

# AUTHENTICALLY ENGAGING COMMUNITIES TO PREVENT SEXUAL AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

## WEB CONFERENCE SUMMARY

From participatory mapping to surveys and town hall meetings, community engagement is a big piece of prevention work for organizations working at the local level. What is the real value of community engagement for sexual and domestic violence prevention? And what does genuine engagement look like? This topic focuses on strategies to prevent sexual and domestic violence that are deeply community driven and that authentically support community voices, such as resident-led assessment and planning, and culturally-rooted social change through partnerships with faith leaders.

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### PRACTITIONERS & ADVOCATES FEATURED

- **Layla Elabed**, Program Coordinator, [ACCESS](#) (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services)
- **Olivia Kachingwe, MPH**, Project Coordinator for the Newport Health Equity Zone, [Women's Resource Center](#)

### KEY FINDINGS

- A. **Prioritizing community voices from the planning stages through implementation is essential to empowering residents and cultivating the sustained buy-in that is necessary for community-wide change.** Prior to starting a needs assessment for the Newport Health Equity Zone, a place-based response to

health disparities, the Women's Resource Center brought residents to the table to truly understand the needs in Newport, Rhode Island, and to work



Source: Women's Resource Center

Newport Healthy Equity Zone prioritizes community voice through an "empowerment model." [Image of Newport Health Equity Zone and residents posing outdoors for a photograph]

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### EXPANDING PARTNERSHIPS & LINKAGES

together to fill current gaps in the community. According to staff, the Women’s Resource Center follows an “empowerment model” of supporting survivors and applies this model at the community level by requiring that all project decision-making and community change be led by those who live in the community. Residents, including 12 paid resident consultants, were involved in the design of the assessment and data collection, and worked together to respond to findings and propose solutions. By involving the community in the assessment, the Health Equity Zone learned what residents really want while also garnering authentic and sustainable community buy-in for the effort. To sustain community engagement, genuine relationships and involvement in the community and transparency are needed, as well as creative advocacy with funders to request flexibility and responsiveness to community priorities.

**Tip: Authentically engaging the community means letting the community tell you how they want to be engaged, and being open to their responses.**

- B. Even when sexual and domestic violence are not prioritized as issues by residents, building safe and inclusive communities in ways residents deem important can contribute to sexual and domestic violence prevention and build collective efficacy for long-term community change.** Conditions that contribute to sexual and domestic violence do not exist in a silo. While domestic and sexual violence did not come up directly as priorities in the Newport Health Equity Zone needs assessment, working on the issues that were prioritized (social cohesion, financial freedom, self-efficacy, and improved transportation) can help reduce the risk of sexual and domestic violence. Change in these factors alone will not prevent sexual and domestic violence, though these kinds of changes can affect the risk factors for sexual and domestic violence. This work enables people to feel more connected and safe, and creates a space for conversations about sexual and domestic violence prevention to come up in an organic way.
- C. Diverse community stakeholders can find common ground in the desire for healthy relationships, safe families, and peaceful communities. Working for these outcomes**

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**and showing how gender equity is an important component of achieving these goals can be more effective than talking directly about sexual and domestic violence.**

ACCESS is a nonprofit organization in Dearborn, Michigan, that works specifically with Arab-American communities. They have a Coordinated Community Response Team – comprised of school staff, administrators, city council members, and religious leaders, as well as community leaders from marginalized groups, such as youth and new immigrants – that promotes gender equity. Rather than sharing a lot of statistics about sexual and domestic violence, they focus on the positive outcomes of healthy relationships, safe families, and peaceful communities, and communicate about the positive association, for example, between education for girls and these outcomes.

**D. Working with faith leaders is one way to engage community and overcome cultural stigmas and taboos.** Many faith communities look to religious leaders for advice and guidance. ACCESS works with faith leaders to embed messages about gender equity into their sermons and counseling, and even push back against messages that make divorce difficult for women experiencing domestic violence. Religion and culture often get muddled, so the team engages partners in the community to highlight the differences between religiously-rooted practices versus cultural practices. In this way, authentic community engagement through collaboration with faith leaders contributes to deep and sustainable culturally-rooted change.

## RESOURCES

- [Web Conference Link](#)
- [Web Conference Slides](#)
- [The Role of Community Culture in Efforts to Create Healthier, Safer, and More Equitable Places](#)
- [Making Connections for Mental Health and Wellbeing Among Men and Boys in the U.S.](#)
- [Karamah](#)
- [Faith Trust Institute](#)
- [Asian and Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence](#)