Engaging Survivors: Advocacy Training Scenarios

This tool explores common scenarios that may arise as part of engaging survivors in workplace advocacy efforts, and offers trauma-informed approaches to improve how worker advocates respond.

Scenario: Different Survivor Responses to Workplace Advocacy

Two worker center participants who are survivors decide to advocate for a ballot initiative to protect workers in their industry against domestic and sexual violence. Survivor Y finds that, as she fights for structural change to prevent domestic and sexual violence from happening to other workers, she is able to accept that what happened to her was not her fault. Although she gained great benefits from counseling, she finds that this type of advocacy helps her feel unafraid and powerful in a different way. Survivor Z finds that participating in the ballot initiative leaves her exposed. She feels vulnerable when she shares her story even though she is being supported by her worker center, and feels like she gains much more from group therapy.

Initial Response: Worker center organizers assume that Survivor Z does not have the potential to become a leader in the worker center given her performance on the ballot initiative campaign. Organizers stop investing resources in her training and instead focus exclusively on Survivor Y. Survivor Z eventually leaves the worker center.

Elements of trauma and trauma response present:
- ☑ Variations in response
- ☐ Loss of control
- ☐ Scrambled chronology
- ☐ Challenges trusting or relating to others
- ☐ Isolation
- ☐ Timelines for processing traumatic events
- ☐ Multiple traumas
- ☐ Re-traumatization
- ☑ Resilience
- ☐ Vicarious trauma and resilience

Trauma-Informed Response: Worker center organizers recognize that people who have experienced trauma find resilience in different ways. Although Survivor Z did not find resilience through advocacy on sexual violence, this does not mean that she does not have the potential to be a worker leader.

Scenario: Deciding to be a Campaign Spokesperson

A worker center leader who has led other organizing campaigns discloses that she is a survivor of domestic and sexual violence. She says she wants to participate as a public campaign spokesperson for a legislative initiative the center is supporting that will increase domestic and sexual violence protections for workers in her industry.

Initial Response: Staff accept her participation as a campaign spokesperson without explaining what occupying this role will involve. She is unaware she will need to prepare a statement about what happened and work with staff to find corroborating information. She is surprised and uncomfortable when staff start asking her for medical information, dates of assaults and incidents, witness information, and more. She grows more uncomfortable when she realizes that, although she only disclosed her experiences to two staff members, all of the worker staff seem to know details of her assaults that she had not planned to share publicly. She decides she does not want to participate in the campaign. She also withdraws from her participation in the worker center altogether because she does not feel the worker center has her best interests in mind.

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Trauma-Informed Response: Worker center staff speak with her about what being a campaign spokesperson will involve. They explain the types of statements they will need to take and corroborating evidence that they will need to identify. They affirm that she will have final approval over any campaign materials released with her story and also explain that once her story is in the public domain, the organization will not be able to control what others write and discuss. Staff explain that, while others in the organization will understand she is a spokesperson, she can decide how and when to tell them and what level of detail to share with them about her experiences.

Scenario: Shop Steward Interviews about Domestic and Sexual Violence

A union shop steward interviews two union members, C and D, who say they have been sexually assaulted by a coworker, F. During the interview, C can't provide dates of assaults or remember the order in which different incidents took place. Member D seems detached and emotionless throughout the interview.

Initial Response: The shop steward believes that C and D must be both be lying – sexual violence is a traumatic experience, it's impossible that someone wouldn't seem upset about it or would forget what happened. The shop steward begins to question their "stories" and the two members leave the interview feeling attacked. Member C quits her job. Later, another union member reports being assaulted by coworker F.

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Trauma-Informed Response: The shop steward recognizes that all reactions of C and D are normal, and none indicate that the survivors are being untruthful about their experiences. The shop steward also knows that difficulty remembering the order of events is one typical response to experiencing trauma. He works collaboratively with the member to explore if other corroborating information helps reconstruct a timeline. Through email and text records, together they are able to recreate a timeline that fits with the member's memory of the assaults. The shop steward assists the members as they report their experiences to Human Resources. After Human Resources conducts an investigation, coworker F is fired.

Scenario: Connecting Survivors with Appropriate Resources

During an intake survey at a worker center, L discloses that he was sexually assaulted at work years ago. He says that he hasn't been able to talk about it with his friends or family because they do not know that he is gay. L shares that the perpetrator recently started threatening to "out" him at work. It took him years to come forward because he thought no one would believe a man could be raped. The organizer doing his intake survey thanks him for sharing his experience and says he is sorry to hear what happened.

Initial Response: L organizes with the worker center to change his working conditions to ensure others in the workplace do not have to experience an assault at the hands of his attacker. However, no one at the worker center tells L where he can receive counseling or sexual health services. L tells one fellow organizer personal details about his assaults because he doesn't know who else he can trust. Although L is able to participate in changing conditions at his job, he still feels anxious and depressed. The organizer's job performance begins to suffer as he spends more and more time trying to support L.

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Trauma Informed Response: The organizer shares contact information for a local sexual violence service center that offers multilingual health services for male survivors as well as an organization that supports LGBTQ individuals. He explains that, while the worker center can help advocate to change working conditions, the service center will be able to provide counseling, sexual health services, group therapy, and more. L simultaneously seeks services while organizing with the worker center. L finds that both experiences help him in his recovery in different ways, and he is able to secure major changes in his workplace.

Scenario: Memories of Sexual Violence Impacting Organizing

An experienced organizer starts having panic attacks before solo house visits for a new organizing campaign. Although it has been eight years since she was sexually assaulted during a house visit, she didn't think about it consciously until a friend was sexually assaulted recently. She tells her lead what happened eight years ago and explains that she now has flashbacks when she knocks on doors alone.

Initial Response: Her lead doesn't think that it is realistic that she would begin feeling effects again from an assault that occurred eight years ago. Instead, he assumes that her problems are related to challenges she has already been having with the content of her organizing work. He has a conversation with her about how often fears about one element of the work – like establishing a strong committee structure – can be transferred into another kind of fear. He explains that he thinks pushing past this fear is an important part of her leadership development. The organizer returns to the field, where she continues to have panic attacks.

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Trauma-Informed Response: The organizer's lead knows that it's normal to start processing trauma years after events and that trauma can be re-engaged when a survivor is reminded of the violence. He asks her what would make her feel more secure and supported. He agrees to a new work plan so that the organizer doesn't do cold knocks alone, and only does house visits with another organizer. Her lead also makes clear that the organizer should feel like she can take time to access mental health services without risking her advancement, and shouldn't fear that the additional resources needed for her house visit program will negatively impact her performance assessments. The organizer seeks help from service providers and is accompanied on her house visits. With these supports, she can focus successfully on the content of her work and thrives as a leader in the union.