

WOMEN OF COLOR NETWORK FOCUS GROUP REPORT

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I. OVERVIEW

The following report is a compilation of four focus groups conducted by the Women of Color Network (WOCN) as a way to inform the development of a Cultural Competency and Ally Training Curriculum, a project funded by the Office on Violence Against Women.

The first focus group was held during the National Network to End Domestic Violence Roundtable held in November 2007 with approximately 50 State Coalition Executive Directors and upper management. Three focus groups were then held via national teleconference through the WOCN Training Without Walls Series in February and March 2008 with over 150 self-selected mainstream advocates from the following states: Eastern Region - Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont; Western Region - Arizona, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington, Utah; Midwestern Region - Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio; Wisconsin; Southern Region - North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Each focus group was posed the same set of questions that were divided into two categories: cultural competency and allies. Before asking the questions, WOCN staff first provided the following definitions for cultural competency and allies:

- Definition of Cultural Competency: Refers to the ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures within four components:
 - 1) Awareness of one's own cultural worldview;
 - 2) Attitude toward cultural differences;
 - 3) Knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews; and
 - 4) Cross-cultural skills

- Definition of Allies: A person of one social identity group who stands up in support of members or another group; typically a member of a privileged group standing beside member(s) of a group being discriminated against, misunderstood, or treated unfairly and/or targeted in ways members of the privileged group are not.

The following are the questions and responses received from the four focus groups.

II. NNEDV Annual Roundtable with State Coalition Executive Directors (Including Follow-Up Email), November 2007 - San Diego, CA

CULTURAL COMPETENCY

1) What challenges are mainstream programs having with culturally &

linguistically competent services and supports?

- Lack of staff
- Lack of language access & building capacity to translate
- When there's only one person available to provide translation
- Not enough resources (i.e., money)
- Having an interpreter but not knowing how to work with them
- Cultural competency is not one thing
- Lack of or a need of personal accountability
- Lack of diversity in programs and state coalitions
- Lack of women of color having decision-making impact
- "Making the case" for why cultural competency is important
- Absence of dialogue about white privilege
- Push back from local programs when trying to work with women of color advocates
- Leadership in programs pushing the responsibility of cultural competency onto someone else's plate
- Lack of acknowledging people and programs as viable resources and experts on cultural competency
- A need for training
- Lack of execution of what's in our policies
- Lack of education of people rights
- Need to be strategic about finding and working with allies

2) What do you believe is your program's greatest strength(s) related to culturally and linguistically competent services?

- Coalition helped startup another local program (i.e., helping with funding & resources)

- It's okay knowing we don't know everything and not getting stuck there
- Making room for women of color advocates in leadership
- Board supporting women of color advocates in leadership
- Example: Legal advocacy project that does outreach specifically to/for Chinese women
- Diverse board

3) What are some approaches that have assisted you in making progress?

- Strong Asian Pacific & Islander support group – incubation & strong relationships with other local programs
- Creating a space for dialogue

4) What additional resources are needed, including non-fiscal resources?

- Money
- More staff that represent communities of color
- Access to statewide and national women of color networks
- Might be helpful to outsource assistance related to cultural competency (e.g., agencies, consultants, etc.)
- Developing a curricula for shelters and managers about how to support women of color

ALLIES

1) What constitutes as ally behavior?

- A willingness to want to change/ no incentive to change-need personal incentive
- A need to provide/seek examples of racism & discrimination
- Giving space/platform for women of color to speak for themselves—really listening and following their leadership. Not always safe to discuss right then – take their lead when it is appropriate to discuss.

- Your beliefs, thoughts, experiences, and even fears can constitute ally behavior.
- Challenging his or herself & others
- Breaking silence and speak up
- Seeking critical feedback from women of Color
- Facilitating empowerment of women of Color
- Taking personal responsibility
- Acting intentionally & overtly
- Promoting & modeling change for other white women
- The ability to have open and honest dialog with women of color and white women about race, racism, and the role of racism in violence against women
- The courage of conviction to challenge white racism when one encounters it. (e.g., white people will say racist comments in front of other white people and assume it is supported. This must be challenged at all time.)
- Promoting complex discussions about the impact of race and racism on the development of American culture and how that history is evident in our organizational practices
- Periodic inventory of privilege and its role in your ability to navigate differently in the world than women of color
- Actively seeking and exploring cultures, histories, and interactions with people who are different from you
- Challenging the institutions that continue to promote racism through their policies and practices
- (email) Providing all employees with full and complete information, training and resources to achieve the goals outlined in their job descriptions. In my experience, in much the same way that white racists will be racist in front of other white people, white women will make assumptions about what information was shared, how it was shared etc. women of color who do not have access to this “club of assumptions” will then be penalized for not knowing.
- Prioritizing leadership of women of color in organizational goals, mission, core values, etc.
- (email) Understanding and being aware of differences in communication

style and management style. This needs continuous dialogue and willingness to experiment on how meetings are run, schedules kept and goals are met with those differences in mind.

2) What do you think are mainstream program's role in addressing ally behavior?

- Our role in addressing ally behavior should always come from a just stand. We should empower and educate people to act as allies towards whatever the good cause may be. Also to encourage people to see themselves as allies.
- Continue to educate myself & others regarding cultural competency
- Continue to challenge the “status quo” within the violence against women movement
- Encourage white women to come the table to discuss difficult & sensitive issues as it relates to racism, white privilege and domestic violence
- It is important for allies to challenge racist behavior and racist assumptions when they encounter them
- It is important for allies to actively work to change and challenge institutions of racism within our culture
- It is important for allies to understand the role of race, racism and racial classification in the creation of violence in our culture. (e.g., wars, genocide etc.)
- It is important for allies to help white co workers think through their response to work conflicts with women of color
- It is important for white managers to make is safe for women of color to express their concerns about racism within the organization, but that needs to happen with a commitment to open and honest dialog
- It is the role of an ally to bring up, address, prioritize, ensure that women of color, or organizations working in a culturally specific capacity are part of task forces, board of directors, and coordinated community responses
- It shouldn't just be the women of color at the table bringing up the need to address services to communities of color in your state

3) What challenges are you faced with in serving as an ally?

- The challenges that you may be faced with could be shame, ridicule or even guilt for speaking up as an ally for a particular cause or belief. You also stand the chance of being ostracized by society or be perceived as

an outcast.

- (email) Constantly having to explain the importance of discussing diversity and cultural competency and how it is relevant to our work (small percentage of people of color in our state; therefore, many do not understand the need for a women of color caucus)
- Program directors do not really understand the mission of the women of color caucus; denial that there is a problem
- Fear of challenging white racism in certain settings
- Fear of addressing work performance as work performance issues and not an extension of racist socialization.
- Needing deliberate reminders to make sure that we are moving forward in developing an anti-racist organization.
- (email) The challenges within how we are defining women of color and white managers. Example: we have a diverse board of directors and at a retreat we were discussing the organization prioritizing in our strategic plan the leadership of women of color. Board members who were Latina discussed how they do not resonate with the phrase women of color; that this concept is new to them and not necessarily applicable to them in their world view. Other women who I have worked with who are immigrants to our culture, who go to women of color meetings, but in their home country are considered 'white' because they are not indigenous. So they have grown up with similar white privilege but have faced oppression and bigotry in America as immigrants. These are challenges that we need to address as a movement and to grow in our evolving response to the affects of racial classification (created by white people) in our world.

4) What are some ways programs can improve in your ally behavior?

- You can improve in your ally behavior by relating and sharing information.
- (email) Maybe you may have had an experience in the past that relates to that particular cause. By telling of your experience, it can bring validation
- Know the issues and know how to facilitate difficult discussions surrounding race
- Speak up and take a stand
- I think it is important to do periodic inventories on the many ways you have privilege or advantage.
- (email) I need to figure out how to maintain my anti-racism commitment as a central focus along with my desire to address homophobia and classism

and their role in creating violence against women. I am not sure how we can have time to prioritize all of them, but they all contribute and work in harmony to create systems of oppression and violence.

- Seek out real and honest feedback from women of color on ways I can improve my behavior. A 'performance review' of sorts. Both on a personal level and as a co-worker.
- Actively seeking, reading, exploring, a culture other than your own in an ongoing way. Can be done through books, film, plays, relationships, friendships, organizations, events that are within or celebrating that culture.
- Be a scholar of history and the role that racism has played in world conflict and tragedy.

III. NATIONAL TELECONFERENCE FOCUS GROUPS: Training Without Walls Series – Mainstream Advocates, Three Calls - February 13, March 17 and March 19, 2008 (Combined Data)

CULTURAL COMPETENCY

1) What challenges are mainstream programs having with culturally & linguistically competent services and supports?

- Getting buy-in to do cultural competency work at all levels of the organization
- No current models for cultural competency – current services based on white population
- Resistance among providers in doing an agency diversity assessment or audit – just think it is enough to have it in the mission or on paper
- True culturally competent services looks different and is uncomfortable for white advocates – they prefer “cookie cutter” services where people are receiving the same services with no recognition of difference
- Lack of examination of unearned privilege by white advocates
- Communities of color are the experts and this makes white advocates resistant – resist allowing them to be the experts
- Underutilization of “cultural brokers” – those who know and can create access to their marginalized communities

- Qualifications change and advocates realize that the usual skills are not enough for cultural competency
- Funding sources want succinct ways to define “clients” – must not reflect diversity
- When trying to write grants for cultural competency its hard to capture the work that is being done in linear ways
- Not sure whose role it is to ensure that cultural competency works
- Language access a major issue
- Problematic when one bilingual advocate is hired to help hundreds of individuals and lack of funding to hire more bilingual advocates
- Lack of funding to hire any bilingual advocates
- Those qualified to provide culturally competent services often have different educational backgrounds – often not like the typical advocate (ie. degree from another country)
- Difficult to standardize and measure cultural competency
- Sovereignty for Native communities gets overlooked
- Women of color advocates have to change their way of thinking and their practice to fit in – should be valued for who they are instead of being expected to assimilate
- Small, isolated communities of color are not prioritized because they are “small”.
- Culture beyond communities of color is also not acknowledged (ie. European immigrants)
- Victims don’t trust advocacy services because they often see them as aligned with mainstream systems such as the criminal justice system
- Lack of understanding and recognition of older survivors of color and ways that age and culture intersect – those who are younger may not be able to relate and may lack generational competency – “her ‘herstory’ matters”
- Lack of moving past the training phase of cultural competency – difficult to actually implement and change practice – “all talk, no action”

- Outreach to marginalized communities is missing or limited
- Cultural competency training is often too short and is limited to only a few cultures
- Programs will conduct cultural competency training, but when the overall funding runs low, cultural competency training is the first to go

Region-specific comments

- Eastern comment: In my state advocates seem to think that all victims white – they are not even doing assessments to see who needs services, or even checking the state demographics
- Eastern comment: We have an influx of immigrant farm workers but only have one advocate in our program to serve this large group
- Eastern comment: South Asian women express fear of coming into our programs because they are afraid of immigration issues, fear of their abusers kidnapping and deporting their children, and fear that their extended family will abandon them
- Midwestern comment: Serving about 85% African Americans and Latinas in some programs but staff make-up does not reflect these communities. African Americans also are no longer being addressed – focus primarily on Latinas
- Southern comment: Urban-based shelters are experiencing cross-cultural tensions among communities of color (ie. between African Americans and Latinas); not quite prepared for this
- Southern comment: Victims don't seem to seek our services – they don't think we will meet their needs
- Southern comment: Lack of acceptance by advocates to serve across communities. A statewide problem – white women are used to being the majority and reject a discussion of differences
- Southern comment: Religious beliefs get in the way of addressing sexual orientation – there is an “overt attack on morality”
- Western comment: Influx of different cultures at different times which makes it difficult to find all of the interpreters and to address all of the needs presented by those cultures

2) What do you believe is your program's greatest strength(s) related to culturally and linguistically competent services?

- Access to money and resources
- Both allies and women of color are coming together in new ways – and the willingness of women of color to do this
- Some youth come in with hip hop culture as a new approach; they have a better sense of working across cultures and of bi- and multi-racial experiences
- Dedicated to providing culturally competent services and they keep trying to improve

Region-Specific comments

- Midwestern comment: In our state, committees are written into the budget to conduct meetings on cultural competency and to provide leadership support to women of color. This is not contingent on outside money to operate, and it is available even for smaller communities
- Southern comment: The fact that our state is beginning this work is a strength
- Southern comment: No strengths – not even communities of color staff are doing outreach in my area
- Southern comment: My state has money earmarked for outreach from mainstream programs to marginalized communities and to also fund culturally specific organizations to serve communities of color
- Western comment: Chinese immigrant women are increasing in our state but they are least likely to come to our programs. We have now partnered with Chinese leadership in the community and are taking their lead on outreach
- Western comment: Our state domestic violence and sexual assault coalitions are leaders in cultural competency and have invited community voices to the table
- Western comment: Women of color advocates are doing outreach in our state, even without funding

3) What are some approaches that have assisted you in making progress?

- Agency-wide monthly meetings to talk about language access – not just one person's job

- Study circles in conjunction with community-based organizations to address an issue on cultural competency with great success
- Outside cultural competency facilitator to work with teams from programs across the state
- Increase number of cultural competency workshops and trainings on various topics such as trafficking, elders and immigration; proficiency of advocates increasing over time
- Conduct a survey to determine the issues with cultural competency across the state
- Set up and staff information tables at community-based events

4) What additional resources are needed, including non-fiscal resources?

- Need more funding for cultural competency programming
- Need to use existing funding more appropriately to reach all communities
- Need more time to work within communities and build relationships
- Need to leverage linkages to other organizations as a resource
- Hiring a person who is bilingual does not change organizational cultural overall; need training to do this and need organizational map to consider how to change the overall organization
- Need funding and/or entity for advocates of color to talk among themselves about these issues of marginalization (ie. women of color caucus)
- Need funding and/or entity for white advocates to talk about privilege issues and ally behavior
- Need to develop media/marketing resources that reflect cultural diversity and reach out to immigrant communities and communities of color
- Programs should do cultural competency training, workshops and discussions two times per year at minimum
- Need to weave cultural competency into all aspects of services
- Need fundamental training on “isms”, privilege and oppression

- Need diversity beyond simply race – need to include different kinds of religion, sexual orientation, age, etc. Also need to have training on the intersections of these identities (ie. African American Muslims, not just Arab Muslims)

ALLIES

1) What constitutes as ally behavior?

- An advocate or activist in support of a marginalized group or cause
- Willing to move beyond support and are willing to “step up and speak out”
- Willing work toward redistributing power and unearned privilege
- Willing to challenge others in their own communities and strive to open and equalize “the playing field”
- Willing to stand in solidarity with marginalized communities
- Willing to meet and connect with others less familiar and be willing to ask questions – with the expectation that you may be told “no”
- Must have an openness
- Deep searching, anti-racism work with constant vigilance of thinking and behavior. Continue to struggle, change and develop
- Accepting leadership from women of color advocates and receiving it well
- Starting fresh and working every day to improve cultural competency and ally behavior
- Not assuming that because you have developed an ally relationship with one person from a particular community that you can claim to be an ally to every person from that community
- One should not refer to themselves as an “ally” – one should receive that title, and should only then consider themselves an “aspiring” ally – and one shouldn’t wear it as a badge of honor
- Need to make sure that one is always aspiring to be an ally and demonstrating this in their practice such as in their approach to advocacy and other aspects of work
- Should do research on marginalized communities and expose self to community-based activities and settings operated and lead by

marginalized communities

2) What do you think are mainstream program's role in addressing ally behavior?

- Looking at and changing organizational policies
- Developing a group to discuss privilege and ally behavior
- Programs working to increase language-specific services
- Pushing staff to put cultural competency training into action

3) What challenges are you faced with in serving as an ally?

- Wondering if one is living up to the designation of “ally”
- Thinking of how to use being “white, middle-class, heterosexual” and so forth and using the access to power this provides to assist others
- It is risky to serve as an ally and challenge others – may have to give up some things – may have to give up some unearned social power and privilege in order to operate as an ally – and is it possible to lose all of your privilege?
- Hard to not cling to “martyrdom” as an ally – need to serve as an ally for the right reasons
- Easy to remain silent on issues, and when trying to speak out, you may “screw up a lot” – make a lot of mistakes and get called on it but this is okay though tough on the ego
- Difficult to get past the shield placed up by those of marginalized communities, particularly those who believe that sharing their experiences is “airing dirty laundry”
- A basic challenge in understanding marginalized groups when one is not a part of that group
- Difficult to be an ally to an advocate experiencing workplace issues when the source of the problem (ie. person in management) is a member of the same marginalized group as the advocate

Region-specific comments

- Western comment: African American women serving Native women must move beyond own perspective and worldview and not transpose upon others – must understand the differences in marginalization

4) What are some ways programs can improve in your ally behavior?

- Provide time to consider ally behavior and to attempt to understand what you don't know
- Move away from segregating staff – get out of the pattern of having the same people at the decision-making table
- Challenge advocates on ally behavior everyday

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the following themes concerning cultural competency and ally development and implementation surfaced from the focus group responses of the state coalition executive directors and mainstream advocates:

- 1) **Limited resources** including lack of staff, funding, language access and multiple staff to address changing populations
- 2) **Limited capacity** in accessing models for cultural competency, including lack of women of color in leadership, resistance to seeking and embracing community-based, culturally-specific expertise
- 3) **Limited priority** for cultural competency, including minimal training, lack of buy-in from leadership, absence of dialogue and personal accountability, and little attention paid to anti-racism, power and privilege and effects on services, diverse staff recruitment and retention
- 4) **Traditional and inflexible structures to overcome**, including working with funding sources to embrace diverse approaches and expanding current mainstream programs to meet the needs of those who do not fit in the “norm”

These themes will be used in developing the WOCN Cultural Competency and Ally Training Institute curriculum and training agenda to be implemented in August 2009.