



# Resource Sharing Project

## Rural Training & Technical Assistance

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## Remote Supervision

in Rural Dual/Multi-Service Advocacy Agencies

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**I**n rural communities, traveling long distances is an obstacle for survivors seeking services in terms of transportation, time, and money. Having advocates out in the community is important to comprehensive services to sexual violence survivors, and critical to the success of sexual assault services in rural communities. Since sexual violence survivors typically don't utilize domestic violence (or emergency) shelter as a service, many sexual violence advocates spend a majority of their time traveling and meeting survivors in the community. While having advocates out in the community and spread across our service areas is best for survivors, we know it can take a toll on advocates in terms of isolation and lack of teamwork. We can institutionalize support for advocates through strong supervision and agency practices, paying particular attention to remote supervision.

Rural advocacy agencies typically serve large areas with very few staff members. This is why rural agencies are the most likely to have a large portion of their advocates working remotely. Some examples of remote advocacy include legal advocates working mostly at the courthouse, advocates who work at satellite offices, prevention educators



who spend most of their time at schools and working with other agencies, advocates who work entirely out of community spaces and survivor's homes, and volunteers. This wide variety of locations can be a challenge to rural programs as they figure out how to supervise and support advocates remotely. There are strategies in building team connection, creating comfortable workspaces, supervising

and hiring staff, and attending to vicarious trauma that can support all your staff, wherever they may work.

## **Team Connection**

When an agency has a small and mostly remote staff, it can be difficult to keep all staff members feeling connected as a team. Remote advocates often feel isolated from main office staff. It can be hard for remote advocates to know when people in the main office are available or busy. This often

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leads them to not ask questions for fear of interrupting. Regular supervision and staff meetings are the best way to make all staff feel connected to your program and its mission.

Holding weekly staff meetings and including remote advocates in a meaningful way is helpful. Whenever possible, you should have all staff meet in person. However, using video conferencing platforms such as Adobe Connect, Google Hangout, or Skype can also be effective.

It is difficult for remote advocates to feel connected to the agency when they never see their team. Have staff, especially supervisors, from the main office travel to satellite offices on a regular basis. Try rotating the location of staff meetings to include satellite offices. This encourages staff to support one another and allows main office staff to see where remote staff work.

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Have agency celebrations and include all remote staff. These celebrations bond staff together and support teamwork. Not all celebrations and connections need to happen in person. For example, try having staff email “selfies” of themselves in their office every Tuesday. Or, if you have a potluck in the main office and remote staff can’t come, send them snacks to enjoy during the potluck.

Encourage staff pairing and mentoring between remote advocates and advocates in the main office. Often remote advocates and main office staff have knowledge and experiences about systems which can be helpful to share.

Make sure your budget covers mileage reimbursement and other expenses for remote staff to travel to the main office for meetings, and consider the additional travel time when scheduling meetings or events.

To encourage communication among the whole team, try using instant messaging, such as Google Chat, Yahoo Messenger, or Yammer.

When setting up instant messaging, set clear guidelines on confidentiality and sharing of client information. This may also be a time to review and update your agency policy on social media usage.

## **Remote Spaces**

To fully support remote advocates and rural survivors, our remote spaces should feel like extensions of the main office. This means remote advocates should have access to all the same technology, paperwork, and agency resources as the main office staff. Spaces should feel safe and comfortable to survivors and staff.

Equip satellite offices with technology for the advocates to maintain contact with the main office or other satellite offices. Supply high-speed internet, phone service, adequate

furniture, and office equipment like copiers and faxes.

When using borrowed space from other organizations, we must ensure that the space is accessible and comfortable for survivors, and ensures privacy. It can be helpful to have a few locations to use to accommodate survivors' comfort and preference. In borrowed spaces, files and confidential information should not be kept there unless the advocate has a locked office or file cabinet that only they (or others from the advocacy program) can access.

For advocates that regularly travel or have no permanent office space, the main office should be the primary storage space for confidential information and files, and the advocate should have a lockbox in their car for temporary file storage.





Make sure to provide advocates who do not have access to a set office space with necessary technology such as smart phones, laptops, and tablets. This ensures remote advocates have access to email, internet, and agency resources. Keep agency resources, such as original copies of paperwork or lists of countywide resources, on a cloud database to make sure all staff has access to necessary information. Ensure that your agency has strong policy on confidentiality and storage of files that covers all spaces the agency uses. Communicate the policy clearly to all staff.

When or if your agency has funds to make upgrades to the office—new paint or furniture, for example—get upgrades for remote spaces too. For advocates who have no set office space, this could mean getting them trunk organizers or other tools for their cars.

It is helpful to allow advocates using a satellite space to determine its set up and decoration. Giving remote advocates responsibility and control of their own space empowers them towards the success of the office and its services.

## **Staff Hiring**

Remote work is most successful when we hire the right staff for the demands of the position. When hiring staff for a satellite office or a position that will largely work away from the main office, look for candidates who, in addition to having the skills and qualities necessary for the position:

- Enjoy some solitude in their work
- Are self-motivated and do not procrastinate
- Can problem solve on their own

- Is comfortable seeking support and asking for help
- Are very organized, self-disciplined, and have good time management skills
- Do not need frequent feedback regarding work results
- Have a solid performance record in present position
- Have proficient job knowledge, strong written and verbal skills, and computer skills

If an employee will be working out of their home, also consider candidates who:

- Have reliable childcare arrangements during agreed-upon work hours. You may need to update personnel policies to address expectations for childcare during work hours
- Have a home workspace that is free from the distraction of household demands (children, family members, or others in need of attention)
- Have sufficient room in their house for a separate, confidential workspace and enough storage space for job needs

If this the first time you're hiring someone who will work remotely, it's a good idea to review personnel policies for any adjustments you may need to make for that position. For example, many of us have policies on snow days, but these policies might not work for all remote employees as they are currently written. It's also important to do a site visit to the new employee's home office to ensure they have what they need for an appropriate workspace and to address any potential issues.

## Supervision

Supervision is an opportunity to provide support and information to advocates, as well as planning about a variety of topics and work activities. These topics can include planning community partnerships, navigating complex boundaries and ethics in rural areas, and discussing ongoing training and skill development. Providing remote advocates with training and information leads to successful and fulfilled staff.

It is a best practice for supervisors to check in with their remote advocates at least once per week via phone to provide support to the employee as well as have the opportunity to monitor work activities. If the advocate is within easy travel distance, at least one in-person session per month is best.

concrete and measurable expectations such as written short-term priorities and long-term goals.

It can be helpful to provide new employees with welcome packets and provide a process to answer questions and introduce systems and people.

Supervisors should set clear expectations for how often you expect advocates to check in. Be sure to reinforce norms that it's okay to call, text, or email questions as needed throughout the week.

Supervisors need to continue to work with remote advocates on their professional and skill development. Ensuring remote advocates, especially in rural areas, are provided ongoing education can be a challenge. However, there

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Supervisors need to be sure that remote advocates know all the policies of the agency and how to access information from the agency. Provide a staff list with names, contact information, and a short job description for all staff members.

Supervisors should provide clear, written job descriptions for remote advocates. The key to remote supervision is to communicate what is expected of staff in regards to work progress and evaluation. This includes communicating

are numerous online training options to help advocates get access to information.

It's important for the agency to have a strong presence in all areas they serve. Remote advocates should not be the sole face of the agency in remote service areas. Agency leadership and other staff should make regular contact with community leaders in all parts of the agency's service area. Frequent contact ensures sustainability of services should the remote advocate leave the position. This approach also allows



agency leadership to provide support to the remote advocate and monitor any issues with relationships in remote areas.

Leadership should take care to recognize the unique isolation felt by multilingual advocates and staff of color working in rural areas. Work with staff on finding ways to maintain balance and boundaries with populations they are serving and are a part of socially. Make sure all staff are trained and capable of working with all populations and languages so multilingual advocates and staff of color are not overburdened. Train staff on anti-oppression, privilege, and being an ally.

### **Self-Care and Vicarious Trauma**

Vicarious trauma is a risk for all staff, but there are some additional risk factors unique to remote work. Technology allows work to be done anytime from anywhere. This often leads remote advocates to feel like they should be working all the time, which makes it difficult to leave work. Moreover, many remote advocates are on call for long stretches. The heavy workloads, lack of culturally appropriate resources, and the isolation and

stress that are the reality of rural work all add to high rates of staff turnover and vicarious trauma.

Supervisors should check in with remote advocates about vicarious trauma on a weekly basis. Remote advocates tend to be more isolated with fewer support people around them on a daily basis. During this check-in, make sure to support and direct advocates in creating healthy ways to relieve vicarious trauma. Try creating self-care plans with all advocates in the agency. Make sure to discuss the ways the agency can support these plans.

When scheduling staff, pay particular attention to on-call work. Remote advocates are often required to be on call for long lengths of time. The geographical size of our service areas can make it very difficult for staff to rotate on-call duties. Try using volunteers or collaborating with other neighboring advocacy service providers to ease the work duties of remote advocates.

During supervision meetings with remote advocates, make sure to set aside time to

discuss workload and boundaries. Often rural remote advocates spread themselves too thin and need help in deciding where priorities should lay.

Make sure to discuss dual relationships, which is when we have a professional relationship with a survivor and a personal relationship. For example, a survivor may also teach third grade for the advocate's child. Dual relationships are more likely to be an issue for rural advocates—especially those from marginalized communities--and can be harder to manage if the advocate is the only staff member serving that community.

It can be most helpful to assist remote advocates in recognizing and building personal resilience. As advocates share their work with you, point out lessons of strength and hope. Make sure to reframe the struggles of survivors as examples of courage and strength. Soon advocates will begin to reframe thoughts for themselves. This will help them sustain their ability to do the work long term.

You can help ease the isolation remote advocates may feel by continuing to keep the team feeling connected.

When we send advocates out of the office and into our communities, we meet sexual assault survivors where they need services most. Just as rural communities create unique barriers for survivors, so too can we create unique solutions out of our strengths and community resources. Growing our supervision skills when we work with advocates who work remotely creates sustainable services for survivors and a healthier work environment for our staff.

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**The Rural Training and Technical Assistance Project**, a program of the Resource Sharing Project, is available to OVW Rural Grantees that are dual/multi-service advocacy agencies or sexual assault coalitions. The rural team provides webinars, publications, tools, national conferences, training and technical assistance for dual and multi-service agencies seeking to enhance services to all sexual violence survivors. For more information and resources, visit <http://www.resourcesharingproject.org/rural-dual-and-multi-service>.

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