

Including Underserved, Un-served, and Inadequately Served Populations in the STOP Planning Process

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One of the unique aspects of the STOP planning process that distinguishes it from other grant programs is that the *process* is equally as important as the *product*. Shortly after the Reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 2005, STOP State Administrators were charged with the responsibility of developing a state plan that includes a “recognition and meaningful response to the needs of underserved populations” and a strategy for equitably distributing the new ten percent set-aside for culturally- and linguistically-specific populations.¹ Each plan must describe who was at the table and demonstrate not only that non-profit, non-governmental victim service providers were included, but that Tribal nations and persons from diverse populations were involved in the planning process, as well.²

The current definition in VAWA for “underserved” includes “populations underserved because of geographic location (such as rural isolation), underserved racial and ethnic populations, populations underserved because of special needs (such as language barriers, disabilities, alienage status, or age), and any other population determined to be underserved by the State planning process in consultation with the Attorney General.” While culturally- and linguistically-specific populations are not currently defined in VAWA, they are commonly understood to include racial and ethnic communities, and also may include deaf and hard of hearing communities, as well as populations seeking language access (e.g., immigrant and refugee populations).

The Women of Color Network (WOCN) has worked to promote a national dialogue on reaching underserved and culturally- and linguistically-specific populations. After speaking to thousands of advocates over the past 12 years, we have compiled a number of suggestions for STOP Administrators as they design and implement their planning processes.

Expand the state approach to include underserved, un-served, and inadequately served.

The term “underserved” represents a wide spectrum of needs. There are some populations that truly have no services available to them and thus, are “un” served. There are also those populations that have minimal access and thus are in need of more outreach and support, and are, thus, “under” served. Finally, there are those historically marginalized populations that may be overrepresented as they are present in large numbers in a state or territory but remain inadequately served with specific reference to the quality of service and a “one-size-fits-all” approach that disregards the historical barriers embedded in each system. It is common for these larger populations to be perceived as adequately served in their states or territories, but this overlooks the history of marginalization and the need for acknowledgement of it. These populations may be more adequately served through culturally- and linguistically-relevant service provision that includes providers that are representative of those populations. It is important that community-based programs that recognize and are responsive to the histories of these populations receive funds to enhance their services.

¹ OVW FY 2009: STOP Violence Against Women Formula Grant Program.

² OVW STOP Implementation Plan Tool: 2006 STOP Grants Technical Assistance Project.

Resist the “we all are underserved” rationale. It has become commonplace to avoid or temper the identification of underserved populations through the statement, “we are all underserved.” This logic, while somewhat true for those living in rural states, for example, derails the conversation. It prevents us from taking true stock of the experiences of those who face multiple barriers and who, even in a rural state, are even further marginalized. This reasoning also pushes us toward a “one-size-fits-all” model while ignoring the needs of diverse groups.

Don’t take the “easy” way out. There is a pattern of jurisdictions choosing the “easy” population with which to work. “Easy” can be defined in some cases as *easy to reach*, such as elders who are in all localities. It can be perceived as the *easiest to identify*, resulting in states and territories placing more focus on geographic location such as rural areas, or on physical disabilities. Finally, it can be implemented as *easy to approach* – i.e., those populations that are already represented at the table and with which you have a prior relationship. Choosing to work with the same populations over and over again can create a hierarchy of need, further reinforcing the isolation of marginalized populations.

Don’t allow racial and ethnic populations to take a back seat to other populations. Communities of color are often the groups that are easily pushed aside in favor of addressing age, disabilities, or geographic location. There should not be a hierarchy of need that places one population or one kind of need ahead of another. The planning table must be designed to include representation of all populations with expressed and determined need. Race and ethnicity is too easily avoided and, while remaining a difficult topic for some to address, it is a daily reality for many of the survivors within each state and territory.

Don’t let, “We tried to reach them,” serve as your final answer. It is common for providers to say that they made several attempts to reach a population but because they couldn’t reach them, they were not included in the state planning process. “We tried...” merely speaks to an action *in progress* and is insufficient as a final answer. Try other methods of outreach. For example, look to the leadership of providers who are from and represent those populations. They can assist in brokering relationships in those communities. Another method is to identify key traditional and non-traditional leaders embedded within those communities and meet with them to develop a plan for accessing and including their community in the STOP planning process. If states or territories are truly unable to reach key leaders within a particular community, then the state plan can outline in the implementation plan the steps that were previously taken to reach them, and the concrete steps that will be taken to avoid a similar scenario in the future.

Refrain from saying, “That population is already being served by the state coalition,” or by some other entity. It may be tempting to offer the rationale that because a population is currently on the radar of a particular provider that there is no need for further support. This line of thinking reinforces silos within the state or territory. Instead, we should strive to weave a fabric of support that creates a safety net for underserved, un-served, inadequately served, and culturally- and linguistically-specific populations at all service points. States and territories must ensure that comprehensive, multidisciplinary services are provided to these populations. Also, while some of these populations may be accessing community-based entities that are in fact serving them, this does not relieve the state or territory of the responsibility to ensure that all services reach and are relevant to those populations.

Resist saying, “We provide the services, but they aren’t utilizing them.” This explanation places the blame upon marginalized populations. Rather, we should ask providers, “Why they are not accessing the services?” Why after using the services are they not returning? What can be done to ensure that they not only access and utilize the services but that they continue using the service until their needs are met?

Welcome persons from and representing underserved, un-served, inadequately served, and culturally- and linguistically-specific populations to the table to speak for themselves. Statistics and research are useful resources, but cannot take the place of having actual people present to speak for themselves. Do not be afraid or hesitant to include more than one person from a group. There is diversity within every population and no community is monolithic. One, two, or even three people cannot speak for the whole population, but in representing themselves, they can draw from their own lives and experiences and can bring a voice that can help to create a powerful impact on behalf of their populations. Ensuring adequate representation at the table can also help to answer some of the questions that the planning team has regarding services to marginalized groups.

Overall, the state planning process should be informed directly by those from underserved, un-served, inadequately served and culturally- and linguistically-specific populations. The process is not just about *what resulted* from the planning but it is also about *who* was involved. Take the time to consider who is at your planning table; your state or territory, and, ultimately, the survivors under your watch, will be all the better for it.

For more information about or to request assistance from the Women of Color Network, go to <http://womenfocolornetwork.org> or contact Tonya Lovelace at tl@pcadv.org.