

Core competencies for sexual violence prevention practitioners

The importance of identifying core competencies among staff has cut across numerous fields of practice. A core competency is defined as “an area of expertise that is fundamental to a particular job or function” (Microsoft, 2009). Core competencies are critical in achieving success and moving forward as a movement. For practitioners working to prevent sexual violence, core competencies include things like knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are necessary to carry out prevention initiatives in communities.

This document summarizes findings from focus groups – facilitated by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) in 2009 in an effort to identify core skills and qualities of effective prevention practitioners – and identifies areas for further exploration. Please refer to the other documents in this packet for further information about the qualities and abilities of prevention practitioners.

For the purpose of this resource, the terms *prevention practitioner*, *preventionist*, and *educator* are used interchangeably to refer to individuals engaging in social change efforts, community education and mobilization, technical assistance, and research focused on preventing sexual violence in any and all forms.

Process of identifying core competencies of sexual violence prevention practitioners

The NSVRC has been involved in building prevention capacity in states, tribal communities, and territories since its inception in 2000. Developed as the nation's principle information and resource center on sexual violence, the NSVRC works to provide resources based on the latest sexual violence prevention research. In order to do this, the NSVRC continually seeks input from those working in the anti-sexual violence field to identify needs.

Gathering input from the field: Focus groups

In response to several requests from sexual assault coalitions, as well as needs identified by organizational partners, the NSVRC conducted two telephone focus groups in



March 2009 with state sexual assault coalition staff on the topic of core competencies for prevention educators. Each focus group was held with six coalition staff and four NSVRC staff members. The focus group discussion concentrated on five questions:

1. *How do you define a sexual assault prevention educator?*
2. *What concepts must one understand to be an effective sexual assault prevention educator?*
3. *What do you think are the must-have skills for a sexual assault prevention educator?*
4. *What are the benefits of everyone in the sexual violence field receiving training on the core competencies identified?*
5. *What on-going support do sexual assault prevention educators need to continue to build their competence?*

Responses and experiences:

Organizing the findings

The focus group discussions centered on a number of themes: prevention practitioners as social change agents, the need for a visionary or “big picture” approach to the world, and some long-reaching effects of prevention work. Responses to each of the focus group questions created new questions and opportunities for training, technical assistance, and resource development.

Some focus group members expressed a preference for the term “Prevention Specialist” instead of “Prevention Educator” because they felt the former helped distance the movement from the intense focus on individual-level approaches. This approach situates the individual as someone who is organizing, educating, facilitating, networking,

How do you define a sexual assault prevention educator?

Common themes from answers to this question included:

- **Someone who does community or classroom education**
- **Someone who understands the key principles of primary prevention, as well as how these principles can address the root causes of sexual violence**
- **Someone who is familiar with and understands “social justice activism”**

collaborating, and mobilizing in order to accomplish primary prevention goals, as opposed to someone who is primarily working in a classroom/school setting. Seeing the role of this individual as primarily a social change agent may help in recruitment and hiring efforts. For guidance on the process of hiring prevention practitioners see *Guidance for Hiring, Training, and Supporting Community Prevention Practitioners*.

What concepts must one understand to be an effective sexual assault prevention educator?

Focus group participants identified and defined a number of important concepts that serve as a good foundation for effective prevention. These include:

- **Risk and protective factors** – key factors that increase or decrease a person’s risk of becoming a victim or perpetrator



- **Root causes** - those forms of oppression that allow sexual violence to exist.
- **Framing messages** - how to effectively communicate your prevention message to reach the intended audience.
- **Foundations of primary prevention knowledge** - including the social ecological model and principles of effective prevention programs.
- **Different styles of learning** - understanding that not everyone learns the same way. These include visual, auditory and kinesthetic (learning by doing).
- **Theories and fundamentals of behavior change** - understanding behavioral change can help to improve the programming and message

delivery.

- **The context of the work within a larger social picture** - how prevention work plays out in everyday life situations.
- **The core tenets of anti-oppression work** - recognizing the importance of addressing the various forms of oppression in order to create a community free from all types of violence.
- **The promotion paradigm** - what are we trying to promote, not just what we're against.
- **The ability to see the "big picture"** - In other words, understanding the macro-level sense of the issue. Looking at the other forms of oppression and how they intersect with sexual violence was also noted as a concept that all educators must understand in order

to be effective. For more information on what concepts preventionists must understand, see the *Qualities and Abilities of Effective and Confident Prevention Practitioners* (NSVRC, 2012) resource in this packet.

What do you think are the must-have skills for a sexual assault prevention educator?

Focus group participants identified a number of skills needed for effective prevention practitioners including personal

qualities, community mobilization skills, and communication skills (see table below). In addition, it was stated by participants that practitioners should have the ability to advocate for the value of prevention within their organization. The need for practitioners to be cross-trained in crisis intervention work was also identified by participants as they felt that having a broad understanding of the impact of sexual violence helps in identifying and carrying out effective prevention strategies.

Skills needed for effective prevention practitioners

Focus group participants identified a number of skills needed such as:

Personal qualities

- Desire to work with a community on finding solutions
 - Project management and leadership
 - Knowledge of community systems and resources
 - Flexibility and spontaneity
 - Creativity
 - Critical thinking skills
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Community mobilization skills

- Crisis intervention
 - Group discussion facilitation
 - Systems advocacy
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Communication skills

- Knowledge of, and ability to adapt to, various learning styles
- Effectively addressing training goals and a objectives
- Public speaking skills and comfort talking to groups of various sizes

What are the benefits of everyone in the sexual violence field receiving training on core competencies identified for prevention educators?

Focus group participants expressed a desire to see everyone within the anti-sexual violence movement receive training on core competencies in order to support prevention practitioners and effective prevention efforts. Cross-training prevention and intervention staff could be an opportunity to reinvigorate projects and partners. While many agencies require training for counseling skills, there is generally no required primary prevention training. This could be due to funding restrictions and the “siloeing” of prevention programming that often happens.

However, mandatory primary prevention training could promote meaningful engagement with the work by focusing on root causes and “bigger picture” perspectives. If a separate training isn't possible, prevention principles could be integrated into the current training curricula - an excellent opportunity for prevention practitioners to engage volunteers and new staff in discussions of prevention. This is also an effective way to show that all agency programs are important, and that direct services and prevention efforts are not competing priorities in the organization. All services offered are core to the mission and values of the anti-sexual violence movement. Several focus groups members stated that high burn-out rates could be lowered with primary prevention training. In an assessment of innovative prevention programs, it was found that 100% of the innovative program agencies have institutionalized prevention in their

missions and/or vision statements (Townsend, 2012). Prevention was also infused throughout the strategic plans of these organizations. The institutionalization of prevention was found to have a significant impact on the success of programs, because the programs were shown to have less staff turnover and had clear measures in place for preventing staff burn-out. These organizations also looked at prevention as equally important to direct services - they are integrally connected.

“PRIMARY PREVENTION IS
THE BEST FORM OF VICTIMS’
SERVICE THERE IS.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Ways that prevention is integrated into these organizations include:

- All staff being given opportunities to influence and define what prevention looks like.
- Requiring all departments to speak to how they fulfill the agency's mission and/or strategic plan, including how their work contributes to prevention.
- Providing agency-wide trainings on prevention.
- Routinely asking staff for personal examples of how they engage as bystanders in their professional and personal lives.
- Including prevention activities and issues in agency newsletters, websites, and other publications.



- Inviting all staff to experience the prevention programs as participants in order to foster understanding across departments of the prevention programs.
- Cross-departmental staffing of prevention programs.

One focus group member brought up the topic of interdisciplinary approaches to primary prevention, giving an example of their agency encouraging not only prevention specialists, but prosecutors, law enforcement, and other key community partners to identify roles that they can have in prevention at the community level.

This could include taking part in prevention trainings or serving on prevention committees in order to expand their knowledge about the broad spectrum of prevention and their role within that spectrum.

For Technical Assistance Providers

What on-going support do sexual assault prevention educators need to continue to build their competence?

There are many ways that state, tribal and territory coalitions and technical assistance providers can support local community organizations in strengthening skills around prevention. Many prevention practitioners have

stated that they feel a sense of isolation in their work and that there is a great need to connect with others doing similar work. Finding ways to create a community of practitioners would cultivate a feeling of connection and prevent burnout among prevention educators.

Some ways to accomplish this include:

- Creating electronic mailing lists to connect prevention practitioners within a state region. This can go a long way in addressing issues around the isolated nature of the work.
- Hosting regular/quarterly/monthly conference calls that could be topic-specific with rotating facilitation by the practitioners themselves.
- Building a resource website that houses key prevention documents and also serves as a repository for collected prevention resources from the local organizations.
- Putting together prevention working groups in order to obtain feedback, recommendations, and buy-in from practitioners.

Other ways that coalitions and technical assistance providers can support organizations is by offering regular trainings to local centers on the fundamentals of prevention. This is a great, sustainable way to help centers get together, share experiences, and get to know what other people in the state are doing concerning primary prevention. Coalitions can also bring the prevention specialists together with advocates for a day once a month and cross-train. Focus group members pointed out that it is beneficial to provide preventionists and advocates with opportunities to share their perspectives, learn about what others are doing, and see their work from different points



of view. If this is not feasible due to budget constraints, coalitions can provide guidance for programs who want to come together on their own, or can offer low-cost alternatives like webinars and teleconferences. They can also leverage resources by partnering with other agencies to bring people together.

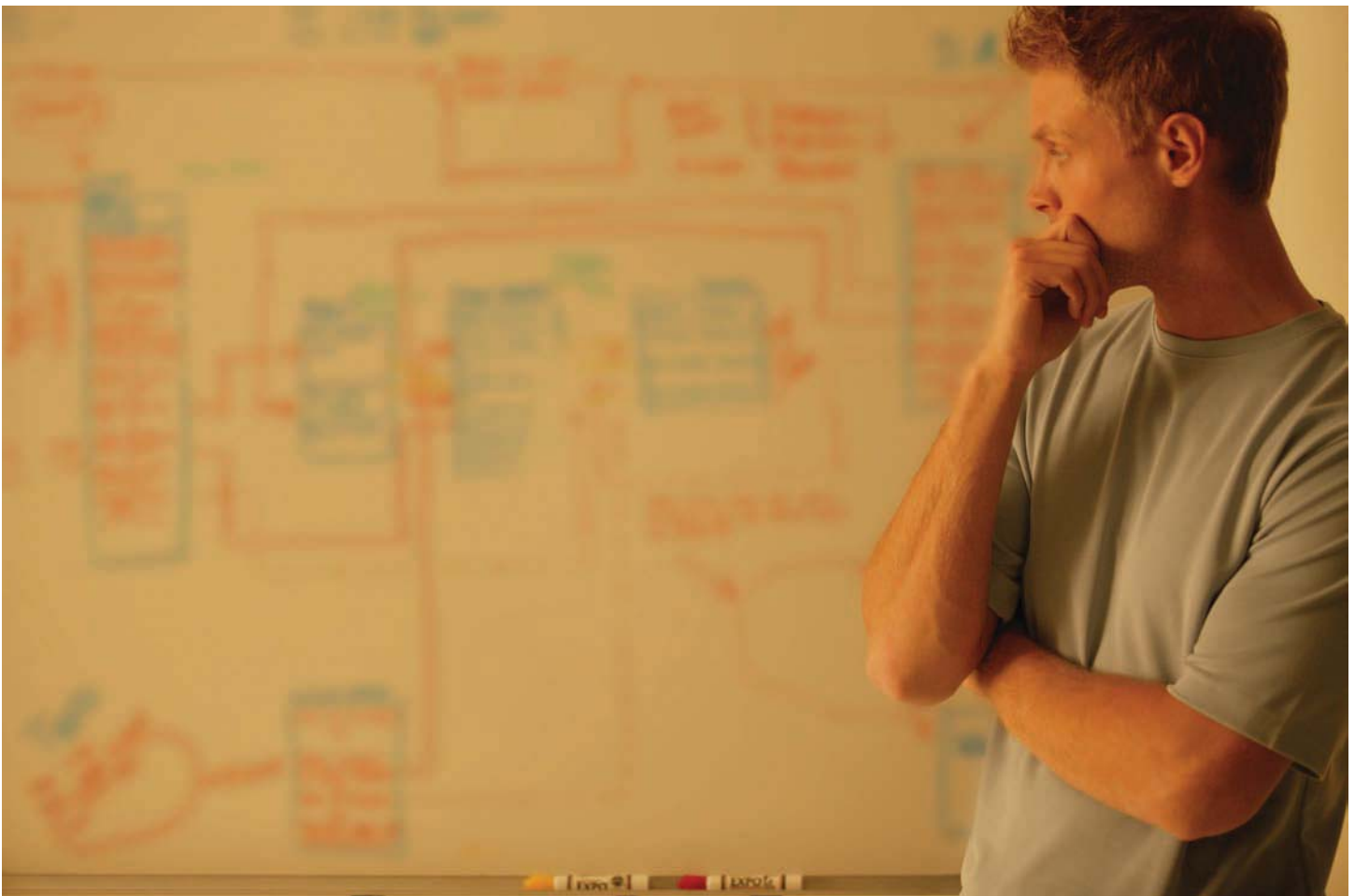
Setting standards for preventionists' job and training requirements was listed as very important along with a continual reminder to local community organizations that the core part of their program is not just counseling and advocacy, but also prevention and social change. Focus group participants discussed the importance of training new directors specifically about feminism, oppression, and other elements of feminist movements in order for people to clearly see the connections

to anti-oppression work and understand the philosophy of the movement.

One coalition representative stated that they were in the process of developing prevention training that they would deliver to the local programs. They also felt it was the coalition's role to disseminate information about other training opportunities and ways to connect (like the PreventConnect electronic mailing list where one may find pertinent information for prevention educators concerning the latest developments in the field, including literature, research reviews, and trainings. For more information, please contact

www.preventconnect.org). Some coalitions have also implemented social networking tools (such as a "Facebook-type" community, blogs, online forums) for organizations and specifically for people invested in prevention education, providing opportunities to share resources, host discussion forums, and participate in blogs.

Focus group members expressed the desire to see ongoing prevention webinars for local communities in their states.



At the local service organizations, program managers/directors also have a role to play in this. They can:

- Provide prevention staff with the needed guidance and resources to do effective prevention work.
- Encourage staff to access the regional/state/national supports available.
- Promote collaboration with neighboring, sister centers

Recommendations and Additional Questions

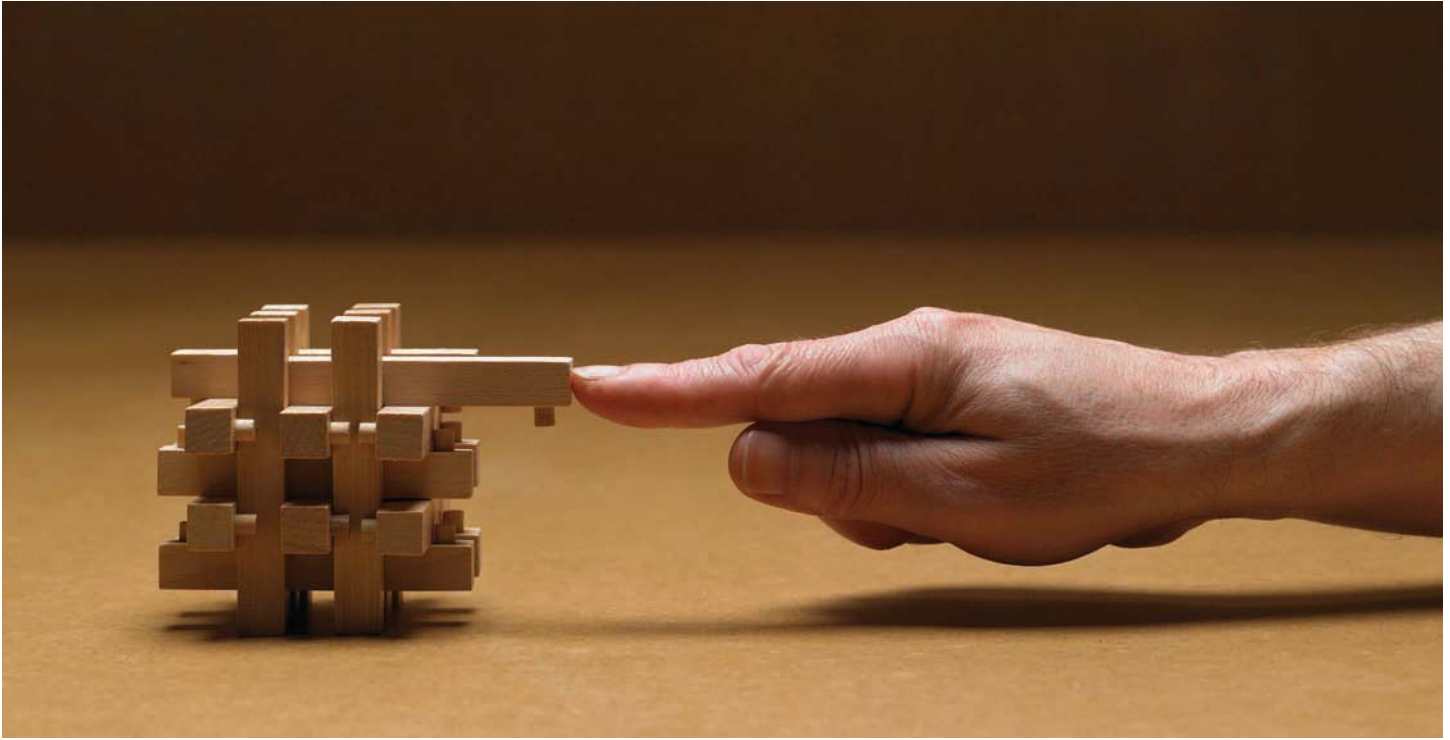
Some additional needs and recommendations that came out of the focus groups and the NSVRC's Prevention Assessment Project reports included:

- Supporting programs to prevent staff burnout and vicarious trauma.
- Building connections among programs. This includes opportunities for local programs to connect with each other within a state, as well as opportunities for states to connect to other states.
- Building capacity for evaluation.
- Promoting examples of successful cross-training of all agency staff in prevention.
- Building organizational capacity for prevention.

Understanding the core competencies necessary for effective primary prevention work is key to establishing lasting prevention initiatives with meaningful outcomes in a



community. Investment in prevention work and those doing that work is critical to the success of an organization and the anti-sexual violence movement.



About the Authors

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This resource was created with the insight and expertise of **Stephanie Townsend, Ph.D.** Dr. Townsend has worked in the movement to end sexual violence for 19 years as both a practitioner and researcher. She began by working for community-based rape crisis and prevention programs in Michigan, California and Texas. Additionally, she served on the boards of directors of the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault, the California Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and on the advisory board of the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault.

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Further Reading

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