COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION and Primary Prevention
Introduction to This Course

The purpose of this course is to support and motivate you as you apply community mobilization theory and techniques in your sexual assault and domestic violence prevention work. We assume that you are familiar with the basic theory and practice of community mobilization, along with general concepts of primary prevention. We recommend that you review the documents available in the Prevention Overview to prepare you to get the most from this course.

The goal of this course is to support you as you incorporate community mobilization into your prevention practice through these educational and skill objectives:

**Educational Objectives**

- Understand community mobilization as it relates to the primary prevention of sexual assault and domestic violence.
- Learn about examples of successful sexual assault and domestic violence community mobilization initiatives.

**Skill Objectives**

- Be able to incorporate community mobilization principles into general social ecological theory.
- Develop locally specific strategies that hold promise for prevention, based on local demographics, organizational goals, and community assets.
Introduction to Community Mobilization

What it is and what it isn’t

Community mobilization is based on the simple premise that **human beings are by nature social creatures whose behaviors, attitudes and beliefs are profoundly affected by the norms of the communities in which they live.** It is the process of engaging communities to change the norms within their own communities. By its very nature it tends to be a primary level intervention. Its goal is to engage the community itself in activities that can prevent incidents of sexual and domestic violence.

Keep in mind:

- Its purpose is not to educate communities, although communities will learn throughout the process.
Its purpose is not to provide services to communities, although communities may develop strategies that include providing support to survivors.

The purpose of community mobilization is to empower communities to recognize and change the existing norms relating to sexual assault and domestic violence.

Community mobilization is a systemic effort that engages a community:

- to define the issue of sexual assault and/or domestic violence;
- to recruit recruiting stakeholders, champions, and leaders to initiate and/or sustain change efforts;
- to develop a plan to prevent the violence as it occurs specifically in their community; and
- to implement their plan.
As professionals, our role is facilitating this process. For many people working in sexual and domestic violence programs, the most difficult task in incorporating community mobilization into prevention work is adopting the mentor and facilitator role. We have a tendency to do the work ourselves, rather than engage the community. Making this shift can be a challenge. A community mobilization strategy requires a significant investment in time and resources if you are to serve as an effective mentor and facilitator. It is most effective in communities that display a readiness to address the issues of sexual assault and domestic violence.

Before engaging in an initiative, assess your resources and be aware of the possible benefits, challenges and common mistakes. Also take stock of your own comfort level with the role of facilitator and mentor and get training and mentoring if you feel it’s needed.
Benefits of Community Mobilization

- It naturally works toward primary prevention.
- It is by definition community specific.
- It encourages community buy-in.
- It is a facilitative process.

All communities have both community and cultural norms. Culture is the way of life of a particular society or group of people, including patterns of thought, beliefs, behavior, customs, traditions, rituals, dress, and language, as well as art, music, and literature. Community mobilization encourages stakeholders to develop and implement strategies that reflect the culture of the given community. When this happens, community mobilization initiatives become powerful tools in developing strategies that are culturally competent, relevant and compelling for historically marginalized communities.
Many historically marginalized communities experience a sense of disconnection from mainstream institutions. There has been an expectation that universal strategies are enough, the one size fits all concept. As a field, we have not invested enough resources in the development and implementation of strategies that address the reality of the intersection between oppression of all types and its violence against women work. With community mobilization as a framework, communities can begin to understand oppression as part of the analysis of sexual and domestic violence and from there develop strategies appropriate within a specific community. Community mobilization can also leverage the rich history of culturally-specific strengths and assets.
Challenges of Community Mobilization

- It requires significant initial investment of resources and relationship building.

- Because the strategy is process oriented, it is difficult to implement effectively within highly prescriptive environments.

- Community mobilization is a mix of structure and the unknown, making it a challenge to manage. While the aim is a standardized process, by definition the outcomes, outputs and activities will vary by community.

- It is a facilitative process and not a directive process.
Steps to Take - How to get started

1. Establish a relationship with a community

2. Identify and recruit stakeholders

3. Gather stakeholders together into a Mobilization Team

4. Engage your Mobilization Team in developing a plan:
   a. an asset mapping and/or community assessment process
   b. developing an analysis of sexual and/or domestic violence
   c. developing a community mobilization plan
   d. developing an evaluation plan
5. Engage your Mobilization Team in implementing the plan:
   a. implementing a community mobilization plan
   b. cultivating/maintaining assets
   c. evaluating progress
   d. assuming leadership roles in the mobilization process
   e. developing a sustainability plan

6. Facilitate transfer of leadership of initiative to Mobilization Team

There are many specific community development frameworks that can be implemented. Adaptations of frameworks by the Asset Based Community Development Institute and William Lofquist have been used in violence against women community mobilization work, but there are many to choose from. Some frameworks lend themselves better to geographically-based communities, while others work better in communities bound together by other shared traits. What is most important is that you choose a framework that resonates for you and that you are prepared to engage in authentic power sharing.
Community mobilization is all about relationships. To provide an initiative with the best chance for success you must have an existing positive relationship with a community that has a medium to high degree of readiness to address the sexual and/or domestic violence happening in its midst.

Common Mistakes

- Most, if not all, community mobilization efforts will encounter prescribed structures that place limitations on some of the strategies that the group can realistically implement. Not understanding or acknowledging prescriptive parameters can be a costly mistake.

- Not trusting the wisdom of the group and/or allowing them to self-correct.

- Not identifying the correct stakeholders and/or being willing to add new stakeholders when they are identified.

- Misjudging community readiness.
Not allowing enough time; community mobilizing is a time-intensive strategy.

Not being committed to the entire process, in which the means are as important as the end.

Community mobilization can be a wonderful strategy, providing you have a good knowledge of the dynamics of sexual and/or domestic violence, facilitation skills, community mobilization theory and a true affinity for the communities you are attempting to mobilize.

Those who promote positive change most effectively are not those who provide a new set of answers, but those who allow a new set of questions.
Connecting Community Mobilization to the Social-Ecological Model of Prevention

Community mobilization has the potential to impact all levels of the social-ecological model, even as the community level will be the designated or primary focus. As stakeholders engage in the mobilization efforts, the individual and relationship levels are impacted. Successful projects will change community norms regarding sexual assault and domestic violence. Community norms and societal norms regarding violence against women are deeply intertwined; as community norms shift the larger societal norms will also shift.
Some Examples of use of Community Mobilization in the field

In the next section, we will provide examples of community mobilization initiatives, organized within the various levels of the social ecological model.
Individual

Washington Middle School Prevention Project was a school based initiative with a goal to create an urban middle school climate in which sexual harassment and sexual assault was unacceptable. The program was designed to change the community (school) norms regarding sexual harassment. A group of stakeholders that included students, parents, administrators, school counselors, teachers, prevention project staff, and intervention staff from other social service agencies housed at the school developed and implemented the project plan. They created three strategies focused on each major constituency within the school: students, school personnel and parents. Each strategy was comprised of several linked activities ranging from peer based training to policy review. The individual level was not the designated focus. However, the group understood that individual stakeholders would increase their knowledge of sexual violence and also gain skills in the prevention of sexual violence through the implementation of the plan. Students learned to identify sexual harassment, to identify media influences, to challenge rigid gender expectations as well as some techniques for bystander intervention. School personnel learned to identify sexual harassment, basic information about sexual assault/sexual harassment, knowledge of their title IX requirements and to implement sexual harassment policies more equitably across programs. Parents learned skills in communicating with their children around healthy relationships as well as basic information regarding sexual harassment/sexual assault.
Relationship

Using the same example of the Washington Middle School Prevention Project, the majority of the resources were focused on students. Sixth grade students participated in a life skills class; seventh grade students started a Students Against Violence Everywhere chapter with a focus on interpersonal violence, and eighth grade students created a video project and classroom presentation on sexual harassment. A girl’s empowerment group and a boy’s responsibility group were also created. These activities were designed to address multiple groups in many settings so that over the course of three years students received the information many times in different formats. Again the focus was changing the overall school climate. Changing the norms within the various student communities was the goal of the strategy. The secondary benefit was that students’ beliefs, expectations and behaviors regarding healthy relationships changed. Evaluators measured change through behavioral surveys, school disciplinary reports and hallway observations. By the end of the project, there were less incidences of harassment observed in the hallway as well as more incidences of bystander intervention.
Community

**Partners in Prevention** began as the Homeless Youth Project, to mobilize homeless youth and the professionals working with them to prevent sexual violence in their community in Olympia WA. The initial stakeholders in the project included project staff, homeless youth, homeless youth service providers, domestic violence agency staff and juvenile justice professionals. As the project developed, business owners became important stakeholders. The project ran for three years before successfully becoming a 501c3 in 2007 with this mission:

To engage homeless and at-risk youth and adult allies in the elimination of sexual violence, bias & hate crimes as they contribute to homelessness and as it exists in street culture.

We achieve this though social change work, violence prevention education, and survivor support services including advocacy, therapy and support groups (Partners in Prevention Education n.d.)

The project identified sustenance sex (the trade of sex to meet basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter) and the societal attitudes regarding homelessness as risk factors that contributed to the sexual violence present in the homeless youth community.
To prevent sexual violence, stakeholders identified the need to develop non-traditional partnerships including business owners to increase youth’s access to basic needs. Business owners were vocal in condemning the youth and helping to perpetuate oppressive behavior within the wider community (Olympia), so bringing them to the project was critical. This initiative is a classic community mobilization initiative, designed as a community level intervention. It capitalized on the assets of the community to create an entity whose sole focus is “the elimination of sexual violence, bias & hate crimes as they contributes to homelessness and as it exists in street culture.”. The creation and sustenance of this non-profit is a change in the community norms within Olympia.
Societal

Using the same example of Partners in Prevention Education, the Olympia project was designed to influence community norms regarding homelessness and sexual violence. The link between homelessness and sexual assault has clearly been documented as a larger societal issue. (Goodman, et al. 2006). The mission of this project is not to provide services to homeless teens but rather to change street culture itself. This is a clear example of societal level intervention.
An Organizational Perspective on Community Mobilization

Community mobilization is resource intensive; it is a process that requires organizations to engage in authentic power sharing. It requires mastery of several skill sets, and demands intensive saturation. It will take time to see evidence of success. All of these factors make community mobilization a strategy that can only be effectively implemented in an organization that supports this work. Prevention educators cannot sustain this work alone and in isolation. Agencies must value the development of community specific interventions as well as a paradigm shift from social service to social change. A successful community mobilization project requires demonstration of readiness by the educator, agency and the community.
Now it’s Your Turn

Each organization and community has different needs and social norms. Likewise, your efforts to implement community mobilization are related to your organization’s capacity to support it. This workbook was designed to help you think through the steps that you want to take in implementing community mobilization. We suggest that you utilize it as a tool with your prevention team or in supervision.
Sources and Citations


About the author

Lydia Guy Ortiz is an independent consultant with an emphasis on sexual violence prevention and anti-oppression theory. Lydia has been active in the anti-rape movement for twenty-five years and is a board member of National Alliance to End Sexual Violence. She is committed to the creation of sexual violence prevention and intervention strategies that are relevant, culturally compelling, and innovative. In addition to extensive experience supporting groups in their prevention efforts, she has direct experience working at community based rape crisis centers and state coalitions as an educator, trainer and organizational leader. Lydia is familiar with the challenges inherent in planning and implementing anti-violence against women programming as well as innovative and promising practices. These experiences provides her with genuine respect for the field and those who work in it, as well as a keen understanding of the broader social and political context in which the field is growing and evolving.

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