**Overcoming conflict to build collaborations: An interview with Jeanne Ronayne**

*Introduction:*

*You are listening to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center Just Rural! Podcast series that highlights innovative programs and success stories from rural communities across the United States.*

*[Music: Cattails]*

**Ali:**

Jeanne Ronayne serves as the Program Manager for Victim Services for Dodge, Filmore, Olmstead community corrections in Rochester Minnesota. Her program provides sexual assault services as part of a multiservice agency in a community with a longstanding commitment to meeting the needs of victims in addition to addressing offender outcomes. Her organization has been a part of a collaboration with a local Child Advocacy Center since its inception over 2 years ago. Jeanne was able to talk with me about the formation of the CAC, the involvement of her organization, and some of the successes and challenges they have faced along the way.

**Jeanne**:

2 years ago when they first started talking about forming the center, and they brought us in at the formative stages, some of the organizations that were involved were of course some of the key organizations, child protection and the medical and law enforcement and prosecution, and those and also children’s mental health.

While we weren’t a part of those discussions at their first formative stage, we were included very soon on in the planning process. That was definitely quite a benefit. Initially when we were included, I don’t know that there was a real vision necessarily by all of those at the table about what victim services or a sexual assault program may have to offer to the process.

Our organization, Victim Services, had some structural advantages that were able to bring us to the table and one of those structural advantages was that we were a part of community services in our county, and so someone along the line said we should Victim Services here at the table as we’re planning for this.

**Ali:**

While they weren’t initially included, other members of the community recognized that Jeanne’s agency should be involved. She went on to describe how their mission prompted their commitment to the collaboration.

**Jeanne:**

Other organizations are really familiar with the work of our advocates in the community. So there were recommendations from the others to include us. When we got involved in this collaboration, it wasn’t with the hope of there’ll be some additional funding; it wasn’t with the hope that there would be some additional positions that would become available because of the collaboration. It was that we saw that as relating to our mission and very important for us to reach out and offer our unique services as victim advocates to the children and families who were coming to the children advocacy center. Everyone here was enthusiastic about the idea of this collaboration, even though it meant that it would be more work. We are somewhat understaffed to begin with, this would increase the workload, the cases that were coming our direction, but again it was enthusiastic because we really felt that those families needed and could benefit from what we had to offer.

**Ali:**

Jeanne went on to describe the practical application of this collaborative work from the perspective of an advocacy organization.

**Jeanne:**

We respond 24 hours to the needs of sexual assault victims. This was just added as another ability to respond immediately. We talked internally about how we would make that happen. I had a lead on the Child Advocacy Center development, a lead advocate. This advocate had many years of experience, has many years of experience, and she also had experience working as a child protection worker, so she really knew the child protection field and was an obvious choice as a lead for that. When we first started, we started as a pilot project and we thought it would be important to have one advocate in particular handle all of the incoming requests for advocacy from the child advocacy center, so she responded to all of those intakes. Any requests the multidisciplinary team could gather together. At this point, we’ve been doing it a while, and she is still the lead on that, if she’s not available because of other commitments and another advocate is available they‘ll respond.

Our CAC operates that the MDT or the multidisciplinary team convenes at the request of the coordinator. That convening happens without a lot of advance notice, either the day of or perhaps the next business day, and they convene when a new intake is coming in. The advocate’s role in those new cases is to sit with the family and to help prepare and predict the child advocacy process and answer any questions that they have. At that time, it’s when the advocate begins to form the relationship with the family and in many in these cases that relationship on cases that do go forward through prosecution to trial or even on cases that don’t, families might have need for harassment restraining orders, emergency assistance, or any other types of assistance. That relationship begins to be formed. The Multidisciplinary Team will follow up and meet together. They include the family with that meeting in regards to what the next steps are, with regard to what the recommendations are and they do case planning meetings that continue to update all of the team members on the particular case and where things are at in the system.

**Ali:**

Each organization that is involved with the CAC collaboration has a different role in the multidisciplinary team. Jeanne discussed the value of recognizing each of these roles and the different guidelines they operate within to accomplish their jobs. This understanding has helped to navigate any conflicts that have come up.

**Jeanne:**

There’s skills and knowledge that are important to use with this approach. I think for the advocate it’s important to be knowledgeable about the different roles and functions of the other agencies that you’re collaborating with and to have a prior relationship with those agencies is really helpful in that as well. But if you don’t, I think to spend some time to sit down and find out, to be knowledgeable about some of the rules and regulations that guide the different agencies or the different professionals. Also it’s really important to understand what are the core values of that profession or the different disciplines that are represented on the multidisciplinary team.

When I think about any conflicts that come up, they usually can be boiled down to some role differences and to the degree that we understand and appreciate each discipline’s role we can overcome some of those or even bypass some of those conflicts right from the get go. There’s definitely a need to remain open in the real spirit of collaboration. There’s also a need to own I guess for advocates and be intentional about what your core values are too and what you bring to the process. For advocates to make it very clear about that their role is not investigation, their role isn’t that of the child protection worker, whose, you know, role is the best interest of the child, but they have the primary interest of empowering families and explaining the process and walking with families while they interact with others that have these particular roles or functions. They’re not the decision makers they’re not the arbiters of justice, but they do have a unique and a very important role with families.

**Ali:**

She also discussed other benefits to participating in this collaboration, including a broadening understanding of the role of sexual assault advocacy among other community agencies.

**Jeanne:**

I really think that it’s very exciting to be a part of it. The advocates will say that it’s really, it was probably the biggest change in our practice, in our agency in I don’t know how many years, in many years anyway. It certainly changed the recognition of and the importance and the value of advocacy particularly in the minds of child protection who I think just really we had been underutilized. I don’t think that they had an opinion either positive or negative, but just didn’t see that there was a purpose sometimes or a need for an advocate. Eyes have been opened to the value that’s added by having an advocate work on a case at the CAC.

**Ali:**

Jeanne went on to describe ways that they shaped their collaboration with the CAC on the model 8 step protocol for developing a Sexual Assault Multidisciplinary Response Team. This included the lessons they had learned in past collaborations on conflict management within disciplinary teams.

**Jeanne:**

So as far as a specific model used for this collaboration, for me it’s been more about what I’ve borrowed or lent from another model and that would be our models of what might be more commonly known as SART teams nationally, and in Minnesota, we’re calling them SMART teams—Sexual Assault Multidisciplinary Response Teams. The teams in Minnesota follow a particular 8 step protocol development process and we have a local SART or SMART team and I’ve found that the 8 step protocol development process which has you look at where, do a community needs assessment, that’s going to be your first step, and reaching out to know what’s your baseline for what’s your collaboration now or where your services in responding to sexual assault in this case are right now and then doing of course the protocol development and then doing a training and then doing some monitoring and some evaluation and it’s a real vigorous process. So as we developed our CAC process, we also looked at the protocol. I was kind of personally and with some of the team members kind of borrow or rely on what thought were some good things to remember from the 8 step protocol process about being sure that we know where we’re at to begin and how can we at the beginning think about how we’re going to measure our success as well.

And also what we learned from our SMART team that had been in place for some number of years was really around conflict and negotiation and finding your way through some of the muddles sometimes that we would find ourselves in. As a SMART team we really learned the methods and the system consultation and building trust and some team development kinds of things to find our way through some of those muddles and so I think it really brought that to the CAC process, so kind of entered it personally from a mindset of having had that experience and really could see the power of a multidisciplinary collaborative process and how we as a team could move through our early beginnings of maybe being disconnected and come to develop trust, understanding and develop a real collaborative multidisciplinary team, so I saw more of the vision and the hope for that through the SAMRT team and really brought that to bear on our work as a CAC.

**Ali:**

I asked Jeanne to share about some of the successes that they have experienced through this collaboration. She recounted their experience with a smoother overall process through the criminal legal system and an increase in the number of families served in their area.

**Jeanne:**

One of the first successes that really came to my mind were the outcomes and success and successful prosecution and in moving cases through to an outcome in a much smoother fashion and more timely fashion. The successes really happen when everyone’s been involved at the front end. Advocates had been involved with child sexual abuse cases on occasion prior to this as well, but they had been brought in much later in the process, say when a criminal case was being charged and they were being used more like one might think of a victim witness coordinator who might help to prepare the child or the family for case going to trial as that was happening. At this point right now with the multidisciplinary team process, advocates are involved right at the upfront and establish that relationship and carry on that relationship throughout the process wherever the case may in fact go. The other big change in practice with the CAC for us was having prosecutors there at the front end as well. That was a practice change that really lead to our cases being processed in a more timely way and also it was clearer when a decision was made about whether a case was viable I guess for prosecution or whether there would be another type of response to the allegations that didn’t include a criminal justice response, perhaps rested with child protection or with an advocate offering services or some other type of service offering.

I can think in my mind of some of the families that we’re working with. We’ve had a number of the cases come through the CAC. Since the process started, we probably had 40 or 50. So for our area that’s pretty good numbers. In some of the cases, they might not end in a disclosure by the child and again there might be some other services might be offered there. But I think about some of those families and how we can offer some real practical services to help them and their children, that’s the biggest success and just working in a more coordinated way with the other providers was just a huge success.

**Ali:**

In addition to some of the successes that they’ve experienced, Jeanne also described some of the challenges that they have had to overcome, suggesting that using good conflict management skills has really helped along the way.

**Jeanne:**

Well you know I did mention at the beginning that it was disappointing at the front end to be looked over for that team training so that kind of, and that decision was made again without my input and when I offered input it still was, well we don’t have space for that so it can’t happen. Of course that was disappointing and it also just suggested to me that there wasn’t immediate value about what an advocate had to offer to the whole multidisciplinary team, but like I said that’s really turned around and I think the openness that other team members have had to that and understanding and valuing our role has been huge. We’ll continue to run into those bumps along the way, that again I think come down to some role difference. But again, they’re usually worked out and if I apply a conflict management tool of where I’ll look at, in a particular conflict, what are the rules that govern that particular discipline, profession, I need to keep those in mind. I need to also keep in mind what are the core principles about that discipline. What’s their worldview for instance, and then keep in mind what the reality of their situation is and then bridge and kind of explain an advocate’s world view of the situation and what some of the rules are that govern our profession, say about empowerment or offering choices versus telling folks what they must do. Other professions of course have to be more explicit and what is our reality. Usually we can get to those things and come to new understanding.

**Ali:**

Like many programs, Jeanne’s organization has struggled to find sustained funding for the work that they are doing.

**Jeanne:**

I guess one of the things that I’d say is disappointing, although I said we didn’t come into this collaboration with any notion that there would be a new position or funding, we did apply for some funding to fund an advocate that would be specific to the CAC but unfortunately we weren’t successful in that grant application. I think we could go a lot further if we had that. I think it’s helpful that that advocate position is not someone who is employed by or works for the CAC. That’s been a good model for us anyway, in that it’s someone who’s separate from the CAC and connected to the criminal justice system, but yet independent in that realm as well. So we’re not an employee of either child protection or the country attorney’s office or the child advocacy center. We are our own separate entity and that’s been really helpful as well.

**Ali:**

Many times, building successful collaborations in one area leads to better collaborations across a community. In this case, the agencies involved in the CAC collaboration have begun to work on child sexual abuse prevention efforts and on finding ways to promote trauma-informed services.

**Jeanne:**

One of the other nice successes that have come out of it is it spawned other collaborations as well. I think that’s often the case with collaborative efforts. You bring folks together and it can spawn something else. For our group I think it spawned some interest in child sexual abuse prevention. So it brought some people to the table around prevention. It spawned some interest in best practices around trauma-informed practice and shared team learning. The whole team is learning about trauma informed practice for example.

**Ali:**

Ultimately, Jeanne emphasized the importance of coming together for the benefit of the families involved.

**Jeanne:**

And if we stay all in our separate silos and we learn the best practices for our discipline but we don’t have any exchange of best practices then I don’t think we advance the whole field. We need to do it from within our own discipline. It can be challenging at times too to really stretch yourself to understand and appreciate another discipline and really maintain that curiosity and openness about what’s the best that can then come from that shared collaborative and coordinated response. Try to do your best to avoid some of the turf battles that invariably can be some of the pitfalls of some of our collaborative processes. Then we’re not where we need to be for the families. You know if the families pick that up at all, the families can tell that I think intuitively if there is disagreement between some of the professionals that are working on their case, and that just doesn’t have any place there. I think that really does a disservice to families. So we should work those things out in our collaborative team process rather than at all bringing it forward to families, even if we think we’re not. I think families just want to know that we have our acts together and we know we have some agreement. Maybe not agreement on everything, but some core agreement about how we’re going to interact as a system.

*Outro:*

*This project was supported by Grant No. 2009-TA-AX-K042 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The findings, opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this program are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.  For more information about our Rural Project visit* [*www.nsvrc.org*](http://www.nsvrc.org)*.*

*[music: Cattails]*