

At the Table: Hosting Listening Forums to Talk About Sexual Violence

Jo Johnson, Visiting Fellow, Office for Victims of Crime

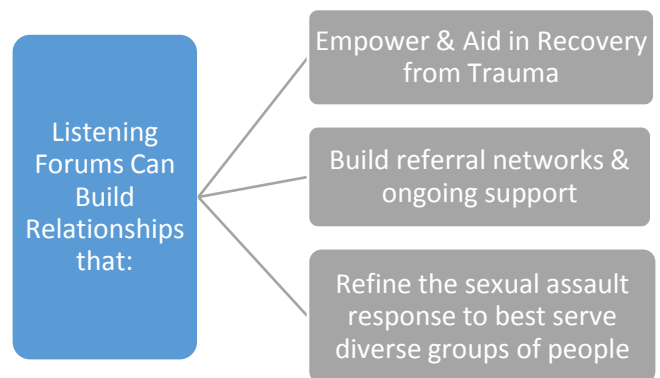
April 2018

Definition: Listening forums are small group meetings that allow professionals to listen to and learn from the communities they serve. These gatherings are sometimes called listening circles, community conversations or focus groups.

Please see the Praxis International webinar on hosting focus groups or listening forums with survivors and professionals online at: <http://praxisinternational.org/institutional-analysiscommunity-assessment-2/audio-event-recordings/>

Listening Forums can accomplish much more than just gathering information. If done well, they have the potential to build relationships between communities and professionals to:

- **Empower survivors**, their families and their friends to reduce violence and provide the next survivor with a better response
- **Connect with diverse populations** to bring their voices into planning and implementing change and evaluating progress
- **Identify professionals, community members and civic and faith leaders** who are able to identify survivors, connect them with services and provide ongoing support
- **Design prevention and intervention efforts** that build upon community assets and its formal and informal structures
- Educate the community members about sexual violence so that they are better-informed voters, leaders and jurors
- **Create communication loops** for getting information out to communities and for hearing from them across time



Planning for a Listening Forum. In some communities, listening forums will be part of a larger community needs assessment process. The needs assessment should be guided by a written plan that outlines how information and data will be gathered, analyzed, written, reviewed, shared and adapted into action plans.

For more information on this, see the Office for Victims of Crime SART Toolkit at <https://ovc.ncjrs.gov/sartkit/>.

11 Key Considerations for Hosting a Listening Forum to Talk About Sexual Violence

- 1) **Consider the safety needs of participants and staff when inviting and hosting a forum.** Participants may be in abusive relationships. They may minimize their danger if they mention it at all. Consider the safety of waiting rooms, meeting spaces, bathrooms and parking areas.
- 2) **Protect the privacy of personally-identifying information of individuals in alignment with the Violence against Women Act (VAWA).** This federal law protects the personally identifying information of victims of violence. Guidelines on how to comply with VAWA to increase the safety of victims, can be found at: Technology Safety, NNEDV <https://www.techsafety.org/confidentiality-in-va-wa-fvpsa/> State coalitions for sexual violence can advise you of state laws that may impact confidentiality.
- 3) **Disclose limits to confidentiality, stating what issues might require a mandatory report.** This gets sticky. Clarify what issues require mandatory reporting such as suicide, homicide, some types of assaults, child abuse or exposure of children to violence.
- 4) **Select a team of professionals and volunteers to invite and host the listening forum.**
 - Select persons who listen well and can respond with compassion and empathy.
 - Select persons who speak the language and reflect the culture of participants.
- 5) **Post definitions of commonly-used terms and a few acronyms that may be used during the forum.** Define sexual assault, rape, sexual harassment and child sexual assault. Avoid using “she” pronouns exclusively to refer to victims and survivors.
- 6) **Be prepared to hear disclosures of violence.** Listen with compassion. Provide support and safety planning. Watch the response of other participants.
- 7) **Be prepared to hear about many forms of violence.** It is not uncommon for people to experience many different forms of violence and trauma at the same time or over time.
- 8) **Let participants know that you and the staff will be staying for 30 minutes after the session.** Reserve the space for this additional time. Watch for participants who hang around.
- 9) **Offer to schedule an individual interview** to talk with anyone who can't attend a forum or wishes to share information in a more private setting. Agree on safe ways to contact the participant to schedule this or send a meeting reminder.

- 10) **10) Provide information on how participants can continue to help improve the community's response to sexual violence.** Can they review the report? Weigh in on recommendations? Provide public support for change? Volunteer? Have ideas prepared.
- 11) **Debrief with the listening forum team.** The emotional intensity of forums varies and the team may need to talk about what participants shared with the group. Take good care of one another.