

GROUNDSWELL: Assessing the Landscape of Community-based, Culturally-Resonant Healing Options for Survivors



TAASA has long been dedicated to improving access to quality services for sexual assault survivors. In 2015, a statewide sexual assault prevalence survey conducted by the Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (IDVSA) reported that only 15% of survivors in Texas reached out to a social worker or helping professional; even fewer, only 9.2%, reported to law enforcement after an incident of violence. Instead, 45% turned to a friend and over 30% turned to family. Communities of color and other historically underserved groups, who have been placed at a greater risk for experiencing sexual violence, also face additional barriers when participating in traditional response systems, resulting in less positive outcomes. These factors, among countless others, led us to explore an expansion of options in how we support survivors within our communities.

With this in mind, TAASA began the Groundswell project in 2018 with the hope of broadening community-based strategies and support for survivors of complex and historical trauma. The team undertook a series of interviews and listening sessions with interested member organizations. In these listening sessions, we explored strengths and opportunities for growth in community partnerships to expand access to healing and justice, and created a diverse network to share tools and approaches.

What We Did

As Groundswell, the team spoke with diverse advocates across the state to get a clear picture of interest in creating or further developing infrastructure to support culturally-specific partnerships to complement mainstream services. Our main interest was to learn more about alternative processes towards healing and justice in addition to the criminal/legal system. We were able to connect with staff at centers in 4 of our 5 regions across the state and conduct 4 phone interviews and 12 site visits with member agencies. In addition, we were able to do site visits with 4 community-based organizations. Of these member agencies and community organizations, three were culturally-specific programs.

Member programs shared that their strongest partnerships are with first responders (including police, clinics, and hospitals) and K-12 schools. Sexual assault programs expressed an interest in developing stronger partnerships and collaborations with schools, culturally-specific groups, and LGBTQIA+ groups or organizations.

When asked about desired projects agencies overwhelmingly responded that expanding healing modalities offered to survivors was high on the list along with expanding shelter options. Primary prevention, social norms change initiatives were also voiced as desired projects. There was a trend among centers and programs to construct more buildings, speaking to a desire for “bricks and mortar” projects for shelters, therapy and other services.

The organizations we spoke with do important and applaudable work in their respective communities. Many programs work in schools doing prevention curricula and other programming. The difficulty of finding flexible funding for prevention work was also mentioned as a concern. Some centers work with churches and faith-based groups to talk about consent and support survivors from those communities who may otherwise not seek support outside of their faith circle. In general, centers mentioned continuing to creatively think about how to continue working with and be more accessible to communities who face additional systemic barriers when seeking assistance. Another concern that was raised was the needed action steps behind seeking funding for bilingual advocates in rural areas, where the need is dire.

From culturally-specific groups, we learned that funding and resources continue to be a barrier for organizations that are culturally-specific or explicitly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)-serving. These agencies spoke to their ongoing efforts to provide support for communities who have been impacted by historical trauma- including racism and colonization (dispossession of land and erasure from historical record). The direct manifestations of which can be seen via gentrification, over-policed schools and neighborhoods, intergenerational poverty, cycles of family violence and lack of access to mainstream services due to language barriers. They identified that unrestricted funding which would allow them to creatively and experimentally cater services and programs to their populations was a strong desire for the future.

The culturally-specific agencies spoke to developing or expanding capacity for transformative justice avenues as a way of both educating their communities and seeking a healing which feels more resonant to their communities. They detailed the role and importance of healing from trauma themselves and how they might (though inadvertently) bring that trauma to their work. They acknowledged the importance of participating in the work of their respective organizations as healing for them and the generations of trauma they may carry as BIPOC staff themselves.

Through our conversations, we saw a particular gap in culturally-affirming options and services for survivors facing multiple barriers within the criminal/legal system, particularly for Black, Indigenous, and Asian survivors. We saw a need for an expansion of options developed in consultation with these directly-impacted communities that incorporated ancestral and culturally-grounded practices to take into account complex and historical trauma.





Steps We Took:

Culturally Specific Funding

In 2019 Groundswell members successfully advocated for and worked through the first expansion of Sexual Assault Services Program (SASP) funding via the Governor's Office for culturally-specific organizations. For the first time, this funding was made available to select groups who were making an impact in culturally specific communities via services and efforts to support survivors.

The Collective Healing Initiative (CHI)

In closing with the Groundswell project, we asked ourselves the following questions: What does it look like to provide and affirm the need for culturally-specific approaches to healing from trauma? How do we support survivors knowing that trauma is compounded for some via the realities of historical and collective trauma?

With these questions in mind, we have started the ongoing, and iterative Collective Healing Initiative (CHI), to approach learning with humility and a child's eyes. CHI, in partnership with grassroots organizations and collectives, aims to foster a network dedicated to the wellness and healing of Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color. By prioritizing culturally-affirming practices, we hope to support the important work of healing from complex and historical trauma, including sexual violence. Over the next few years, CHI hopes to establish and continue to cultivate relationships with culture bearers and healers in communities across the state.

Groundswell would like to thank each and every organization that took their time to share their successes, their struggles, and their dreams as we all work together in complementary ways to support the wellbeing of survivors of sexual violence across Texas.

