

Sexual Assault Coalition
Public Policy Engagement
September 2021



National Alliance to
End Sexual Violence

An important role of state and territorial sexual assault coalitions is to be a voice for rape crisis centers and sexual assault survivors in their communities—to advocate for sound and responsive public policy that centers survivors and to promote the prevention of sexual violence.

Sexual assault coalitions vary greatly in size, capacity, political environment, and emerging issue areas, and as a result, implement a variety of policy engagement approaches to advocate for and support their unique communities.

In June 2021, NAESV surveyed sexual assault coalitions to gather information about the ways that state/territory level policy development and advocacy is conducted by their organizations. Thirty-six coalitions responded to questions about staff, membership, and survivor engagement in public policy efforts; strategies for policy development and decision-making; and coalition building more broadly. This paper will also spotlight policy approaches from several coalitions, based on follow up conversations.

Policy Staff and Support

Most coalitions responding to the survey (86%) report that their executive director engages in direct administrative and/or legislative advocacy. More than half (56%) employ a public policy director. Forty-seven percent of responding coalitions engage the services of a professional lobbyist. Some coalitions are engaging multiple staff members in policy work and others have very limited ability to do so. Coalitions reported between 0-3 FTEs of policy staff (not including executive directors), with the most common response of 1 FTE. Additional survey responses indicated that even staff members dedicated to public policy are also responsible for non-policy work. On occasion, non-policy staff are engaged in policy efforts because of their subject matter expertise, such as in prevention or economic justice.

Teamwork Makes the Dream Work

The *VT Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence* Policy Team is made up of 3 staff—the policy & organizing director, the director of economic empowerment, and the deputy director. The work of the team is complemented by a professional non-profit lobbying organization with a deep knowledge of state budgetary processes. Having 3 different staff with policy as part of their portfolio allows the Network to bring a diversity of knowledge and expertise to a variety of policy issues. It also allows each person to be involved in other non-policy related work within the coalition. This collaborative structure ensures that no one individual is responsible for everything related to the State House, preventing silos and isolation. There is always someone who can step in to provide testimony or take an important meeting, and more capacity to connect and build coalitions with other stakeholders. The Network's [policy focus](#) has shifted over the years to reflect their efforts toward seeking racial and economic justice for all. Having a fully engaged policy team has enabled the organizational philosophy to be fully embodied in policy efforts to promote a violence-free Vermont.

Membership Engagement

Nearly all coalitions report that they engage member programs in state policy efforts:

- 89% send members action alerts and ask them to call/email legislators on policy issues
- 81% include members in legislative briefings and advocacy days
- 72% guide members in meetings with legislators
- 61% survey members for feedback
- 36% ask members to formally weigh in or vote on policy priorities

Coalitions also provide regular policy updates to their members, train members on public policy advocacy, support members to engage elected officials locally through site visits, support members in developing and delivering legislative testimony, and encourage and assist members in submitting op-eds in their local media to advocate for public policy initiatives. Member programs are frequently the core members of coalition policy committees, for those that have them.

Policy Committees

Policy committees play a key public policy development role for 58% of responding coalitions, and they vary in size and composition. Most commonly, policy committees are comprised of member programs and sometimes board members (noting that for several coalitions, these 2 groups are the same). Several coalitions (5) reported that they include additional stakeholders in their policy committees, such as governmental officials and other allied organizations. Committees range in size from a few participants to up to 40 people. While a small number of committees meet bi-monthly or weekly, others meet monthly or quarterly, or come together at critical decision-making points. Some coalitions also report being part of larger coalitions as core to their policy engagement.

Committed Committee

The **Colorado Coalition Against Sexual Assault (CCASA)** has built an effective policy team in Colorado that includes the policy director, contract lobbyist and an engaged policy committee. In the past several years, they instituted a policy committee orientation process that has helped build the committee's capacity to engage and support the coalition's advocacy work. Each year, CCASA opens the policy committee to any of the members that wish to participate. Over a period of a few months, interested people attend monthly policy committee meetings to help them get a sense of whether this committee is right for them. In November of each year, CCASA asks folks who are interested in continuing to commit to participation in an orientation training and to participation in meetings throughout the legislative session. This timing ensures preparation of the annual advocacy agenda with a consistent group of informed participants who are educated about the process and issues. Learn more about CCASA's recent accomplishments [here!](#)

Centering the Voices of Survivors & Communities of Color

The Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence ([OAESV](#)) is committed to the inclusion of the voices of survivors and communities of color in their programming and policy work. The OAESV Survivor Caucus plays a critical role in the implementation of their 5-year policy plan. Survivors are engaged in advising and providing feedback on policy issues, providing testimony, and responding to other calls for action on legislation. OAESV is committed to supporting survivors' participation and valuing their time by providing resources that enable them to be engaged. The Women of Color Caucus is another important forum for policy engagement and advisement, ensuring that the needs of underserved populations are addressed and prioritized. These groups have been integral to policy efforts in Ohio related to the statute of limitations, Erin's law, and successfully advocating for sexual assault services funding in the state budget.

Survivor Engagement

Coalitions are currently actively engaging survivors in state policy efforts to a lesser extent than member programs. It is notable that many staff of coalitions and member programs are survivors themselves and therefore bring lived experience to their participation even when doing so primarily as a sexual assault program or coalition representative. Three coalitions reported specifically including survivors in their policy work and several others facilitate and support survivor caucuses or task forces that are engaged in policy at different times.

Coalition Building

Partnerships with other statewide organizations and coalitions is an element of nearly every coalition's policy strategy. Coalitions are working with their sister domestic violence coalitions, sometimes as policy committee co-chairs, as well as with anti-poverty, LGBTQ, racial justice, reproductive justice/rights, civil rights (ACLU), housing, health care, child abuse/advocacy, disability rights organizations, and many others. These collaborations reflect a strong commitment of coalitions to recognize and address the intersectionality of survivors' lives and the multiple ways survivors are impacted by systems.

Proactive vs. Reactive Policy Efforts

Most of the responding coalitions (61%) report that their state policy work is an even mix of proactive and reactive efforts. Six states indicated that they primarily work proactively, investing time to plan, develop, and advocate for original policy proposals. Another 6 states report a primarily reactive policy agenda, responding on policy issues when asked to do so or when critical issues arise. The need and desire to respond to unplanned issues is a barrier to doing more proactive work that many coalitions shared. Time spent preventing problematic or dangerous policies reduces their capacity to develop and pursue a proactive policy agenda.

Decision-making

Policy decisions are made in very complex ways by coalitions. Most respondents reported the executive director having a key decision-making role, but they also report that many others can be involved in this process. Decision making can be based on member program feedback, consultation with community partners, policy committee recommendations, lobbyist recommendations, board voting, and critical feedback from affinity groups such as survivor caucuses and women of color groups. Overall, coalitions demonstrate an intentional commitment to engage with communities that will be impacted by policy changes and to direct their efforts toward where there is the most need identified.

Common Barriers to Public Policy Advocacy

Coalitions face barriers to state policy work, in addition to those previously mentioned. By far the greatest barrier reported were challenges related to the political climate in their state (75%). Second, a lack of resources prevents coalitions from doing more of what they see is needed (64%). Funding restrictions and member engagement challenges were also cited, but by fewer coalitions. Consistently, coalitions report having more work than they have capacity in which to fully engage. Coalitions also identified challenges as they develop and promote policies through a racial and social justice framework. Shifting away from carceral responses to sexual violence is at times met with resistance and confusion from some policymakers and other allies. Expectations that coalitions will always engage in and support increased

Intersections Matter

Like many coalitions, the *New Mexico Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs (NMCSAP)* has been expanding their policy scope to move beyond working *only* on policy that can be found using a "sexual violence" keyword search. NMCSAP has increasingly centered the intersectionality of survivors' experiences to reach out and build broad coalitions to support policies that addresses survivors' whole lives. Part of that includes engaging local communities—organizations working with young men, tribal communities, organizations led by women of color, youth organizations, disability justice, and LGBTQ communities—to better understand what public policy changes are needed and desired. This deep inquiry allows for greater understanding of the diversity of survivor and community experiences and in the differential impact of public policy decisions on their lives. NMCSAP's approach consistently connects back to the importance of prevention in its many forms. While it can be challenging, the Coalition is adapting and responding to the current climate, unpacking what justice really means for all survivors, and resisting the expansion of the criminal legal system.

criminalization with regard to sexual violence persist and it can be challenging for coalitions, policymakers, members, and survivors to always find common ground.

Conclusion

Regardless of size, capacity, geography, political climate and other factors, state and territorial coalitions all play a role in advocating for survivors of sexual violence and for policies that prevent sexual violence. There is no single policy engagement model that is ideal for all coalitions. There are many ways to educate, influence, and support others in doing so; each state and territory must find the right process to meet the needs of their constituents and communities. This may mean that coalitions cannot always be on the front line of certain issues but can be supporting others in the background. Coalitions can learn from one another—from both similar states and very different ones—about new approaches and strategies. While each coalition is unique, all have similar goals to advocate for a world free of sexual violence.

Small and Mighty

Kentucky Association of Sexual Assault Programs (KASAP) policy department is small, but that doesn't stop them from getting the work done. The staff attorney and executive director both double as registered lobbyists. KASAP currently has no dedicated policy staff, so they are creative and efficient, making important strides on behalf of survivors and toward the prevention of sexual violence. Advised by a policy subcommittee of the Board of Directors (all RCC directors), KASAP has developed a guidance document that offers an outline for coalition priorities, allowing for the staff to be nimble in their responses to legislation during the brief and fast-moving legislative session. To maximize their impact, KASAP builds and participates in an array of advocacy coalitions with shared goals. In a state where the political climate can be challenging on some social issues impacting survivors, KASAP is constantly assessing the ways in which to effectively spend political capital while sustaining funding and supports for sexual assault prevention and services.

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