
DV RISC

**Guidance Document:
Engaging with Survivors
and People Impacted by
Intimate Partner
Violence to Inform Risk
Assessment Strategies**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The development of this document would not have been possible without the DV RISC Survivor Advisory Board. The Board is composed of 12 individuals who are survivors of intimate partner violence and family survivors of intimate partner homicide. The Board members are located throughout the United States and met virtually on a quarterly basis throughout 2022- 2023.

This document was also inspired by: 'Safe consultations with survivors of violence against women and girls,' UN Women 2022.

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) affects countless people across the United States and can result in devastating consequences, including homicide. The Domestic Violence Resource for Increasing Safety and Connection (DV RISC) is a national resource center funded by the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) that provides training and technical assistance on intimate partner violence (IPV) risk and lethality assessments.

DV RISC is guided by 4 main principles: community responsiveness that is inclusive; guidance by people impacted by IPV; accountability that is individual and communal; and coordination that is multi-layered and multi-pronged. DV RISC operationalizes its guiding principles in numerous ways including forming a Survivor Advisory Board in February 2022, who helps inform the development of the DV RISC resource center and advocate for the voices of survivors to be integrated into policies, programs, and system responses to IPV.

An issue identified by the DV RISC project team and Survivor Advisory Board is that many system players and agencies operating in jurisdictions are not actively and continuously obtaining feedback from survivors and impacted people, to inform policies and programs. For jurisdictions that are seeking to identify, implement, or enhance IPV risk and lethality assessment strategies or models, it is imperative that local survivors are engaged to obtain their feedback on a selected strategy or model. To support jurisdictions in engaging survivors, the DV RISC Survivor Advisory Board has created the following Guidance Document with some suggested practical strategies to obtain feedback meaningfully and safely from survivors in the community. It is hoped that feedback from survivors can be used to contribute to the effective planning and implementation of an IPV risk or lethality assessment strategy.



Intended Audience



The intended audience for this guide is any jurisdiction that is interested in identifying, implementing, or enhancing an IPV risk or lethality assessment strategy, and is seeking to include local survivor feedback in the planning process. This guide provides practical strategies for safely engaging with survivors. The authors of this guide assert that community-based advocates and other community-based organizations are in the best and safest position to engage with survivors, rather than those working within the criminal legal or child protection systems.



Why Consult Survivors?



There are numerous benefits to consulting survivors of intimate partner violence, and family survivors of intimate partner homicide, particularly when it comes to risk assessment planning and implementation. These include:

- Survivors have interacted with the system and are the direct recipient of services and policies, including risk assessments. Therefore, they are in the best position to identify what works well or does not work well, and areas for improvement
- Survivors best understand the magnitude of their situation and their needs, and can advise on the effectiveness of current or proposed risk assessment strategies
- Learning what survivors are already doing and who they're engaging with, can indicate other good intervention points that may not have been previously considered
- Gaining a better understanding of survivors' experiences including the full spectrum of violence and abuse, and patterns and vulnerabilities. This can help to assess whether the current or proposed risk assessment strategies are responsive enough
- Increasing awareness that IPV does not discriminate but does disproportionately affect some populations. This can help to challenge biases and build more understanding of where services and responses need to be strengthened



Why Consult Survivors?



- Can help to identify and reduce any unintended consequences of a current or potential risk assessment strategy
- Helps to build trust, improve system responses, and ultimately lower crime and keep other victims safe



Reflection Questions



Before engaging with survivors and those impacted by intimate partner violence, the authors encourage agencies to reflect on the following questions, as these will help to create more meaningful engagement:

What has prevented your agency from seeking feedback and input from survivors?

- Include reflection on barriers/challenges to engagement.
- Include reflection on any possible inherent biases.
- Include reflections on any previous attempted efforts to engage survivors

Who are the different populations of survivors in your community?

- It may be helpful to review local data, census reports, community organizations, etc. to help build understanding of different populations and representation of survivors in your community, and whether they are accessing services beyond the criminal legal system or mainstream organizations

What is the current motivation to engage with survivors?

- Understanding why you want to engage with survivors will help to inform the information you are seeking



Practical Strategies for Outreach



Who Should Participate

The participants that you reach out to will depend on the information that you are seeking. For example, if you are already using a risk assessment or risk model such as a high risk team, and are looking to strengthen or expand its use, you would be looking for survivors who are currently or have previously been case managed by the high risk team, to seek their feedback on what worked well and areas for improvement. Some other examples of purpose areas are below:

Purpose: to better understand if the law enforcement risk assessment is being used effectively and helping survivors connect with services.

- *Seek survivors who: made a report to law enforcement during x period*

Purpose: to gain insight and input from survivors on whether a risk assessment being used by X agency or at X point, will be helpful.

- *Seek survivors who: Interacted with X agency or at X point*

Regardless of the information or feedback that is being sought, it is important for a variety of survivors to be engaged, that best represents the diversity of your community. This can include but is not limited to diversity in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation, racial and cultural background, and people with disabilities. Diversity of experience is also important to consider. For example, you may want to hear not only from survivors who have experienced intimate partner violence, but also from family survivors who have lost a loved one to intimate partner homicide. The authors also encourage jurisdictions to think about engaging survivors who have been criminalized by the legal system and incorrectly classified as the offender, rather than the victim.



Practical Strategies for Outreach



Who should conduct outreach

It may not be the most appropriate or practical for system agencies, or even your own agency, to directly seek feedback from survivors and impacted people. Partnering with other agencies and institutions to facilitate this survivor engagement can be more strategic and can also help to build relationships within your community. Examples include:

- Local community agencies focused solely on domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking (e.g., women’s shelters, domestic violence safehouses, advocacy programs). These agencies have direct access to survivors and may be in a better position to seek their feedback in a variety of ways including group sessions, one-on-one sessions, or through a hotline service
- Local community agencies that may not be dealing directly with domestic violence but may have access to diverse survivors, including survivors of diverse cultural and racial backgrounds
- Faith based institutions who may already be operating domestic violence programs and serving the needs of survivors
- Health institutions such as local hospitals or walk-in clinics who regularly serve diverse survivors, especially those from marginalized populations



Practical Strategies for Outreach



Suggestions for outreach

Reaching out to survivors can take many forms including but not limited to phone calls, social media posts, or flyers and advertisements. Work with your local partners to determine the best method for outreach. In whichever way the outreach is conducted, it's important that these key points are communicated:

- The 'why' of the ask i.e why are you looking for their feedback (the purpose). This can include some data on the issue (e.g., last year there was an x % increase in IPV homicides), and the value their voice will add to bringing about substantive change
- What is expected of them e.g., 60 minute listening session
- How the information will be used
- Measures in place for confidentiality and safe sharing
- Compensation

Note: if doing telephone outreach, it is important that this type of message not be left as a voicemail as this could compromise the safety of survivors.



Methods for Obtaining Feedback



There are several methods for engaging survivors and obtaining feedback, with 3 common ways being focus groups or listening sessions, individual interviews, and surveys/questionnaires. There are several advantages and limitations to each approach, with some listed below. It is best to analyze and discuss with your partners the best method for obtaining feedback.

Focus Groups/Listening Sessions

Advantages:

- Enables survivors to open up and share with another, as they may have had similar experiences
- Can elicit a number of different perspectives and cover a range of questions and talking points
- Can be empowering or validating for survivors, almost like a support group

Limitations:

- Requires a skilled and trained facilitator
- May require other resources such as refreshments and childcare, which not all agencies have the capacity to provide



Individual Interviews

Advantages:

- Some survivors may feel more comfortable speaking to someone one-on-one
- Enables opportunity for conversations to go into a deeper level as the focus is on one person
- There is no need to worry about group dynamics or someone dominating the conversation

Limitations:

- Time consuming
- May be intimidating for the survivor speaking to the interviewer by themselves

Surveys/Questionnaires

Advantages:

- Can reach a large audience by disseminating surveys online or in-person
- Enables survivors more time to individually reflect on and respond to the questions in their own time
- They are quick and affordable

Limitations:

- Can be dehumanizing and triggering as there is no human interaction guiding the facilitation of questions
- Participant can only respond to questions that are asked in the survey; they don't enable space for nuanced conversations



Methods for Obtaining Feedback



Regardless of how feedback is sought, it's imperative that survivors feel safe and comfortable when sharing and providing feedback.

Some important factors to consider are:

Confidentiality

- Obtain informed consent from survivors to participate
- Having signed confidentiality agreements can be helpful in holding interviewers and participants accountable to not sharing one another's information
- Do not use a person's name, address, or personally identifiable details in any written documents. It is critical to explain to survivors that their identifying information will never be attached to the information gathered, and that what they say is confidential

Language

- Communicate how information will be stored and what it will be used for
- Avoid any leading questions that generate a specific or preferred response
- Allow survivors to use language that feels comfortable for them and to be referred to by any name and pronoun that they're most comfortable with
- Enable language access and make accommodations for survivors who may require an interpreter, translated questionnaire, or to participate in a listening session conducted in a preferred language



Creating Safe Spaces for Sharing



Location/Access

- Provide a central and easy to access location for survivors to participate in a focus group or interview (ideally close to public transport)
- If disseminating surveys/questionnaires, provide hard copies for survivors who can't easily access an online survey

Facilitation

- Provide questions ahead of time so the participant can gauge their comfort and reflect on the questions. Inform participants that they are free to not discuss anything or respond to anything they are uncomfortable with
- If organizing a listening session, be mindful of the person running the group. For example, no one should be in uniform (e.g., law enforcement, healthcare providers). It should be a safe and comfortable environment, and everyone should be given the opportunity to be heard
- Groups sized should be kept small, ideally no more than 5-7 participants. If there are many interested participants, then multiple groups may be needed
- A guided length of time for the session could be no less than an hour, but not much more than 90 minutes.
- If organizing a virtual listening session, enable the option for participants to turn off their camera or use another name for their display



Creating Safe Spaces for Sharing



- Allow survivors the choice to stop participating in the interview or focus group at any time
- Be mindful of the physical space (e.g., it must be a safe environment and set up in a way that is conducive to open sharing)
- Conduct separate sessions for in-person and virtual participants (combining the two, i.e., having some participants in-person and others virtual for the same session, can be awkward and does not enable open sharing)

Providing Support

- Provide a list of additional resources for support (in case if needed), such as numbers and addresses of local organizations
- Participants should be advised that the session could be recorded for transcription and accuracy of capturing information purposes. Allow participants the choice to not be recorded
- Having a trained mental health provider/advocate or social worker present for participants to debrief afterwards if needed, can be very helpful



Compensation



While it is not always necessary to compensate, offering survivors money or gift cards (physical or e-gift cards) to “practical” stores (e.g., gas, groceries, department stores) is an important step in affirming their courage to share and to demonstrate that you value their time.

If conducting in-person focus groups or interviews, covering the costs of transportation and providing childcare are also important things to consider.



Information to be Obtained



The questions that you ask will be determined by the information that you are seeking and your purpose for engaging with survivors. Using the example highlighted earlier, of wanting to strengthen or expand the current high risk team model, some examples of questions that could be asked include:

- Were you informed that your case had been referred to the domestic violence high risk team?
- Which members of the high risk team were you in contact with? How did you feel about your interactions with them?
- Did you sign a consent form allowing the members of the high risk team to discuss your case and share information? At what points in time were you asked for your consent?
- Did you have any concerns for your privacy or confidentiality throughout the process? If so, in what way?
- In what ways did your case being managed by the high risk team make you feel safer or less safe?
- What are your thoughts on the high risk team expanding its model to the neighboring county?
- What suggestions do you have for the high risk team to improve its services and support of survivors?

Note: It can be helpful to use a mix of closed questions when you want to elicit specific facts, and open questions when you want to encourage more free expression and narration.

➤ Next Steps and Follow-up ➤

The information that is gathered should be collated into a document or report and shared with the various agencies that will be collaborating to plan and implement a risk or lethality assessment strategy. These could include but are not limited to law enforcement, medical institutes, advocacy organizations, court personnel, abusive partner intervention programs, and culturally based organizations. The information and feedback received should inform planning and implementation efforts, and can also be used to inform numerous processes related to effective risk assessment implementation such as confidentiality, accountability, and referrals to appropriate services.

It's important that survivors are kept engaged and followed up with at a reasonable period later (approx. 6-12 months), to demonstrate what active steps towards achieving change have been made or suggestions that have been actioned, thanks to their engagement. If no steps have been taken, then discussions on why not and plans for how things will be done differently, should be had.

Another important thing to remember is that engaging with and obtaining feedback from survivors and impacted people is not a one-time endeavor. Jurisdictions should try to seek feedback and build partnerships with survivors and those impacted in their communities on an ongoing basis, particularly when it comes to implementing or reviewing the ongoing implementation of a risk assessment strategy. Consider hiring people with lived experience, forming survivor advisory boards, inviting survivors and those with lived experience to sit on multidisciplinary units or interagency meetings, and partnering with other survivor-led entities.

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