Creating an Advocacy Supported Community to Address Youth with Sexual Behavior Problems: A Vital Step Towards our Comprehensive Approach to Sexual Violence Prevention

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Since 1984, our Director of Training, Stella Gallegos, LISW, gently but consistently included sex offender assessment and treatment into all professional training throughout New Mexico, recognizing that to do so would add to the Coalition efforts to reduce sexual violence in our state.

Stella trained with Nicholas Groth, Ph.D., Eliana Gil, Ph.D., and Rob Longo, LPC, traveling to Alaska and Massachusetts to learn directly from these early sex offender treatment specialists. With only two rape crisis centers in New Mexico at that time, minimal resistance was encountered from the victim advocacy community. Her approach was entirely victim-centered, which quelled any fears that may have arisen. Drs. Groth and Gil trained hundreds of New Mexicans in several joint trainings on treating child victims of sexual violence and sex offenders. They accepted tremendously reduced stipends to make these events possible. In the late 90’s, our rape crisis center in Santa Fe began offering treatment to sex offenders.¹

In 1988, Coalition staff were influenced by a Canadian Broadcast Corporation ‘Man Alive’ documentary entitled ‘Circle of Healing’. It featured the Native community of Alkili Lake’s collective efforts to deal with rampant child sexual violence. Their approach was similar to the current social approach to curbing community violence (Violence Interrupters’).² The next effort of the Coalition staff involved a Navajo Nation prevention effort involving a Native storyteller, Betsy Yazzie, LISW, who wrote the story of Glenabah, a young Navajo girl whose uncle raped her. The story showed the importance of community readiness and action to recognize, report, and treat both the survivor and the offender. This effort was not ideal as funding did not allow for multiple sessions. Though it was multi-tiered (parents, teachers, students, and community response professionals), no follow up discussions with the community or students was provided. It also became clear that while we promoted sex offender treatment, none existed on the Navajo Nation.

After some missteps with national sexual violence prevention efforts that included addressing sex offenders in the curriculum/agendas, we achieved legislative success: based on Stella Gallegos’ certification course taken at the University of Louisville on Adolescent Sex Offender Treatment featuring Joann Schladale, MS, we designed a plan to promote a uniform, empirically-informed state-wide approach that would create treatment providers in our state who could provide victim centered treatment to address problem sexual behavior in youth.

¹ Provided in a separate building with a separate entrance.

² This was a community cruelly referred to as Alcohol Lake by outsiders due to their unusually high percentage of teens and adults who were alcoholic. The community worked together to become entirely sober, supporting each other and calling out each other until they achieved collective success. Following this effort, they noticed that the violence in their community did not subside as they had anticipated (thinking that if the drinking stopped, violence would follow). Upon further investigation, they came to realize that nearly all males in the community in a twenty year range had been sexually victimized by the same priest in the parish. Several went on to victimize other children in the community. The community brought in treatment specialists and combined this with their traditional healing methods. They repeated the same method utilized in the community becoming sober to address the sexual violence: all offenders brought forward to the community in a non-shaming manner, followed by ‘bystanders’ calling them out on any questionable behavior. The key to their success: everyone in the community was involved – their own ‘interrupter’ effort.
We approached the state legislature in 2006 with this plan, and in 2008 an appropriation was made awarding $110,000 annually for the training of New Mexican therapists in the treatment of youth with sexual behavior problems. Based on the Coalition request, the funding prescribed payment of all registration fees, books, training manual, hotel, per diem, and travel for all participants.  

Since that time, the New Mexico Coalition has provided the 2-week, 80-hour academic certificate training for treatment to 104 professionals: 84 therapists/social workers; 11 juvenile probation and parole officers (JPPO); 3 sexual assault nurse examiners (SANE); and 3 ‘other’ professionals.

This training then led to interest from Chiefs of Police, probation and parole leadership, and others requesting specific training in the criminal justice field. In our evaluation responses, law enforcement participants said: “I learned a lot and have new ideas for my department”; “Great course – the beginning of promoting change in law enforcement.”

Since 2008, 19 in-depth courses have been provided (from 2 days to 2 weeks in length) to 359 professionals from varied disciplines: 221 therapists, 35 JPPO’s 46 law enforcement personnel, 1 prosecutor, 8 SANE’s, and 45 ‘other’s.

Participants have represented the Navajo Nation and several Pueblos, urban and rural areas, Mexican border communities, child protective services, juvenile detention, and the New Mexico psychiatric state care unit for adjudicated patients. The Coalition provides annual advanced training for certified therapists to receive updates on current research and practice, and participate in case consults and statewide collaboration.

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3Coalition representatives met with the Courts and Corrections, and Health and Human Services Legislative Committees with a well documented presentation on the traumatic impact of sexual violence on victims and the necessity to provide treatment to youth with sexual behavior problems. It was extremely well received and noted the following information: very little treatment existed for either adult or youth who had committed sex crimes. The presentation steered clear of registration discussions, ‘To Catch a Predator’, and ICAC discussions, and dismissed annual efforts to pass a ‘castration’ bill. Sen Cisco McSorley invited Fred Berlin, Ph.D. to speak to the Courts and Corrections Legislative Committee on sex offender treatment on the Senators very low funded budget for hearings, and without Coalition or rape crisis efforts!!!
Built around the certification course she created at the University of Louisville, Joann Schladale⁴ meets with Coalition staff annually to plan each year’s schedule of trainings. They often include one or more of the following:
  - A Collaborative Approach To Stop Sexual Harm By Youth: a 2-week, 80-hour certification training.
  - A Comprehensive Response to Incest, a 1-week, 40-hour, multi-disciplinary training.
  - Facilitating Effective Criminal Investigations Addressing Sexual Harm By Youth, a 2-day criminal justice-only training
  - Celebrating Success and Facing Challenges When Addressing Sexual Harm by Youth, a 2-day advanced course: (Case studies, new literature, evidence based practice)

Since the inception of this project, the Coalition consistently maintains a waiting list of therapists, child protection workers, law enforcement officers, and probation and parole officers. Our resident researcher and evaluator, Betty Caponera, Ph.D., recently stated that of all the programs she has evaluated over the last twenty years, Ms. Schladale’s trainings consistently receive the most enthusiastic, positive ratings and comments. Dr. Caponera was amazed that this very therapeutically-centered course attracts so many law enforcement personnel throughout the state. Our courses typically begin each Fall, and calls from therapists and investigators typically begin in early July, hoping to retain a spot (classes are limited to 20-25, depending on the course).

Each participant of the two-week course receives approximately $2,894.00 worth of registration and travel costs. For all courses, mileage reimbursement, hotel, meals, registration, training manuals, and books are provided free of charge to professionals working in non-profit community mental health centers, rape crisis centers, or in state funded agencies (law enforcement, probation and parole, SANE units, etc.). Private therapists must agree to provide one year of services free of charge to youth with sexual behavior problems.

The project does not come without its challenges, though. The biggest is supervisors giving therapists time off to attend the courses and permission from their agencies to provide treatment addressing sexual harm by youth.⁵

In October of 2013, the New Mexico Coalition’s technical assistance provider, Resource Sharing Project, sponsored—with Office on Violence Against Women funds—a two day training on Sex Offender Management specific to coalition/advocacy involvement in the process. The training featured coalition directors that are active in management in their states, as well as Alisa Klein (A Reasoned Approach) and Nicole Pittman, JD. (Raised on the Registry) This was the first time OVW funds have been permitted for training specifically on sex offender management. There was much discussion on how to get more state coalitions involved in this effort. Additionally, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, the Resource Sharing Project, and the Center for Sex Offender Management have partnered together and were awarded a joint grant from OVW to address collaborative efforts specific to Sex Offender Management with an advocacy voice included.

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⁴Joann Schladale is a licensed marriage and family therapist specializing in trauma, interpersonal violence, sexual harm, and sexual health. She has received professional awards and made hundreds of presentations throughout North America, Europe, and Africa focusing on trauma, youth violence prevention, positive youth development, sexual harm, teen pregnancy prevention, and Motivational Interviewing. She has written numerous book chapters in scholarly texts and most recently authored A Trauma-Informed Approach for Adolescent Sexual Health (2013). She co-authored Stop It! A Practical Guide For Youth Violence Prevention, (2012). She has written two workbooks for youth: The T.O.P. Workbook for Taming Violence and Sexual Aggression, The T.O.P. Workbook For Sexual Health, and collaborated in the creation of Community-Based Standards For Addressing Sexual Harm By Youth (2007). She works closely with public and private organizations on prevention, mental health and protective services, and juvenile justice.

⁵The Coalition worked with New Mexico’s Behavioral Health Services Division to ‘re-mandate’ all community mental health offices to allow interested staff to attend these free trainings. Additionally they were ‘re-mandated’ to include youth exhibiting sexual behavior problems among priority populations to receive treatment, and therapists were required to have specialized training.

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Hopefully, the more that OVW, TA Providers, Coalitions, and programs start to address the connection between sex offender management and victim services, more progress can be made across the country to ensure that victims have a voice in the supervision of SOM.