

## **Communities: Guidelines for Facilitating Victims, Survivors, and Family Members in Sharing their Stories**

This resource is designed for communities who want to help individuals share their stories following a Mass Violence Incident (MVI). These individuals may be direct victims, survivors, family members, or others who were impacted by an MVI. For this tip sheet, we refer to all of these individuals, collectively, as “survivors.”

For community agencies interested in engaging survivors impacted by MVIs in an activity where he/she will be sharing their story, it is extremely important to ensure that the sharing is meaningful, effective, and safe. Although outreach can be empowering for survivors, it can be challenging or potentially harmful without adequate support. This tip sheet can help agencies make intentional choices for inviting, preparing, and helping survivors share their stories.

### **What are some ways to involve victims, survivors, and family members in sharing their story to empower others?**

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There are multiple ways to share your story as a victim, survivor, or family member impacted by an MVI, which may assist others in their healing and recovery. Some examples include:

- Speaking at public events
- Providing peer support
- Attending support groups as a mentor
- Organizing/participating in community activities
- Speaking at small group meetings
- Being a spokesperson to the media

### **What should be done prior to asking survivors to become involved?**

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Prior to inviting survivors to become involved in an activity, it is critical to *first* establish the goal of the event and determine how the individual will contribute, and *then* discuss this goal and the individual’s expected role with them before he/she commits to participating. It is also very important that participating agencies complete training on or consult with professionals who have expertise in: working with distressed survivors, establishing appropriate boundaries, and providing trauma-informed services.

### **Planning for the Event**

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One of the most common stressors that survivors have indicated when asked to share their story at an event is not feeling prepared or not being informed about the event logistics. There are several steps that the planner(s) can take to lessen stress surrounding details of the event. These include:

- Clarify the role and responsibilities of the survivor(s)
- Establish boundaries around resources to be asked of the survivor (e.g., time, money)
- Set psychological boundaries around emotional engagement by maintaining a professional relationship with the survivor
- Ensure that all staff involved in planning and execution of the event are trained in how to be trauma-informed

- Create the opportunity for all interested survivors to potentially participate
- Denote when and where media may be invited and ask survivors' permission regarding media requests beforehand
- Include time on the agenda for unstructured interactions
- Include downtime for the survivor if there is a very full agenda
- Provide take-home tangibles to serve as a memory of the event (e.g., pins, bracelets)

## Choosing Participants

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It is critical to dedicate necessary thought and planning into choosing who will participate in events. Just because a survivor has done a wonderful job sharing his/her story in one situation or at one type of event, it does not mean that he/she will be the correct participant for another event, or that he/she will want to participate in all events.

- First, decide what the purpose of the event is, what involvement the survivor will have in the event, and what goals are to be accomplished by including a survivor.
- Once these have been established, it is helpful to adopt a vetting procedure to determine if a particular individual will help accomplish these goals, as selecting the right individual is crucial.
- In addition, screening should seek to explore survivor readiness to participate and share their story.
- Finally, it is very important to ensure that all speakers and participants are trauma-informed.

## Prepare and Educate the Survivor

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Once a survivor has been selected, some specific steps can help prepare the participating individual for the event, which may include:

- Explain the purpose and audience of the event
- Clarify the role, demands, and parameters of the survivor's involvement
- Establish goals and expectations for both the survivor and the organization
- Review the logistics
  - Agenda
  - Dress Code
  - Media Involvement
  - Agencies and people involved
  - Room and Board
  - Traveling arrangements
  - Coordination of supplies (tissues, water, etc.)
  - Disability considerations
  - Language interpreter considerations
- Cultural considerations (setting, incident, city/town) of the audience or community.

## Coordinate Social Support for the Survivor

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To ensure the survivor is adequately supported, it is essential to:

- Make a plan to have individuals present at the event that can provide support and assist with debriefing with the survivor following the activity.
- Encourage the survivor to develop a safety plan that includes coping mechanisms to manage potential triggers and/or distress.

- When multiple survivors are present for an activity, coordinate a way for those who are interested to maintain contact following the event. When coordinating this, consider setting boundaries and guidelines for remaining in contact.

### **Establish Boundaries for the Victim, Media, Audience, and Event Planners**

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It is important to educate the media and the audience about the purpose of the event and to establish boundaries prior to hosting an event involving survivors. The role and extent of media involvement will vary, depending on the event.

- Recommendations for social media (comfort in sharing, social media involvement) should be outlined with the survivor, audience, and others involved. Any questions or other types of communication should be voluntary, non-judgmental, and respectful.
- It is also critical to determine whether the survivor is comfortable with answering questions, and if so, plan for interrupting if questions are inappropriate or if the survivor becomes uncomfortable.