# "Was This Helpful?"

## Survivors Tell Us What They Need. Are We Listening?

*Justice requires the truth be told, to the extent possible the harm be repaired, and the conditions that produced injustice be changed.*

- Ellen Pence, adapted from Archbishop Desmond Tutu

We often say that justice is the foundation on which our advocacy rests. But how do we know if we are making progress to *achieve* justice? To move toward a community free from domestic and sexual violence? How well do we support survivors to *tell their truth*? What do survivors have to say about whether *the harm has been repaired*, or to what degree?

I have traveled around the state talking with advocates, and I am impressed by the amount of energy advocates put into gathering survivor feedback. And I've been deeply moved reading the comments from survivors about what a big difference we are making in their lives.

Survivors not only appreciate being asked, but when engaged in a meaningful feedback process, they become members of the movement to end the violence. Survivors are already helping their communities to *change the conditions that produce the injustice*.

As much as all of this is true, there is still much room for critical thinking:

- How do we draw survivors into the conversation about justice and social change?
- How do we use what we find out to get a little closer to the capital-J Justice we all desire?

The remainder of this article pivots around a central truth: *We want to know what survivors have to say.*

## *WE* want to know what survivors have to say.

One of our biggest challenges when we take a critical look at our current practices around gathering input from survivors is that *we—advocates and survivors—* often take a back seat to *them*—funders, policy makers, and others. We ask survivors lots of questions that are required by others. Funders drive the questions we ask, the forms we use, and the statistics we compile and submit.

Of course we want to be able to prove to anyone who asks us that public and private dollars are being spent wisely. But we cannot lose sight of our larger goals simply because we have requirements to gather certain information.

We need to examine *why* we ask questions and use the answers for our own purpose of moving closer to justice by doing outrageously good advocacy.

Two simple questions:

- Do you, personally, sincerely want to know what survivors have to say about the effectiveness of your advocacy?

- Do you, as an agency, sincerely want to know what survivors have to say about your collective work?

As an individual advocate, it takes a certain amount of courage to ask survivors questions and stay open to the possibilities—both that your work can use improvement, and that your work has made all the difference.

An organization needs courage as well. Though typically the director or managers have to have the will to lead the agency, I've always believed leadership can come from any level. Anyone can influence an organization to embrace and act upon what survivors say.

Have you lost track of why you are asking the questions you ask? In other words, do you ask any questions whose answers you will not report to any funder, but rather will use internally for reflection and action? Would a funder or whoever else who is imposing certain questions be open to asking more relevant questions?

## We *WANT* to know what survivors have to say.

Do you, or don't you? This is an important question. Let's explore some common forms of resistance to actually wanting to know:

- It is just flat-out hard to hear criticism sometimes. Especially if it is coming from someone you have had a difficult time connecting with.

- It's hard to integrate criticism if you don't feel like you have strong mentors or outlets to develop your advocacy skills.

- It's especially hard if you have been directed by a supervisor to engage in problematic advocacy practices. When you feel you have no power to address a lapse in advocacy, it is frustrating to get negative feedback from a survivor.

- It can be hard to get suggestions or criticisms if you feel like your organization is working *just as hard as it possibly can.*

- It is easy, especially if you have been around for a while, to dismiss concerns or ideas. (i.e., you have heard it all before; there is nothing that can be done; this is just how you do things.)

Take a few moments to think about if these ideas resonate for you, or if you have resistance for some other reasons.

What keeps you, individually or organizationally, from *wanting* to know what survivors have to say?

## We want to *KNOW* what survivors have to say.

Many of us are in a rut, using the very same forms with the very same questions that we've been using for a very long time. You can sometimes find out more by asking one simple question, "Is this helpful?" than by reading the answers to a five-page questionnaire.

Does the information we gather tell us the whole story? Do we make it easy and accessible to give feedback? Are we creative and do we make it fun?

Do you engage in other ways of listening to survivors besides written forms and questionnaires? Have you ever formed a formal or informal focus group so you can ask more in-depth questions?

Do you ever hear back about the data you collect? Do you take the time to discuss the reports you generate or look at what survivors are telling you?

Often, people only give feedback when they have a complaint. Think about your own experience. How often do you take the time to let someone know when you are *satisfied* with something that happened—compared to how quick you are to fill out the card or talk to someone when you are *dissatisfied*?

A single complaint may or may not be a good reason to change something. But the squeaky wheel may be squeaking for a very good reason. Don't just react, analyze. Data and good information can drive positive changes.

When survivors tell us we have a problem, we shouldn't ignore it. When survivors give us compliments, we should not ignore that either. We work with tough stuff and need to take the time to acknowledge when things are going right. Having this experience can put us on the road to wanting to *know* more.

It is much easier to plan for everything from major overhauls to minor refinements when you have substantial amounts of information and data to back you up. If you have the facts—the information and the stats—you can analyze if the refinements that you make to your services actually make a difference for survivors.

Have you made any changes recently to your program where survivor feedback was the motivation?

## We want to know what *SURVIVORS* have to say.

The saddest truth for advocates is that we simply cannot fix anything—we cannot turn back the hands of time. But we can, and we must, hold space for victims to tell their entire truth, with no part left out. We can help hold the judgments and shame at bay long enough for her to say all that she wishes to say. Being able to tell her truth, perhaps for the very first time, is powerful. The importance of this person-to-person connection cannot be overstated.

This is one of the hardest jobs any advocate undertakes: to be in the presence of the pain that people reveal and to be a compassionate witness to it.

Beyond that, to repair the harm we must be open to hearing from survivors the full range of possibilities they see—from what they are going to do, to what they want us to do, and what they want their friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, and the larger community to do. What they want the perpetrator to do. All to repair the harm done. As much as we are "service providers" of advocacy, shelter, crisis services, support, and so on, we cannot rush into offering these services before we know if our services are any part of what a survivor needs to be restored.

Feeling overly responsible for repairing harm can be a barrier for advocates as we help survivors explore *all the ways* the damage can be repaired. We are not in charge of all the repairs. But we can be the sounding board, a facilitator of creative ideas, a conduit of information out into the community.

How do victims let you know if they are or are not feeling listened to? Do you ask victims to assess how well you helped them to explore a full range of options for restoration?

## Conclusion

Every day, so many advocates all around our beautiful state try their very best to help survivors. We do thoughtful and compassionate work. We owe it to survivors and we owe it to ourselves to make sure we are on the right track with all of our honest effort. The only way we can know is if we ask survivors for their honest opinion about how we are doing.

What survivors say matters. We want to know what survivors have to say.