggest challenges when we take a critical look at our current practices around gathering input from survivors is that we often take a back seat to them — funders, policy makers, and others. We ask survivors lots of questions that we are required to ask by others. Funders drive the questions we ask, and the forms we use. We compile statistics and send the reports away.

Don't get me wrong, we do want to be able to prove to anyone who asks us that public and private dollars are being spent wisely — all to good purpose. But we simply cannot lose sight of our larger goals simply because we have been required by others to gather certain information.

I believe we have lost sight of asking questions and using the answers for our own purposes — that is to move closer to justice by doing outrageously good advocacy.

Two simple questions:

- ◆ Do you, individually, sincerely want to know what survivors have to say about the advocacy you provide?
- ◆ Do you as an agency want to know what survivors have to say about your collective work?

As an individual advocate, it takes a certain amount of courage to ask survivors questions and stay open to the possibilities — both that your work can use improvement, and that your work has made all the difference.

An organization needs courage as well. Though typically the director or managers have to have the will and lead the agency, I've always believed leadership can come from any level. Anyone can influence an organization embracing and acting upon what survivors have to say.

Look back again at the two questions above. Can you answer them with a wholehearted yes?

I hope that most of you are thinking you would *like* to answer yes. It would be completely understandable — even expected — for you to have reservations.

Let's talk more about this.

## **We WANT to know what survivors have to say.**

Do you, or don't you? This is such an important question. Let's explore what resistance you, as an individual or organization, might have to hearing feedback from survivors.

Here are just a couple of ideas:

- ◆ It is just flat out hard to hear criticism sometimes. Especially if it is coming from someone you have had a difficult time connecting with.
- ◆ It's hard to integrate criticism if you don't feel like you have strong mentors or outlets to develop your advocacy skills.
- ◆ And it's especially hard if you have been directed by a supervisor to engage in problematic advocacy practices. When you feel you have no power to address a lapse in advocacy, it is frustrating to get negative feedback from a survivor.
- ◆ It can be hard to get suggestions or criticisms if you feel like your organization is working just as hard as you possibly can.
- ◆ It is easy, especially if you have been around for a while, to dismiss concerns or ideas. You have heard it all before. There is nothing that can be done. This is just how you do things.
- ◆ Ironically, part of resistance can also be about how hard it is to accept compliments and praise. When a survivor connects with you in a profound way, and expresses a deep appreciation, it can be hard for some to accept.

Take a few moments to think about if these ideas resonate for you, and/or if you have resistance for some other reasons.

What keeps you, individually or organizationally, from wanting to know what survivors have to say?

## **We want to KNOW what survivors have to say.**

It might be human nature, but a big motivator for people to give feedback is when they have a complaint. Think about your own experience. How often do you take the time to let someone know when you are *satisfied* with something that happened — compared to how quick you are to fill out the card or talk to someone when you are *dissatisfied*?

Does the information we gather tell us the whole story?

- ◆ Is the information truly representative of the whole? Do we gather enough information by making it super easy and accessible for everyone who wants to give feedback? Are we creative and do we make it fun?
- ◆ It is much easier to plan for everything from major overhauls to minor refinements when you have substantial amounts of information to back you up.
- ◆ If you have the facts — the information and data — you can analyze if the changes you try to your advocacy actually make a difference for survivors.
- ◆ A single complaint may or may not be a good reason to change something. The squeaky wheel may be squeaking for a very good reason. Don't just react, analyze. Data and good information can drive positive changes.

When survivors tell us we have a problem, we shouldn't ignore it. When survivors give us compliments, we should not ignore that either.

As we try things to fix problems and we succeed (and we know this because survivors tell us) this is cause for great celebration. We work with difficult stuff, and need to take the time to acknowledge when things are going right. Having this experience can put us on the road to wanting to know more. Knowledge is power.

Have you made any changes recently to your program where survivor feedback was the motivation?

## **We want to know what SURVIVORS have to say.**

In certain ways, it is harder to listen to survivors than it is to focus on what our co-workers, colleagues, funders, legal allies, etc. have to say about our services. Our co-worker says, "We need a bigger refrigerator in the shelter." We get a bigger refrigerator. "Cops are complaining that we don't cooperate with them on missing persons reports." We generate a protocol that addresses it. This is all well and good.

But I want to go back to what Archbishop Desmond Tutu said about what justice demands.

***Justice demands the truth be told  
to whatever extent possible the harm be repaired, and  
the conditions that produced injustice be changed.***

The saddest truth for advocates about the truth for victims is that we simply cannot fix anything — we cannot change the things that have happened.

We can, and we must, be the holders of the space where a victim can tell her entire truth, with no part left out. We can help hold the judgments and shame at bay long enough for her to say all that she wishes to say. Being able to tell her truth — perhaps for the very first time — the importance of this person-to-person connection cannot be overstated.

This is one of the hardest jobs any advocate undertakes — to be in the presence of the pain that people reveal and to be a compassionate witness to it.

Beyond that, to repairing the harm, we must be open to hearing from survivors the full range of possibilities they see — from what they are going to do, to what they want us to do, what they want their friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, and the larger community to do. What they want the perpetrator to do. All to repair the harm done. As much as we are "service providers" of advocacy, shelter, crisis services, support and so on, we cannot rush into offering these services before we know if our services are any part of what a survivor needs to be restored.

Feeling over-responsible to provide fixes to repair harm can be a barrier for advocates as we help survivors explore *all the ways* the damage can be repaired. We are not in charge of all the repairs. But we can be a great sounding board, a facilitator of creative ideas, a conduit of information out into the community.

How do victims let you know if they are or are not feeling listened to? How do you ask victims about how well you were able to help them explore a full range of options for restoration?

## ***We want to know what survivors have to SAY.***

Say. Yes, say. I'm afraid many of us are in a rut — using the very same forms, with the very same questions that we've been using for a very long time.

- ◆ Many of you may have lost track of why you are asking the questions you ask. Who wants to know? Are these good questions? Might a funder or someone else who is imposing certain questions be amendable to asking more relevant questions?
- ◆ Do you as an advocate ever hear back about the data you collect? Do you take the time to discuss the reports you generate or look at the things survivors are telling you?
- ◆ Do you engage in other ways of listening to survivors besides using written forms and questionnaires? Have you ever formed a formal or informal focus group so you can ask more in-depth questions?
- ◆ Even verbally asking something as simple as "is this helpful?" can be so valuable. Is this a part of your practice of advocacy? You can sometimes find out more by asking this simple question than by reading the answers to a five page questionnaire.

Discovering what survivors have to say is all about engaging in relationship.

What survivors say matters.

## **Conclusion**

Let's end where we began.

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Every day, so many advocates all around our beautiful state try their very best to help survivors. We do thoughtful and compassionate work. We owe it to survivors and we owe it to ourselves to make sure we are on the right track with all of our honest effort. And we can know this when we ask survivors for their honest opinion about how we are doing.

***WE WANT TO KNOW WHAT SURVIVORS HAVE TO SAY.***