Authentic Community Engagement in Safe Harbor
Overview

The meaningful engagement and collaboration within community strengthens a multidisciplinary response to sexual exploitation and trafficking. A blend of constructive teaming strategies, stakeholder buy-in, and effective system partnerships will set the foundation for teams to be successful. However, it is essential that teams bolster their response with the feedback and participation of culturally-specific organizations and survivor voice.

To improve the response of statewide protocol development, the Sexual Violence Justice Institute (SVJI) at the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MNCASA)\(^1\) sought to identify how Safe Harbor Protocol Teams could increase their capacity to center marginalized voices and survivors within their work. To move forward with this project, two approaches were determined:

1. to interview and engage culturally-specific Safe Harbor service programs
2. to implement the voices and wisdom of youth with lived experiences of trafficking and/or sexual exploitation.

The purpose of each goal aims to ensure that protocol development meets the needs of all victims and survivors.

Objective

The objective in creating this report is to inform stakeholders within Safe Harbor to apply the following results and recommendations to continue centering the experiences of survivors and to further improve their systems response. This report will outline the methods of the project, describe the results of interviews with both youth and culturally-specific organizations, share limitations, and address future recommendations for Safe Harbor Protocol Teams.

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1 Here after referenced as “SVJI @ MNCASA”
Method

To determine who could be considered eligible as participants in this project, programs were selected if they received funding through Safe Harbor. However, as will be discussed below, not all of the culturally-specific organizations shared this requirement. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that this report did not recognize all Safe Harbor grantees as “culturally-specific.”

Additionally, in regards to youth interviews, only Safe Harbor programs that offered shelter services or had access to youth groups were contacted. Once programs were identified, recruitment emails were sent out by SVJI @ MNCASA staff members. The outreach and engagement for this project was conducted entirely by email, phone calls, Zoom communications, and other digital avenues.

When seeking participation from Safe Harbor programs, there was an emphasis placed on engaging voices and experiences from across the state of Minnesota. The reason for this was to avoid being “metro-centric” and to amplify the feedback from those who have not previously held influence within Safe Harbor. Furthermore, to gain the best insight into Safe Harbor services, youth who had either aged out of Safe Harbor services or who had significant experience with such programming were specifically recruited.

After programs shared their interest, they were provided with a general description of the project. Upon confirming their participation, a follow-up email was sent with additional material. Depending on whether programs were considered culturally-specific or had access to youth, they received different emails. Included within the emails were a consent form, interview questions, and requests for interview availability (see appendices).

Youth Interviews

When connecting with Safe Harbor programs about youth interviews, both the staff and youth themselves had the opportunity to view the consent form. Youth were informed they would be participating in one-on-one, informational interviews that would be held over Zoom’s phone calling function. In addition to being informed of the prepared interview questions, youth were also notified that follow-up questions may be asked.
Each youth interview was a maximum of one hour long and was recorded with the consent of all youth participants. Transcripts were also created from the recordings. To preserve the privacy and confidentiality of all the youth participants, no identifying information is shared throughout this report. However, a limited amount of demographic information was requested if youth participants felt comfortable sharing. Questions asked about youth demographics are included on page 4:

1. How have you observed different agencies interacting with each other when they come into contact with someone who has been trafficked?

2. How did agencies take your unique background and experience into consideration when working with you?

3. How would you like your voice to be heard to improve response by agencies?

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Demographic questions were open to interpretation for youth. Due to this, certain youth responses look different when, in reality, they may have the same meaning. For instance, some youth preferred to use the term “Mixed-Race” while others identified as “Native American and White” with their race.

Youth were also compensated for the time, wisdom, and knowledge they had to share. Youth were paid via a Visa gift card at the rate of $81.25. If for any reason youth chose not to answer a question, this did not impact their compensation or participation in the project. Furthermore, youth were informed that if the interview ended early, they were still awarded full compensation. After the interview was finished, youth were asked to provide an address so that SVJI @ MNCASA staff could mail them the gift card.

Culturally-Specific Organizational Interviews

The process was quite similar for culturally-specific Safe Harbor programs. Staff working at these locations across the state of Minnesota received a list of prepared interview questions, the same consent form as youth (although with unique guidance), and a request to gather participation from at least three different staff members. It was preferred that each staff member worked directly with either at-risk youth or youth with lived experiences of sexual exploitation. However, due to several reasons – such as lack of funding, being understaffed, etc. – several culturally-specific organization interviews
included staff holding supervisory roles. Furthermore, it was the case for multiple organizations that only a single position was funded through Safe Harbor.

As mentioned above, one culturally-specific organization that was interviewed did not receive Safe Harbor funding. Although this will be discussed later, it is also mentioned here for methodological purposes. Since there was no prominent Safe Harbor-funded program that provided specific services to a unique cultural population, alternative programs were sought out and fulfilled this much needed gap.

A total of four prepared interview questions were asked of culturally-specific organizations. The purpose of conducting interviews with culturally-specific organizations was to identify how protocol teams could meaningfully and authentically engage with community organizations. The prepared interview questions for culturally-specific organizations are offered below:

1. **What are the unique needs of the communities that you serve?**

2. **What discrepancies/inconsistencies have you noticed in systems response to trafficked/exploited youth?**

3. **When teams are developing protocol, what needs to be included or reflected upon in the development process to support the particular needs of the community that you serve?**

4. **Should organizations such as yourself be involved within Protocol Development Teams? If so, how should this collaborative process be achieved?**

To take into account the voices and knowledge of multiple interviewees, culturally-specific organization interviews were held for up to an hour and a half. All participants consented to have their audio recorded for the interview. To preserve the privacy, confidentiality, and reputation of culturally-specific organizations, their identifying
information will also not be included within this report. Similar to the recruitment of youth, intentional efforts were made to engage culturally-specific organizations from across the state of Minnesota.

Staff from culturally-specific organizations were also compensated for the expertise, information, and time they dedicated to this project. For programs that could commit at least three staff members to the interview, they received $500 in funding, whereas culturally-specific organizations with only one participant received $100. Once the interview was completed, a check was sent to the dedicated financial staff member at each program.

**Results**

The timeline for both the youth and culturally-specific interviews occurred between February and May of 2021. A total of eleven different youth participated in the interview from various regions across Minnesota. As for the culturally-specific organizational interviews, six different programs were interviewed and included a total of thirteen participating staff members.

To reiterate, the goal in completing these interviews was to identify how protocol teams could more purposefully engage with youth victims/survivors and culturally-specific organizations within their community and to strengthen their protocol development and response. Rather than address each interview question that has been shared above, this section will identify main themes shared by participants as it relates to the overall goals of this project.

**Youth Interviews**

The figures on page 8 offer a visual representation of demographic information provided by youth participants. However, one person’s demographic information was not shared during the interview, which is acknowledged as “Unknown.” It should also be noted that the percentages for Figure #2, Figure #3, and Figure #5 do not add up to one hundred percent; this is due to rounding the percentages.

One clarification that needs to be made is about one of the participant’s quotes as it relates to their gender. During the interview, this youth mentioned “being trans” but later responded as “female” when asked to share how they identified with their gender. To be clear, this is not an attempt to categorize a participant against their wishes, rather, it is intended to offer context for the reader.

Finally, to differentiate between youth and their quotes, a label such as “Youth #5” will be used.

2 Youth #1, interview by author, February 18th, 2021.
3 Youth #1, interview by author, February 18th, 2021.
I had to explain to a caseworker that I’m literally living in a car and my whole situation is extremely stressful so my brain isn’t necessarily focused on, ‘oh, let me email my caseworker and let me keep in contact with her,’ because I’m in survival mode. I have to make sure I’m okay, you know, and I’m constantly in this state of survival.”

Discipline Collaboration

When asked to offer perspective on the collaborative interaction between agencies, youth participants provided mixed responses. Youth #1 shared examples of productive relationships when stating, “I really like how, up here specifically, people are working together because it’s more of a connected community.” Furthermore, this same youth mentioned that, “[county attorneys] give you advocates and the advocates really care about you.” This experience shared by the youth emphasizes how meaningful partnerships between disciplines are a foundational part of a victim/survivor-centered approach. On the other hand, this was not the reality for all youth participants. Youth #7 said, “There has absolutely been a lack of communication between organizations.”

This response echoed experiences by other youth who shared that they often had to find resources on their own and were rarely referred to other community programs. The lack of referrals and warm handoffs between disciplines experienced by youth allows an already vulnerable population to continue slipping through the cracks.

While it was necessary to gain insight from youth on this issue, it needs to be acknowledged that this question was likely difficult for youth to answer. For example, it can be expected that some youth were not a witness to the collaborative processes their cases may have gone through. However, it is clear that progress still needs to be made in this necessary element of response and protocol development.

2 Youth #1, interview by author, February 18th, 2021.
3 Youth #1, interview by author, February 18th, 2021.
4 Youth #7, interview by author, March 11th, 2021.
5 Youth #7, interview by author, March 11th, 2021.
Cultural and Background Considerations

Youth were also asked to share whether or not system disciplines took their unique culture, background, and previous history into consideration when working with them. Although about half of the youth mentioned that disciplines took these factors into account, several of the youth said that this was not the case.

Youth #6 said, “They [the shelter] never really seemed to take that sort of stuff into consideration.” Youth #5 echoed this same experience with shelters. One youth shared very different experiences between two disciplines. The youth said that “they [the shelter] go a long way to make me feel accepted being trans” and also “making sure they are using my pronouns.” While this youth had a positive experience with shelters they had come into contact with, it was not the case with all disciplines. When prompted to share experiences related to their identity with other disciplines, the youth said, “Law enforcement? No, not at all.”

Overall, with the youth respondents being roughly split on this issue, it still demonstrates a need for systems to respond with more equitable and inclusive practices. As one youth noted, “I believe it is very important for youth to be involved in their culture.” This comment illustrates a need for shelter and housing programs to offer diverse services, educational opportunities, and activities for youth of all backgrounds. Many participants also agreed upon the importance of having diverse staff with lived experiences. Furthermore, Native American youth emphasized their appreciation for having access to tribal caseworkers.

In this section, youth were encouraged to share their most positive and most negative experiences with the systems they have interacted with. A total of nine youth shared positive and negatives experiences with at least one specific discipline. Shelters represented the largest amount of positive experiences with eight out of nine youth sharing this perspective. The quote below and quotes on page 10 contains a number of anecdotes from the youth about their experience with shelters.

“They gave me a voice. They helped me understand all of my rights and all the things that I could do to help better my situation.”

6 Youth #6, interview by author, February 24th, 2021.
7 Youth #7, interview by author, March 11th, 2021.
8 Youth #7, interview by author, March 11th, 2021.
9 Youth #4, interview by author, February 23rd, 2021.
10 Youth #1, interview by author, February 18th, 2021.
They seem more like a family. We sit down and we eat together. We get presents from them. We go out to eat with them. They help us out with everything. It’s a different type of connection. They want to make you have the best life that you are capable of having. I wouldn’t be where I am at today without them.”¹²

“They helped me succeed in ways I didn’t think I could.”¹¹

“You can feel how genuine they really are there. They really have compassion for you. It feels good when someone gets personal with you.”¹³

The other discipline associated with positive experiences was law enforcement. One youth had this to share about law enforcement: “They really helped me out a lot. They made me feel a lot better because they saved me a lot. They are really looking out for me.”¹⁴

Youth also shared negative experiences with Safe Harbor disciplines, but on a much deeper level. Again, a total of nine youth shared negative interactions with systems. However, some youth shared more than one unique, negative experience which is why there are eleven different instances shared in the figure below. Additionally, there were youth who reported multiple, negative occurrences with certain disciplines but this is not represented below.

Figure 4

- Law Enforcement (4/11)
- Shelters (3/11)
- Child Protection Services (2/11)
- Court System (1/11)
- Treatment Centers (1/11)

11 Youth #4, interview by author, February 23rd, 2021.
12 Youth #1, interview by author, February 18th, 2021.
13 Youth #7, interview by author, March 11th, 2021.
14 Youth #1, interview by author, February 18th, 2021.
The following quotations from youth offer insight into their negative experiences with Safe Harbor services:

“I feel like they [law enforcement] discriminate excessively. They don’t care what you identify as. They don’t make you feel like you can confide in them, trust them, or anything like that. This isn’t all of law enforcement but it’s a majority of it.”¹⁵

“They [the court system] said, ‘if you plead guilty, we can release you today.’ So [at the time], I said I guess I should plead guilty because I need to go back to school.”¹⁸

“[Staff at shelters would] say, ‘what could you have done differently,’ and that’s the end of the story. Instead of saying, ‘here’s what I could have done differently to support you as an individual.’”¹⁷

“I swear cops are women-haters. They don’t care if you are being assaulted, trafficked – you know what I mean? Cops are supposed to protect and service, but for who, you know? I get in trouble for defending myself.”¹⁶

The goal here is not to ostracize any particular disciplines within Safe Harbor. However, the results are clear that essentially all disciplines across the board need to improve in their response. In the Safe Harbor Protocol Guidelines, multidisciplinary teams are instructed to utilize five principles in their response to sexually exploited youth. The five principles include being: (1) victim-centered, (2) trauma-informed, (3) youth-centered, (4) strengths-based, and (5) culturally-responsive.¹⁹

It should be safe to say that the majority of multidisciplinary team members sitting on these teams are in fact centered within the above-mentioned principles. Yet, if there is not a clear line of communication between the Safe Harbor Protocol Team and the home organization of each discipline, it is very possible that these extremely vital frameworks of systems response are not being applied.

¹⁵ Youth #7, interview by author, March 11th, 2021.
¹⁶ Youth #6, interview by author, March 10th, 2021.
¹⁷ Youth #2, interview by author, February 22nd, 2021.
¹⁸ Youth #6, interview by author, March 10th, 2021.
¹⁹ Safe Harbor Protocol Guidelines. Revised, 2020. Written by the Ramsey County Attorney’s Office (RCAO) and Sexual Violence Justice Institute (SVJI) at the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MNCASA).
“Being in the life, it’s not easy to trust people. It’s not easy to confide in people. So, when we finally do that and it’s like, thrown out the window, it makes it even harder to ask for help the next time.”²⁰

Pay attention to their stories. You can learn a lot about how these people [traffickers, abusers, etc.] begin to prey on us, how they lure us in, how they condition us. Someone’s story can bring about a lot of different red flags that some people might not notice right away. The beginning of it [how you get into the life] can be really important at times and people tend to forget that.”²²

Youth and Survivor Voice

The final question asked of youth was how they would like their voices to be heard and implemented to improve systems response. The purpose of asking youth this question is two-fold. Initially, it is vital to center the experiences and voices of survivors because they are the individuals most impacted by systems response. Secondly, many multidisciplinary teams question what the most effective method is for engaging such populations in their protocol development. While the information below cannot be considered evidence-based, this direct feedback from youth survivors can be crucial for your community’s future improvement in systems response.

“Every voice is important. Every story is important. And no matter what, everybody deserves compassion. And that you can, truthfully, learn so much from every situation. Take every situation as, I can learn something new from this.”²¹

Overall, all the youth participants indicated that it would be beneficial to have youth survivors be a part of the protocol development process and advocated that a variety of options be offered. Youth offered many methods for engagement on protocol teams: offering interviews and surveys, creating youth advisory boards, having a youth representative on the team, and as one youth put it, to create “opportunities to have raw conversations” between youth and local organizations.²³

The implementation of youth advisory boards was the most supported method of engagement. Several youth mentioned that they had previously held roles on youth advisory boards or hiring boards in the past. Youth #2 who revealed they participated in one said that “it showed they trusted me and showed that they actually cared about my voice.”²⁴ The power within this statement is that implementing youth survivor voices benefit everyone involved. Not only do systems receive direct feedback as to how to improve and thus make their jobs easier, it also greatly empowers youth. Protocol teams can let youth survivors have their voices be heard and act as a catalyst for change in their community. As teams consider these interview responses, keep Youth #7’s above quote in mind.

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20 Youth #7, interview by author, March 11th, 2021.
21 Youth #7, interview by author, March 11th, 2021.
22 Youth #7, interview by author, March 11th, 2021.
23 Youth #9, interview by author, March 19th, 2021.
24 Youth #2, interview by author, February 22nd, 2021.
Compensation for Youth Survivors

While this particular issue was not addressed within the interviews themselves, it must be noted that youth survivors need to be compensated for their time, effort, and wisdom in these circumstances. Youth are often not given enough credit for the knowledge they have to share and cannot continue to be exploited by the systems that are responding to them. Youth should be treated as experts as they all have valuable information that we can learn from.

Culturally-Specific Organizational Interviews

Table #1 below represents each culturally-specific organization that was interviewed and the unique population they offer services for. Similar to the differentiation between youth above, culturally-specific organizations will be labeled such as “C-S (D)” to distinguish quotes apart from one another.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culturally-Specific Organization</th>
<th>Primary Population Serve</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Latinx community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Southeast Asian community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Immigrant community</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Native American community</td>
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<td>E</td>
<td>LGBTQIA+ community</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Black community</td>
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Discrepancies & Inconsistencies Experienced by Culturally-Specific Organizations

Culturally-specific organizations were asked to share the discrepancies they have experienced when working with other Safe Harbor services. The most common discrepancy experienced by culturally-specific organizations was a lack of meaningful relationships with other systems. For example, C-S (B) said that, “I feel like a lot of organizations just don’t want to do the work. They want us to do all of the work.”²⁵ This reality is represented by the example shared below by C-S (E):

“People come to us for consultation and ideas and then it’s kind of like, thanks, bye. While sometimes that is totally fine and makes sense depending on the context, regular communication is really important. [Additionally,] we need to be really careful in who we are asking to do free labor. People will ask us to do a 30-minute training for free and tell us that we need to teach them everything there possibly is to know.”²⁶

Culturally-specific organizations are an integral piece of systems response for sexually exploited youth and are uniquely positioned to provide in-depth, specialized services. Due to this expertise, many other organizations rightfully rely heavily upon culturally-specific programming. But this creates a weighted exchange that does not include beneficial outcomes on both sides. This is why C-S (A) says, “we don’t do transactional relationships, we do meaningful collaboration.”²⁸

In addition to experiencing a lack of meaningful relationships with Safe Harbor systems, culturally-specific organizations also reported feeling

“People come to us for consultation and ideas and then it’s kind of like, thanks, bye. While sometimes that is totally fine and makes sense depending on the context, regular communication is really important. [Additionally,] we need to be really careful in who we are asking to do free labor. People will ask us to do a 30-minute training for free and tell us that we need to teach them everything there possibly is to know.”²⁶

“It’s hard when you want to share insight about your community but also, it’s tiring educating people all of the time.”²⁷

²⁶ Culturally-Specific Organization E, interview by author, April 15th, 2021.
²⁸ Culturally-Specific Organization A, interview by author, April 13th, 2021.
like an afterthought. Rather than being involved from the outset, many participants shared that they were not included until the very end or were only invited to reach a certain requirement. It is for this reason that one organization said, “we are not going to be included at the very end because that is also the tendency that has happened.”²⁹ Not only does this harm relationships, it also wastes valuable time and capacity that could be spent elsewhere. Moving forward, protocol teams and their disciplines should be proactive in beginning collaborative efforts with culturally-specific organizations to ground their work upon an intersectional foundation for all survivors.

Yet another discrepancy that culturally-specific organizations dealt with was experiencing a disregard for their work on behalf of other systems. Participants felt as though their knowledge and expertise were not equally valued in the response to sexually exploited youth. To describe this further, C-S (D) mentioned that, “advocates are not always taken seriously. Their professional opinions and knowledge are not taken seriously enough. I don’t think there is enough appreciation for the work that we do for the victims and survivors.”³⁰ The significance of multidisciplinary teams lies in the unique opportunity to combine many different perspectives, strengths, and expertise that creates a more effective and intersectional response. For this reason, all disciplines within the team’s response are a vital asset and each one is just as necessary as the other.

Not only did culturally-specific organizations report a need to be validated for their work, they also consistently experienced a misunderstanding of their offered services. The most common manifestation of this example is other agencies assuming culturally-specific organizations were a “one-stop-shop” for certain populations where all their services could be met. For example, one participant said that other programs will call them and ask, “Can I get an interpreter? Can you translate this for us?’ Well, that is not our job, we are not that type of service. We are advocates.”³¹ Furthermore, participants stated that other services would often apply certain sub-groups of a culture to an entire culture. To illustrate this, C-S (B) shared that, “they are referring anyone who is Asian to us. We are mainly focusing on Southeast Asian youth so we don’t have expertise with other cultures.”³² As mentioned above, time and time again culturally-specific organizations are asked to take on additional responsibilities that detract from their capacity and overall response.

“You can’t save us without us.”³³

²⁹ Culturally-Specific Organization A, interview by author, April 13th, 2021.
³⁰ Culturally-Specific Organization D, interview by author, April 21st, 2021.
³³ Culturally-Specific Organization B, interview by author, March 24th, 2021
Culturally-Specific Protocol Development

Participants were also asked what needs to be included within the development process for protocol teams to support the needs of the particular communities they serve. By far the most common response by culturally-specific organizations was emphasizing authentic community engagement and participation. This aspect of development was perfectly represented by the statement from C-S (B) on page 15: “You can’t save us without us.”

This statement should be at the very foundation of any type of community response. Importantly, it exemplifies the need to have both victims/survivors and culturally-specific organizations involved in protocol development. Because, as mentioned by C-S (E), “It’s still incredibly valuable and important to be a part of these teams and conversations. I think that things get missed if we’re not.”³⁴

“I would encourage that protocol teams have voices at their table that look like and sound like the people that they are anticipating to serve. Starting at the point of asking ourselves, do we look and sound like the individuals we are trying to serve and if we don’t, trusting that that expertise exists in those communities and trying to cultivate those relationships.”³⁵

While participants advocated for diverse and meaningful community engagement on teams, they also cautioned bringing in one person to speak for an entire community. For teams that may have limited access to diverse populations, one participant offered a constructive solution:

“We can’t speak for the entire community but I think that another thing that would be beneficial is that, if you have culturally-specific people part of these teams, they can reach out to their own networks to do engagement.”³⁶

34 Culturally-Specific Organization E, interview by author, April 15th, 2021.
36 Culturally-Specific Organization E, interview by author, April 15th, 2021.
Such strategies emphasize a community-driven response that is not only for the community but by the community. Additionally, these approaches have the potential to establish trust, strengthen engagement, and create more partnerships within a community. However, once access to community networks are formed, be sure that all members of the protocol team are participating in the collaboration so as to not overburden culturally-specific disciplines.

**Discussion**

The feedback and wisdom shared above by both youth survivors and culturally-specific organizations are central to how teams should implement future strategies for authentic community engagement. However, participants also introduced a number of other very important factors to keep in mind as teams are developing protocol.

Throughout the interviews conducted with youth, nearly every single participant indicated a need for autonomy when interacting with systems. Youth survivors who are in the life may find themselves making decisive choices each and every day. Conversely, this can drastically change if youth come into contact with systems that do not emphasize a strengths-based approach. To be clear, youth were not advocating to discredit helpful guidance or assistance from systems professionals. Instead, they identified a need to empower themselves. Youth #1 shared this important experience when saying, “They [the shelter] really opened up options so I could choose for myself what I wanted my experience to be.”³⁷ Likewise, Youth #2 echoed this same value when stating, “They give you independence and goals to look forward to.”³⁸ All types of disciplines have the ability to endorse youth autonomy and empowerment in their response. Not only does this allow for a more victim/survivor-centered and strengths-based approach, it can also help build necessary skills and even uplift them in their journey of healing.

“We would be remiss if we also didn’t have knowledge of the other niches that are out there and support them through partnerships. Aligned focus of healing in every single area that impacts the human condition. I think that’s what they [Protocol Teams] need to be looking at.”³⁹

³⁷ Youth #1, interview by author, February 18th, 2021.
³⁸ Youth #2, interview by author, February 22nd, 2021.
³⁹ Culturally-Specific Organization F, interview by author, April 28th, 2021.
Culturally-specific organizations as a whole shared major issues with having enough funding to do genuine work within Safe Harbor. C-S (E) echoed this problem when stating, “In my experience, what I have seen is that culturally-specific programs are the ones with the least amount of funding, resources, and access. These things make our work incredibly unsustainable. But, more importantly, it really limits what we are able to do.”⁴⁰ This comment demonstrates a crucial need for Safe Harbor grantors to fund culturally-specific organizations. While extra funding is a fundamental issue for nearly all non-profit agencies, culturally-specific organizations responding to sexually exploited youth arguably have greater urgency. This is due to working with specific populations of survivors that are often overrepresented in prevalence rates and have high numbers of vulnerabilities and risk factors. For example, when evaluating who is served by Safe Harbor grantees across Minnesota, Wilder Research discovered the following averages for participants: the average age of clients was 17; the majority (91%) of clients were female with six percent identifying as male and three percent identifying as transgender, gender non-conforming, or other; and more than half (59%) identified as people of color.⁴¹ This research helps demonstrate the need for additional funding for culturally-specific organizations.

As mentioned previously, one culturally-specific organization that was interviewed did not receive Safe Harbor funding. This was because youth survivors in the Black community did not have any identifiable Safe Harbor organization that was funded to service their unique needs. It goes without saying that this is a huge issue for folks in the Black community. For Black folks who are unable to find trustworthy, well-funded, and culturally-specific resources if they are being exploited or trafficked, they will continue to slip through the cracks. However, to reiterate, this goes for all survivors who hold marginalized identities. There are simply not enough culturally-specific organizations that are funded through Safe Harbor. Moving forward, grantors need to emphasize this need and to advocate for equitable funding for culturally-specific organizations.

One theme that arose in the culturally-specific organization interviews was the historical and deep-seated systemic racism and white supremacy that both victims/survivors and culturally-specific organizations experience. When asked to share potential discrepancies on behalf of law enforcement and the court system, C-S (F) had this to say:

“I don’t want to talk about law enforcement... I want to keep going and not get triggered. I can’t do it. Come back to me in, I don’t know, maybe a month, but I am so fed up.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Culturally-Specific Organization E, interview by author, April 15th, 2021.
⁴² Culturally-Specific Organization F, interview by author, April 28th, 2021
Systemic forms of oppression are the root of violence. If systems and teams refuse to acknowledge this history that is still very much alive and well today, it is impossible to say that you are victim/survivor-centered. Furthermore, systems themselves need to come to the realization that they have also re-traumatized and caused harm to the same people they provide services to. Building upon this framework, C-S (F) shared the following:

“Unless you are an organization or system that is specifically set up to treat and to address and to partner and to sojourn with [the community] in terms of healing from sexual violence, most systems have a built in prejudice and [have a] disrespect and disregard for victims of sexual violence.”⁴³

Accountability and responsibility from systems must occur in order to establish trust and dependability within the community. Critical self-reflection and dedication to systematic improvement is an essential first step in this process. However, grounding your response within the previously mentioned five principles – (1) victim-centered, (2) trauma-informed, (3) youth-centered, (4) strengths-based, and (5) culturally-responsive – should not be the end goal. Instead, all systems should seek to help their communities and their diverse members thrive.

The final theme to address from the interviews is the widespread impact of white supremacy. This was shared by C-S (F) in response to the trial and eventual conviction of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin for murdering George Floyd. Here is what the participant had to say:

“When Chauvin was being taken away, when they handcuffed him, the tears were running. First, I had tears of joy. Then, I had tears of sorrow because I said, ‘He is the poster boy of what white supremacy creates and the harm it does to our white brothers and sisters.’ It harms everyone. I wanted to just jump up. If I had a megaphone and could get [in front] of the world, I would have been, like, ‘Look what this has created.’ We are weeping for George Floyd and his family and Breonna Taylor and on and on and on. But you should be weeping for yourselves and change the systems that keep you disengaged from your humanity.”⁴⁴

⁴³ Culturally-Specific Organization F, interview by author, April 28th, 2021.
⁴⁴ Culturally-Specific Organization F, interview by author, April 28th, 2021.
White supremacy and systemic oppression harm everyone. First and foremost it harms those who hold marginalized identities in which many victims/survivors are situated. But it cannot be ignored that those in positions of power and privilege are also negatively impacted. These forms of oppression deprive systems professionals of doing their best, impartial work. White supremacy results in bias, unfair structural hierarchies in the workplace, and de-humanizing practices for everyone. Communities are unable to genuinely engage with one another in robust and revolutionary ways. To achieve the creation of safe, healthy, and thriving communities, all members must work to eliminate white supremacy and systemic oppression.

Limitations & Future Exploration

In reflection of this report, it is necessary to address certain limitations that were present within this project and the impact they had. The most glaring drawback of this project is the number of participants who were interviewed. At the outset of this project, the goal was to interview twenty different youth and nine culturally-specific organizations. However, with only eleven youth participants and six culturally-specific organizations interviewed, this offered a very small pool to represent that spectrum of voices and experiences within Safe Harbor. Potential influencing factors for this limitation are examined further in this section. Although our initial net of recruitment was quite significant, limitations that are further explained below will help describe why this specific limitation was uniquely present within the project.

In addition to a small pool of participants, the youth interviewees also lacked diversity. Only three demographic questions were included in the interview. While the choice was specifically made to only incorporate three of these questions, youth participants were not vetted beforehand based upon their identity in order to be eligible for the interview. Rather, when in communication with Safe Harbor programs, staff were asked to share this opportunity with any youth who might be interested. Despite this, future projects such as this should place added emphasis on ensuring a diverse pool of participants. Particularly, it would be beneficial to have youth interviewees represented from a larger spectrum of gender identities including male or masculine, transgender, non-binary or genderqueer, and more folks. Additionally, youth participants from a range of other races, ethnicities, and cultures are necessary as well.

“Humans create bifurcated systems and systems that are bifurcated then create bifurcated humans. So part of what we have to do in this work is to create systems of equity – and I mean equity rather than equality. We have to let everybody know that we are part of our community. We are part of each other. It is a reality.”

45 Culturally-Specific Organization F, interview by author, April 28th, 2021.
Arguably the most apparent limiting factor of this project was the COVID-19 pandemic. It is an understatement to say that the pandemic had not only a negative impact on the lives of youth survivors, but also on systems professionals and the effectiveness of their response. The primary reason as to why it limited this project, in particular, is because many organizations did not have the time nor the capacity to participate in the first place. Programs were likely focused upon their response to victims/survivors and trying to identify and eliminate the barriers that COVID-19 posed. Even now, we will probably not know the true extent the pandemic had on our communities and service providers for quite some time.

A final limitation of this project was unique to the interviews conducted with youth. The vast majority of youth participants only shared having experiences with either advocacy/shelter organizations or law enforcement agencies. That being said, some youth participants reported receiving multidisciplinary services at a single system discipline. Such disciplines were exclusively Safe Harbor shelters. Within these shelters, youth shared having social workers or caseworkers, educational services, access to healthcare, mental health, and chemical dependency services, and more depending upon the program. More often than not, youth interpreted these combined services as solely shelter programming. However, this may not have always been the case since some services (i.e. healthcare workers, tribal caseworkers, etc.) may in fact be separate from the shelter programming. At any rate, this may explain why youth survivors are generally only offered experiences with advocacy/shelter organizations and law enforcement agencies. But, this in itself shows that more constructive engagement from non-represented disciplines is necessary. Furthermore, it also illustrates that such disciplines have a huge amount of potential to become authentically engaged with youth survivors.

“I would encourage protocol teams to ... start at the point of asking [themselves], do we look and sound like the individuals we are trying to serve and, if we don’t, trusting that that expertise exists in those communities and trying to cultivate those relationships.”⁴⁷

“We deal with multiple pandemics. Not only the shootings from the police, but also the intrinsic violence that is happening because of the unaddressed trauma in our communities.”⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Culturally-Specific Organization F, interview by author, April 28th, 2021.
Recommendations

The content shared above by both youth survivors and culturally-specific organizations must be taken into account in order to improve systems response. This section of the report details a summarized version of practical strategies to implement this feedback. Recommendations below are specifically intended for use in Safe Harbor Protocol Teams and funders of culturally-specific organizations:

1. **Authentic community engagement begins with having critical conversations.**

   Systems must acknowledge the fact that they have actively harmed the same people they are responding to.

2. **Develop meaningful partnerships with the community.**

   Without the direct participation and collaboration from both youth survivors and culturally-specific organizations in your response, you cannot offer victim/survivor-centered services to all individuals.

3. **A clear line of communication extending from the multidisciplinary team to all facets of the community is vital.**

   If effective and intersectional protocols are not implemented outside of the team, system disciplines will not have the opportunity to improve their response.

4. **Propose for greater allocation of funding for culturally-specific organizations.**
Added funding for culturally-specific organizations would promote enhanced representation of victims/survivors, uplift equitable approaches, and offer increased sustainability for such programming.

**5 Boldly work to eradicate white supremacy and systemic forms of oppression.**

By taking these necessary and revolutionary steps, teams can help their communities work towards creating healthier, safer, and thriving environments for all of their members.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this report was to offer stakeholders direct feedback on how they can authentically engage with their community and thus improve their overall protocol and response to sexually exploited youth. Recommendations outlined above provide multidisciplinary teams with practical strategies to begin such meaningful collaboration. While many teams may already be implementing certain methods within their communities, the wisdom and knowledge brought forth from these interviews demonstrate a fundamental need for victim/survivor-centered and intersectional responses on all levels. Additionally, the insight shared by participants encourages teams to take their response a step further by advocating for the abolition of systemic forms of oppression to create equitable and thriving communities.

Finally, the SVJI @ MNCASA team would like to share their deepest appreciation and gratitude for each and every one of the individuals who participated in this project. The value of your wisdom, unique experiences, and the incredible passion you have demonstrated time and time again is immeasurable. Your participation and vision are absolutely necessary for us to improve. This project would not have been possible without you. Thank you.
Appendix 1: Consent Form

You are invited to participate in an informational interview about your experience interacting with agencies in the state of Minnesota.

Please consider this information carefully before deciding if you would like to participate in an interview.

What is the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MNCASA)?

MNCASA provides support and assistance to organizations, professionals, and communities across the state who offer services to people who have experienced sexual violence. Our goal is to challenge the systems, policies, and procedures in our society that may further victimize survivors all while supporting those who have experienced forms of sexual violence.

What is my role at MNCASA?

My name is Hunter Beckstrom and I am the Prevention & Sexual Exploitation Specialist at MNCASA. I work with teams across the state who provide services to people who have experienced sex trafficking/sexual exploitation. These teams work together to create better practices that center the experience of those who have been impacted by trafficking/exploitation.

What is the purpose of this interview?

The purpose of this interview is to gain an understanding of your experience interacting with different agencies in Minnesota. Interview questions will be offered to you prior to conducting the interview.

The following paragraphs will offer more details about your participation in this interview.

Content Warning:

It is possible that our conversation may bring up some difficult experiences. Although it is not the intent to cause you any type of distress, I want to be sure that you receive the care, support, and resources you need. In addition to the services you are already aware of, the end of this form provides other resources that you might find helpful.
Duration:

The interview is expected to last about an hour long. While the interview has the possibility of being completed early, interviews will not continue longer than one hour. Updates on time will be offered throughout the interview.

Documentation:

The interview will be conducted via Zoom. This can occur either virtually or via Zoom’s phone calling function. If not using Zoom’s phone calling function, you will not be required to have your camera on during the interview. You will be asked if you are comfortable having your audio be recorded.

If you are comfortable having your audio recorded, the audio will be recorded via my work-computer and saved to the hard drive. Within two weeks of the interview, the recording will be transcribed. Once the transcription is complete, the audio recording will be deleted. No identifying information will be used in the transcribed document.

If you are not comfortable being recorded, no penalty will be taken against your participation in the interview. In this case, I will ask if you are comfortable with me taking notes during the interview. Within two weeks of the interview, my notes will be transcribed. Once the transcription is complete, the original sheet of notes will be shredded. No identifying information will be used in the transcribed document.

Privacy and Confidentiality:

Protecting your privacy and confidentiality throughout your participation in this project is a top priority. Neither your name nor identity will be shared during the interview in order to preserve your privacy. Additionally, only my supervisors at MNCASA and I will have access to the finalized transcriptions. As mentioned previously, there will be no identifying information on the transcript.

Use of Information:

The information you share during the interview will be used in the following ways. Initially, a summarized report will be created from the information shared from participants in the project. This report will be shared and be accessible via MNCASA’s website. Additionally, information may be utilized for future legislation, factsheets, and resources.
Compensation:

You will be compensated for your participation in this interview at the rate of $81.25 per hour. Compensation will be offered in the form of a VISA gift card. If you choose not to answer a certain question or the interview does not last a full hour, you will still be compensated at the full rate.

Additional Considerations:

- If at any time you have a question for me, I am happy to pause and answer to the best of my ability
- If you are not comfortable answering a certain question, you are not required to and we can move onto the next question
- You are welcome to choose to have an advocate be in attendance during the interview or to complete the interview alone
- Your participation in this interview if voluntary, you are welcome to end the interview if you ever feel uncomfortable, distressed, or for any reason

Thank you for taking the time to look over this document. Your participation and the information you share is very important to us. I look forward to learning from you and the wisdom you have to share from your experiences.

Sincerely,
Hunter Beckstrom
Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault
Appendix 2: Prepared Interview Questions – Youth

A total of three questions will be asked during the interview. Each question serves as a general theme of experiences and feedback you may want to share. Depending on what you share, follow up questions may be asked in addition to the three questions.

Setting foundational knowledge for introduction, agency interaction, and interaction with protocol teams:

I work with teams across the state of Minnesota whose goal is to respond to, help, and support people who have been trafficked for sex. Part of that work involves creating protocol. In other words, teams create rules and a process to follow when they come into contact with someone who has been trafficked for sex. Does that make sense?

These teams are made up of different organizations and agencies working together to respond to and support people who have been trafficked for sex. Teams can include shelters, advocacy organizations, law enforcement, health care professionals, probation officers, social workers and caseworkers, and attorneys or lawyers. Are you familiar with what all of those different organizations or agencies are?

For the following questions, remember to only share experiences with organizations you came into contact with while you were either in or leaving the life of trafficking.

Do you know what agencies or organizations you have come into contact with?

1. How have you observed different agencies interacting with each other when they come into contact with someone who has been trafficked?

2. How did agencies take your unique experience and background into consideration when working with you?

3. How would you like your voice to be heard to improve response by agencies?
Appendix 2: Prepared Interview Questions – Culturally-Specific Organizations

The list of interview questions provided below serve as general themes that will be covered. Depending on the information you share, follow up questions may be asked in addition to these prepared questions.

1. What are the unique needs of the communities that you serve?

2. What discrepancies/inconsistencies have you noticed in systems response to trafficked/exploited youth?

3. When teams are developing protocol, what needs to be included or reflected upon in the development process to support the particular needs of the community that you serve?

4. Should organizations such as yourself be involved with Protocol Development Teams? If so, how should this collaborative process be achieved?