

Connecting with Our Communities:

A Peer Dialogue on Community Engagement Work
to Prevent Violence against Women

June 2011



Online Publication and Resource: Published by Transforming Communities
Technical Assistance, Training and Resource Center



Introduction



TC-TAT Transforming Communities: Technical Assistance, Training and Resource Center (TC-TAT) hosted a peer learning teleconference on April 27, 2011 with people doing in-depth community engagement work to prevent violence against women (VAW). These community-based activists are working in diverse communities in California and represent organizations that may or may not have dedicated funding for prevention work.

The goals of the call were to:

- Explore and refine a critical analysis of what it means to do community engagement work around prevention of VAW.
- Share successful strategies, challenges, and advice, including how to do in-depth community engagement work with limited resources.
- Discuss the changes we are seeing as a result of our work.
- Gain nourishment and support for continuing our work.

This conversation was a space to share our ideas and challenges, spark our collective creativity, and learn from each other with the intention of then sharing some of our stories and insights with the broader VAW prevention movement.

This online publication is for prevention advocates who are seeking strategies and inspiration to strengthen their community engagement work. We invite your ideas for creative ways that we can continue to deepen these conversations.

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Acknowledgment

TC-TAT extends appreciation to the funder of this project:
California Emergency Management Agency,
Domestic Violence Section

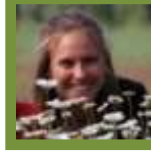


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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: What does meaningful community engagement around prevention look like in your community?

Alison: We are doing a lot of prevention work in schools. At the elementary school level, Project Respect (PR) (<http://www.mariposarespect.net/>) is focused on social-emotional learning and bullying prevention. We have PR coaches at each school site, helping students with conflict and supporting teachers with integrating prevention into their curriculum. At the middle school level, we are using GroundSpark's *Let's Get Real* curriculum. We are also involved as a demonstration project with a statewide domestic violence primary prevention project working with 7th-8th grade boys to promote gender respect. We have a wide array of community partners and work actively with a local youth center.

Sharon: Our prevention work is based in many different communities. In one project, we are working with men (and women) to support them to be really compassionate in defining new images of masculinity. Over the past five years, we've hosted a grassroots event where more than 200 men have been honored as community role models who embody the principle that strength does not equal violence.

Mimi: We've been developing a 9-week Bible study in the Korean community on gender equity and Domestic Violence. This participatory, community-based process is the result of about ten years of organizing on domestic violence in faith communities through Shimtuh (www.english.kcceb.org). A minister's wife came up with the idea for a Bible study. What an interesting idea – to get a small, intimate group to meet for ten weeks on one topic. The group became invested in this project and strategized around how to take the curriculum and



“We are working with men and encouraging them to be really compassionate in defining new images of masculinity.”

*– Sharon Turner,
STAND! For Families
Free of Family
Violence*

make the message subtle yet powerful. It's very beautiful – we pilot tested it with a group of young people and have received feedback from ministers who have noticed changes. One female member asked, “Hey, why are we the ones who always have to clean up and wash dishes?” and then the Minister modeled washing dishes after church meetings. Slowly, young men started also washing dishes after meetings. There have been ripple effects throughout the entire church.

Cristy: As part of GroundSpark’s Community Outreach Initiative I had the opportunity to work with community members in Lake County, California. GroundSpark has a long history of working with school communities to create safe and inclusive learning environments using our documentary films and providing professional development, but we knew that it wasn’t enough to just show a film and have a discussion if we wanted to really create sustainable change. We decided to launch a pilot project to explore, ***“What would it take to support communities to think about the issues that youth are facing, be moved to take action, and truly become adult allies that work in partnership with youth?”***

When I first started working in Lake County, I contacted leaders in the community and was invited to meetings of existing collaboratives. One of the most important things I did was just to go there and spend the day talking with community members and listen to stories, learn about their concerns and hopes. We worked together for three years and built trusting relationships with one another. It was our in-person visits to Lake County that truly created that bond. During that time they started a *Respect for All Task Force* made up of teachers, youth service providers, counselors, health advocates, and youth. The group conducted a community



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That won’t create sustainable change.”

– Cristy Chung,
GroundSpark

readiness assessment that helped them build relationships and understand more concretely the community's needs.

I had started the project with many preconceived ideas about how communities would use our films, receive training and go out to do the work – in contrast the focus has been on building their ally base and identifying the right strategies to meet the needs of the youth in their community. It has been an amazing learning experience to watch folks take on the issues and make the solutions their own.

Paula: The history of oppression against Native people here in Del Norte and Humboldt Counties is intense, long, and less than 100 years old. Elders were sent to boarding schools in childhood, treated brutally, and separated from their culture. There's an understandable reticence in trusting folks from outside the community. I'm grateful that our organization has a 37-year history and has worked for most of that time with tribal people. In the last 15 years, there has been a deepening of that relationship

We have been participating in events organized by Native communities. We show up, listen respectfully and figure out prevention strategies that take into account historical conditions and current realities. Recently, we've been working with queer identified Native youth inter-tribally to assert their identity and search out elders to talk about pre-contact views around orientation and a broader understanding of gender beyond a Western binary.

We do a lot of primary prevention in pre-school, Head Start, elementary, middle, and high schools as well as with professionals and parents. Today is the annual healing walk at the Hoopa Valley Reservation. They get the teens at the high school involved in service to community – looking at intergenerational trauma, domestic violence at home,



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*– Mimi Kim,
Creative Interventions*

sexualized violence, bullying – they come together as a community to look at common denominators and common ground on how we can change it. We are one of a very few non-Native organizations invited to walk – it allows us to make connections with services and other organizations that don't have those partnerships.

We need to sustain our connections and our work whether the funding is there or not. At the Inter-tribal Women's Advocacy Network, we need to show up and not make promises we can't keep; make sure we're honest; ensure that we learn from others; find opportunities where we might be able to share something we've learned and build on all of that.

Zaria: Our organization is all volunteers. We work with a coalition of Muslim service organizations and non-Muslim service organizations working on domestic violence issues. We created a sermon discussing domestic violence and how to prevent it, looking at it from a faith perspective (it's not condoned). We provide trainings and attend meetings around the county to increase sensitivity to needs that Muslim families face. Many times domestic violence takes a back burner because there are so many issues facing the Muslim community.

Reetu: We are working with community members to change school and community climates. We work with middle school boys around how masculinity, patriarchy, and violence in their communities affect their lives and how they can be leaders for change. We work with adults around what it means to be an ally and talk about social justice with young people.

It's exciting to talk with adults about letting go of adultism and how adults can support rather than guide youth. The 7th and 8th graders meet weekly during their lunch hour to talk about masculinity, bullying, power hierarchies, what it means to be



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*– Zaria Horton,
Muslim Women's
League*

an ally, and violence they witness. There's a lot of racial ideology and prejudice that they work through together.

The 7th graders are organizing a poster context exploring how not to use your power to hurt other people. The 8th graders are using storytelling to describe the violence in their lives and how they think their lives can change. The after-school group is creating a slide show about what they want to change in their school that will be part of a ceremony with students, teachers, parents, and newspaper representatives. Policy efforts are coming from students, who feel like they get bullied by their teachers. It's been difficult for them to transition from a group at lunch that values equality to a more authoritarian dynamic in the classroom. We are starting informal talks with teachers around how bullying affects students and conflict resolution.

“We work with middle school boys around how masculinity, patriarchy, and violence in their communities affect their lives and how they can be leaders for change.”

— Reetu Mody

INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS: What are some of the creative, low-cost ways you continue to engage deeply with your communities, even in the midst of economic crisis?

Paula: When money becomes scarce, we all start to feel stretched and there can be a tendency to not attend to true collaborations. We might go to something called a collaboration that's required by funders but you don't really have a voice. Our strategy is to find common ground and connection in partnerships where we really do have an opportunity to learn from community members. Then, when funding comes along, several groups can identify a common need.

Because we had strong relationships with community partners, we were able to bring youth together in a much more integrated conversation that was accomplishing what several of us individually were trying to do. We've been able to share resources like car-pooling and staff. We facilitated a dialogue with adults separately around what it really means to be an ally – how hard it is to be in that dominant structure in schools where the oppression is coming from the adults in that environment.

A group working with transitional age youth was able to pay for young people to travel to a remote area so that youth in that isolated area have access to other youth around sexual orientation and gender. We brought together tribal folks for a showing and a facilitated discussion of a GroundSpark film. Hearing about what others are doing allows us to strengthen, build on, and be more creative about our partnerships.

Mimi: Creative Interventions (www.creative-interventions.org) has developed models, tools, films and curricula addressing community-based intervention and prevention that

“Through our strong relationships with community partners, we were able to accomplish together what several of us individually had been trying to do.”

*– Paula Arrowsmith
-Jones, North Coast Rape
Crisis Team*

can be used within existing infrastructures. For example, churches already have Bible study groups – we don't have to recreate another mechanism to have that curriculum implemented. It doesn't take a lot of money and can be done on a volunteer basis. It would be interesting to look at how those tools get used by other organizations – what can we learn about tools or training that makes it easier for folks to implement?

Cristy: I'm thinking about what Mimi said about building on existing frameworks and structures in communities. That's one of the things that made the work sustainable in Lake County. We didn't create new staff positions. We brought together people who were already doing similar work and focused on how to work in a more interconnected way. It's important to think about how we can build on existing assets in a community and make sure they have access to information and tools to work with. In my case, it means building the capacity of folks who are already working in schools to use our films and other resources and work with other folks who will address issues they're trying to shift in their schools, making sure folks don't have to reinvent the wheel. So we're not saying you need a new group. There is likely already an amazing group of people who are committed to supporting youth and making schools safe. It's about making sure there are opportunities for the right people to come together and support each other rather than work in isolation.

“We’ve focused on community-based intervention and prevention tools and strategies that can be used within existing infrastructures without a lot of money.”

*– Mimi Kim,
Creative Interventions*

CHALLENGES: We know this isn't easy – what do you really struggle with? What gets you down?

Sharon: It's great when people get excited and share a vision about what a violence-free community might look like – the challenge comes in having the ongoing conversations, trainings, and deepening of our analysis, commitment, and actions. We've been working with the community for many years now. We started by doing intervention to increase awareness of family violence happening in the community. In recent years, we've been doing more work around prevention. I love that people get excited, but a challenge we're facing is that several people are now running around half-cocked with knowledge and trying to start their own domestic violence agency. In a collaboration, there needs to be the ability to step over into the other person's shoes, see from their perspective, step back into your own shoes, and be willing to be changed by others in the group. I don't think we need to have several domestic violence agencies running around.

Alison: I've noticed increased collaboration in our county with the economic crisis with more groups applying for grants together. Our schools really want to see change, but they're having to shut down half an elementary school – relationship violence prevention isn't their priority right now. People in the community may have a lot of excitement but then get too busy or overwhelmed to actually follow through.

Paula: I really appreciate what's being said. Some of my challenges are collaboration without cooptation. We need to remember to be grounded in our core values as we come together in a broader alliance, especially as people struggle with finances. There's an "expediency" dynamic that plays out that's a reflection of the old top-down, power-over dynamic. Small nonprofits get pitted against each other. Funders play



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*– Alison Tudor,
Mountain Crisis
Services*

into that. Rather than promoting activities of a sister organization, I might feel threatened. We need to understand where we are in the power dynamics. There's a real narrowing of the conversation. Important words like white supremacy, patriarchy, and all the isms are not being talked about. As we talk about social norms change, the challenge is to be really clear about those terms and not water down by using softer words. We need multiple strategies for different audiences, but we can't let our analysis get pushed out.

Cristy: Another frustration is that as a nonprofit, you have to produce, produce, produce – you have to show what you're accomplishing. A lot of our strategies are long-term but it's hard to be resourced for the long-term work. It takes a long time, building relationships, being in the community, learning from each other. Sometimes communities I'm working with feel like they don't have time to really slow down and build relationships.

I also struggle with how we are not acknowledging the connections between gender-based violence, racism, classism, homophobia, and other oppressions. It's really hard for people to understand what it means to do that work to change social norms. We're so used to addressing an issue in an isolated way.

Zaria: It's challenging being grassroots in a limited resource economy. Everything you use is for the program. It's hard to stay grounded, maintain volunteers, and keep people motivated. We realize the importance of the work but feel alone. I've also had the experience of building bridges with national and international Muslim organizations and then no follow-through on their part. That was very frustrating.

“One training or event is important, but it's not enough. We have to be committed to doing this work over a long time in a more integrated way.”

*– Cristy Chung,
GroundSpark*

SHIFTS: What are some of the changes you are seeing as a result of your community work? What do you think has created or contributed to those changes?

Reetu: Volunteers at our weekly community meetings are now holding each other accountable regarding how to be an ally to youth. I've heard adults ask, "Will that be a form of cooptation or is there a way to provide help without asserting our power?" There are also a lot of shifts among the youth in our program. One of our middle schools is fairly diverse, with racially segregated enclaves. We've heard from faculty and students that different groups of friends are now trying to talk about race on campus. There's been a big shift with school administrators recognizing they need to support teachers and students to talk about things beyond standardized testing. Students need to talk about race, patriarchy, power – these ideas are critical to students learning and make other subject material relevant. There's been an openness to having trainings for teachers about promoting gender respect.

Sharon: This work is dynamic. You never know from one moment to the next what's going to happen. In the last couple of months, I lost a staff person who was coordinating our project that is focused on engaging men. When the guys heard that this person was gone, they got on the phone and started talking with each other about how to support me. They called someone who had retired from the group and recruited him to come back and help staff this program so it can go on. This was a group of people that said early on, "Do you want men to be wimps?" Yet their commitment to making sure this goes on with or without staff – for me, that's worth the five years we've been working with them. It's sustainability in action.

“Volunteers are now holding each other accountable regarding how to be an ally to youth. I’ve heard adults ask, ‘Will that be a form of cooptation or is there a way to provide help without asserting our power?’”

— Reetu Mody

Alison: On an individual level, we have seen a shift in the way that students talk with each other and how they solve problems. School administrators believe our projects are worth the investment, and we have been able to shift the focus of our prevention work from bullying prevention to include work around intersecting oppressions and working with young men and adult men with community support.

Cristy: The changes I see are different in every community, and that can be one of the most challenging and important pieces to acknowledge and remember. Each and every community has its own unique changes and solutions even though there are similarities. We have to be so careful not to make assumptions about what outcomes we expect. Generally, people are opening their hearts to one another, sharing stories about their experiences, listening to one another, deepening their understanding of the issues, finding allies, and discovering new strategies for change. I've watched people who came in skeptical of being able to create safe and inclusive schools change over time and become one of our strongest allies in the room because we kept showing up and not judging but offering new ways of understanding and sharing.

I've watched youth and adults side by side find the courage to speak up about their support for people who identify as gay or lesbian to create more inclusive schools. I've listened to community members verbalize their new awareness and concern about the deep anti-immigrant sentiments ingrained in their community and use that to find strategies to reach out and support community members most impacted. But the most important change I experienced was when I had to end my work in Lake County, and every single member of the task force stepped up to take on leadership roles and have

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*– Cristy Chung,
GroundSpark*

continued working together to make their schools more responsive to the needs of youth in their community.

Mimi: Through our Creative Interventions Project, we've seen a shift towards a new paradigm in the response to violence. There has been a growing taboo against people confronting violence within their own social networks, and yet people do this all the time. We as an anti-violence movement need to legitimate this and offer tools to make interventions within social networks safe and effective – as much as that might be possible. The stories we have collected through the “Storytelling and Organizing Project” (STOP) have given people ideas that this can be part of our everyday actions. They seem do-able, with people that we already know, live with, work with, and care for. Our next step is to get more ample tools out there – with the publication of a toolkit taken from a pilot project that we conducted over the past few years. We think that this is where the shifts can happen on a broad scale.

Paula: Through our community organizing and outreach efforts, along with consistent long-term provision of much needed and trusted services, we have seen strengthened partnerships, particularly with tribal partners, allies in the youth-empowerment movement, queer communities and faith communities. Over the last 15 years, and especially as resources have disappeared, I have noticed more intelligent and thoughtful awareness and leveraging of the overlapping efforts and energy of social justice movements that may have different specific goals but share common values.

“As resources have disappeared, there has been more thoughtful leveraging of the efforts and energy of social justice movements, which may have different goals but share common values.”

*– Paula Arrowsmith
-Jones, North Coast Rape
Crisis Team*

ADVICE: What is one piece of advice you wish someone had given you along the way?

APPRECIATIONS: What are you grateful for?

Zaria: *Advice:* Keep diligent and maintain a sense of hope. *Appreciation:* A woman came to one of our seminars and thanked us – that made a huge impact, and I knew we weren't doing this in vain.

Paula: *Advice:* Remember to pace yourself and say “no” more often. *Appreciation:* My biggest gift has been true mentorship – a feeling that I can receive mentoring and in turn have an opportunity to both mentor and be mentored by people coming into this work. A wonderful thing I've experienced is shared commitment to deeply-held values.

Reetu: *Advice:* Remember how powerful presence is – how really being in community, one-on-one with people, makes a huge difference, not just for a program, but for the community to build trust. *Appreciation:* I'm appreciative of the dynamic learning process with adult volunteers and youth. Whenever we're together and I see that they've learned something new, I realize how much people can change. I'm hopeful that change is possible, and it's constantly happening.

Alison: *Advice:* Recognize that changing social norms takes a lot of time. You need to work every angle to get all parties involved. Also, be willing to really come to the table and be involved with all issues, not just the one you are focused on. *Appreciation:* I'm thankful for all the relationships I've built in the community that fuel me daily.

Cristy: *Advice:* Trust your intuition and know that the relationships you build will be the most important part of the work you're doing. *Appreciation:* I'm really grateful for the folks that helped me learn and engaged in deep conversations with me; they have been so amazingly open to inviting me into their community.

Sharon: *Advice:* I wish someone had said: This work takes every ounce of creativity that you never thought you had. *Appreciation:* BUT – what I'm most grateful for is I keep learning that lesson over and over.