**In Brief: Advocate’s Role from an Indigenous Perspective –** 2020

**NOTE**: *Up to 96% of victims/survivors of battering/IPV are female, so the words “woman”, “women,” “she” and “her” are used in this document. However, male victims/survivors, those who are LBGTQ2S, those who are differently-abled, and other Relatives from disenfranchised groups also have a right to advocacy and resources in ways that meet their needs. Advocacy includes addressing challenges and barriers posed by sexism, heterosexism, classism, racism and other forms of oppression.*

Context:

The passage of the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 (VAWA) has resulted in the institutionalization of advocacy. This, in turn, has shifted the definition of advocacy from a grassroots, pro-active, social change framework, to a definition framed by a social work perspective – advocates as service providers. Here the definition of advocate is based upon its original grassroots, activist foundation created largely by women survivors of battering and sexual violence. Their vision and work created the U.S. domestic violence shelter movement, initiated many policy and legislative changes, including mandatory arrest laws and the VAWA itself.

Historical perspective is important. Briefly, beginning in the 1970’s the shelter movement in the US, was modelled after efforts of women in England. Women who were battered opened their doors to other women who were battered – women helping women. Shelters were women’s homes and church basements. They survived on donations, bake sales and the like. Identifying as an “advocate” usually meant you were a survivor of battering and/or sexual violence. The personal experience of being battered was motivation and integral expertise for the majority of advocates. The Family Violence Prevention and Services Act in 1984 provided the initial federal funding for shelters, though donations and local fund-raising were, and in many instances still are, necessary to keep shelter doors open. The VAWA made significant changes in resources for advocacy and shelters. However, domestic violence shelters, especially in Indian Country and rural areas, remain scarce. Grassroots advocates/ survivors, and their allies, can be credited for bringing domestic violence and intimate partner violence (i.e. battering) as central to violence against women, out of the shadows and making violence against women a national, criminal justice and human rights issue. It opened the door to addressing other issues of oppression, including violence within and against the LGBTQ2S communities, women of color and indigenous women. Child survivors of domestic violence and male survivors continue to be important aspects of this movement. As resources increased and public awareness evolved, the capacity to be inclusive of diverse populations, like the LGBTQ2S communities and those with disabilities, has expanded. This reflects the power of advocates as agents for social change to end domestic and sexual violence, and oppression.

Leadership of Native Women

Native/Indigenous women were not always at the table of the women’s or shelter movements for a variety of historical and societal reasons. However, over the years, the leadership, expertise and tenacity of Native women advocates established a permanent place at the table. Note within VAWA the creation of tribal set-asides, and Title IX – Safety for Native Women in the 2005 reauthorization. It’s important to acknowledge that initially VAWA 1994, created a number of national resource centers, though not a Native specific resource center. Native advocates had worked side-by-side with non-Native advocates in the creation of VAWA, developing relationships and their understanding of sovereignty, and jurisdictional, cultural and historical realities of Indian Country. These non-native women/allies recognized their limitations and the dire need for a Native specific resource center, held themselves accountable by advocating for the center and gave up some of *their own funding* in the first year to make it happen. This is a rare, powerful, historic example of women working together as sisters, moving beyond politics and turf issues, relating as women, to ensure everyone’s need are met. As a result, Sacred Circle, National Resource Center to Violence Against Native Women opened in 1998, eventually becoming the National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center in 2010.

Cultural Context of the Role of Advocate

Previous to colonization, violence against Native women and children was an extremely rare occurrence. This is true of violence against elders and those who were LGBTQ2S as well. Such violence was considered unnatural and was an affront to the entire Nation. The vast majority of indigenous cultures held women and children as sacred. Indigenous cultures are based upon a spiritual understanding that all living beings are related and interdependent, and that every individual has their own unique path and purpose. Values of respect, generosity, courage, non-violence, compassion and humility are ingrained in indigenous belief systems and life ways. These concepts form the foundation for advocacy in Indian Country. Ending domestic and sexual violence, intimate partner violence/battering, in Indian Country rests on the honoring of tribal sovereignty, and the reclamation of traditional life ways, and roles and responsibilities as Relatives. Our relationships were not based upon titles, job descriptions and status, but on how we are connected as Relatives, and our roles within families, societies and clans. The challenge is to confront oppression, decolonize, undoing internalized oppression and embrace our roles as Relatives. How we relate to each other and show respect begins with how we call each other, i.e. Sister, Aunt, Mother, Brother, Uncle, Father etc. Reconnecting as Relatives is imperative in ending violence and transforming our communities.

Advocacy

An advocate is the biased supporter of women and other survivors who have been battered/raped. This is a unique role, because it’s the only job where priorities and focus are entirely about the comprehensive safety of victims and survivors, and offender accountability, ideally, as defined by the survivor. The goal of advocacy is to help ensure women’s and other survivor’s safety and personal sovereignty, as well as offender accountability. Gender-based violence and oppression are about power \* and control. Victims of violence have had power and control taken from them. Advocates helps equalize this imbalance. Within Indian Country, advocacy is based on the understanding that violence against Native women is a result of colonization and oppression, and that ending violence requires reclaiming indigenous natural, indigenous life ways and belief systems. Advocacy is personal, political and cultural. It is about individuals, and connections between groups and society as a whole.

Grassroots, culturally- and woman-centered advocates are unlike service providers who act within western-based institutions that require proof of need, eligibility, provide limited access, time and resources, and are accountable to the system they work within. Though restrictions may be imposed by funders and inadequate resources, advocates address all forms of gender-based violence, and the intersections of mental health and substance abuse issues, poverty, classism, sexism, heterosexism, racism, historical and intergenerational trauma. These intersections are born of the same root causes, overlap with, and intensify the violence and tactics of intimate partner violence/battering and sexual violence. Advocates believe survivors are the experts on their lives and needs, and have the right to determine what they need, when and how. Getting safe and healing require time and the path to safety follows unique individual paths. The strengths, courage, expertise and leadership of survivors is integral to empowering advocacy and social change. At the end of the day, advocates are accountable to women and other survivors. It’s about connections and our relationships as relatives.

The job description of an advocate is comprehensive. It involves pro-actively assisting and supporting women and their children, and other survivors: making relationships, listening to and believing survivors, accompaniment to court, providing necessities and resources, transportation, housing assistance, providing legal, medical and other systems advocacy – the possibilities are determined by the survivor.

Beyond individual advocacy, outside shelter doors, advocates work to transform society, so every space is a safe space. This means providing active leadership in community education, systems change including policy development and education, coordinated community response efforts assuring prioritization of safety and offender accountability in all matters, and that responses are effective, respectful and trauma-informed. Advocacy involves ally-building, policy-making, legislative changes and development of resources, like housing. It also means acting as social change agents by pro-actively confronting root causes of violence and reclaiming cultural belief systems that create non-violent societies, and actively honor the sacred status of women that honor the integrity, leadership and sacredness of women.

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**THE ROLE OF ADVOCATES**

Adapted by NIWRC from materials by Sacred Circle, National Resource Center to End Violence Against Native Women with credit to "Advocacy" by Anne Marshall and Ellen Pence

• To advocate for the woman who is battered in a manner that respects and validates her individuality,

experiences, decisions and strengths. [To advocate for disenfranchised, LGBTQ2S and cisgender male survivors in the same manner.]

• To model courage and resistance in the face of oppression, intimidation and fear.

* To provide leadership and ensure that women’s/survivor’s safety is a priority in the coordinated community response initiative that promotes and enhances the spiritual and cultural traditions of the sacredness of women and children.

• To advocate for the expressed interests and safety of survivors, and their children, including provision

of safe space and any other resources necessary for the woman/survivor to regain control of her life.

• To focus attention on the operational meaning of safety and integrity of women and renewal of

traditional life ways as guiding principles at all levels of the justice, law enforcement, social and medical

systems dealing with domestic violence cases.

• To provide expertise based on the experience of women/survivors who are battered and their children on issues related to domestic violence within the justice, law enforcement, social and medical systems.

• To ensure that all who have been battered/sexually assaulted have 24-hour access to support, accurate

information, crisis intervention, and other advocacy services.

• To educate personnel within the relevant systems regarding the most effective responses to domestic

violence on behalf of batterers, victims and at-risk family members, prioritizing victim safety and offender accountability.

• To be conscious of the educational role within all advocate activities.

• To remain accountable to the woman/ survivor who has been battered/raped, including maintaining

confidentiality.

\* “Power and control” commonly describe the goal of the purposeful system of tactics battering/intimate partner violence. However, the meaning and use of “power” in this context is a reflection of a societal and cultural cause of violence. In American society, people with power are seen as those with the capacity to be violent, i.e. cause harm, manipulate others against their will, set and enforce rules for their own benefit, provide/withdraw resources etc. The male stereotype or expectations for men in America is that “real men” are powerful. When power is defined as the ability to be violent, then the result is gender-based violence. However, within indigenous societies, “power” has the opposite meaning. Powerful people within indigenous societies are those with the capacity to give Life, preserve Life and nurture life, i.e. women, medicine people, Elders, men who support and protect women, children, Elders and those in need.