



Re-Centering: Grassroots Supporters

Survivor-Led Roles Within the
Domestic Violence Ecosystem



Indiana Coalition
Against
Domestic Violence

Prevention • Awareness • Advocacy
Until the Violence Ends.

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A Note to Readers

This report is intended for two primary audiences: individuals interested in supporting survivors in grassroots ways, and domestic violence service providers interested in partnering with grassroots supporters.

For current and future grassroots supporters—especially survivors—we hope this report affirms the value and impact of your work and helps you see your role as essential to our shared mission of ending domestic violence. For providers, we hope these findings inspire new possibilities and invite deeper collaboration with those who are purposed and passionate to help survivors, particularly in areas where formal services may be limited by capacity, structure, or scope.

On Grassroots Names and Quotations

Some names used in this report are real and others are pseudonyms. Each participant was given full authority to decide whether their name would be used.

Select quotes have been lightly edited for clarity and readability while preserving the original meaning and intent.

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Executive Summary

In this report, “grassroots supporters” refers to a type of domestic violence support provided by individuals outside formal service systems, typically through volunteer-based, lowly funded, or informal community efforts. The term also refers to the individuals who are providing grassroots support. Many of these individuals are survivors themselves. They draw on their experiences in grassroots contexts to serve as a unique bridge for overcoming the stigma, fear of judgment, and isolation that often keep survivors from seeking help.

This report documents how grassroots supporters show up for survivors, the roles they play, the values and practices that guide their work, and the strengths and limitations they experience. Rather than proposing a new model or replacing formal domestic violence services, this report seeks to name and better understand a form of support that already exists. This report considers how grassroots support can be stewarded ethically and safely alongside the broader domestic violence ecosystem.

Through interviews with 19 grassroots supporters across Indiana, we identified several core ways they engage survivors and communities. These include meeting basic needs, increasing community support, forming empowering relationships with survivors, and supporting accountability for people who cause harm—though the latter is to a lesser prevalence. While many operate across multiple roles, their work is consistently shaped by flexibility, informality, and proximity to survivors’ daily lives.

They described how these features allow them to reach survivors who may not contact formal services—particularly those who fear judgment, do not identify with dominant narratives of domestic violence, or face cultural, relational, or practical barriers to accessing traditional programs. At the same time, they were clear that they cannot and should not replace formal domestic violence services. Instead, they see themselves acting as bridges—helping survivors make sense of options, access resources, and navigate safety on their own terms.

A central contribution of this report is identifying survivor-defined essential elements of grassroots support. These include safety, confidentiality, boundaries, centering survivors’ needs, peer-to-peer connection, trust-building, competence, and attention to healing and self-care. They stressed that these elements are not abstract ideals, but daily practices shaped by lived experience, judgment, and ethical discernment—often carried without formal infrastructure or supervision.

Grassroots supporters also named both strengths and limitations to their role. Their strengths include accessibility, shared lived experience, flexibility, and deep community trust. Their limitations include lack of funding, limited capacity and scale, absence of formal authority and increased personal risk. Understanding these realities is critical to ensuring grassroots support is neither romanticized nor dismissed.

This report offers recommendations for how domestic violence providers, community partners, and the Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence (ICADV) can strengthen grassroots support efforts—through shared learning opportunities, reciprocal partnerships, increased visibility, and access to tangible resources. These recommendations reflect grassroots supporters’ desire to collaborate, not compete, and to be recognized as part of a shared effort to end domestic violence.

Finally, this report offers a shared language for naming work that is already happening across communities. Survivors will continue to help other survivors—as they always have. By understanding and supporting grassroots efforts more intentionally, we can strengthen our collective response to domestic violence while honoring survivor autonomy, safety, and dignity.



Setting the landscape. Our Why.

Many survivors of domestic violence want to be part of the solution of ending domestic violence. In 2022, we interviewed survivors who shared how supporting their fellow survivors was a critical pathway for combating isolation and loneliness. They understand what it means to be a survivor and the stigma and fear of judgment associated with it. Unlike other formal supports they “just get it” and know how to speak directly to their shared experience.¹ This specific role of peer support uniquely positioned them to provide survivor-centered support. Survivors have always worked in mainstream and formal domestic violence organizations, but oftentimes there are boundaries and ethical considerations that limit the use of shared experience as a means of support. They often cannot name their shared experience with survivors and thus cannot leverage that point of connection.

This led us to consider grassroots supporters: survivors helping other survivors outside of formal mainstream domestic violence organizations. We wanted to know what kind of support they offered, the ingredients to their success, and the strengths and limitations to their work—especially when considering how grassroots support used their shared experience to help survivors. By better understanding them as an intervention for domestic violence, we want to understand how to steward a pathway for survivors to lend support to other survivors alongside the rest of the domestic violence ecosystem.

In addition to what survivors have told us, there are additional factors leading to this inquiry we believe are important to uplift: it is how the modern movement to end domestic violence started, the current decrease in funding for domestic violence services combined with the system’s current insufficient amount of resources to support all survivors, and how this work could build on the foundation of emerging academic research involving informal supports and peer-to-peer interventions for survivors.

Our History

The Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence spent part of its founding being run out of a garage. Safe Passage, a domestic violence provider that influenced a few of our participants, started as a mother and daughter operation at a kitchen table with a phone answering calls and responding from their home. Our history is grassroots. Passionate and purposed individuals, many of whom are survivors, working tirelessly to support other survivors in their community. By examining grassroots supporters, we are returning to our roots.

Funding Forecast and Insufficient Number of Resources Leading to Unmet Support for All Survivors

The funding landscape for victim services is dire. The Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) federal funds have seen a 40% decrease since 2019.² For Indiana, this has meant a \$12 million loss in funds impacting nearly 200 local providers across the state of Indiana. Future losses are projected which means additional job cuts, shrinking services, and increasing gaps for survivors seeking basic forms of support.

\$12M LOSS IN FUNDS impacting nearly 200 LOCAL PROVIDERS across the state of Indiana

¹ <https://icadvinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/icadv-loneliness-summary.pdf>

² <https://www.protectindianacrimevictims.org/>

What makes the funding forecast even bleaker is the lack of enough services to address the current need. National surveys continue to demonstrate on an annual basis the need for more and more domestic violence services to meet the needs of survivors.³ After all, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men have experienced severe physical violence from an intimate partner while nearly 1 in 2 women and men experience psychological aggression (emotional abuse, control).⁴ Even without a negative funding forecast, the prevalence rates of domestic violence and the lack of enough services points to a need for more support to help shoulder the enormous need for survivors.

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1 in 7
MEN have
experienced
SEVERE PHYSICAL
VIOLENCE from an
intimate partner

Nearly
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PSYCHOLOGICAL
AGGRESSION
from an intimate
partner

Builds on the Foundation of Emerging Academic Research Involving Informal Supporters and Peer-to-peer Interventions

There are many different barriers for survivors seeking formal support, from lack of awareness to lack of accessibility of services, to fear of providers making the situation worse.⁵ They often turn to their informal supporters first for help “before, during, or instead of formal domestic violence services.”⁶ Researchers on the subject have thus advocated for more network-orientated approaches to supporting survivors that leverage the strengths of informal supports.⁷ Since informal support can play such a large role in influencing outcomes for survivors, we want to understand how we can collaborate with them to maximize their positive impact.

Additionally, emerging research supports peer-to-peer models as an important tool for building survivors’ social capital.⁸ In other words, peer support can help survivors “increase access to information, knowledge, competencies, and can lead to development of meaningful social networks, empowerment, and decreases in feelings of stigma.”⁹ All of these are critical areas for supporting survivors’ success and can meet the increasing gap of services for survivors.

With this as our landscape, we sought to find and interview these grassroots supporters. In this report you will find a summarization of our findings as well as recommendations for how we can support the impact of their work.

³https://nnedv.org/latest_update/every-survivor-counts-national-network-to-end-domestic-violence-to-conduct-20th-annual-domestic-violence-counts-survey/

⁴https://www.cdc.gov/nisvs/documentation/NISVSReportonIPV_2022.pdf

⁵ Robinson, S. R., Ravi, K., & Voth, R. J. (2020). A Systematic Review of Barriers to Formal Help Seeking for Adult Survivors of IPV in the United States, 2005-2019. *Trauma Violence & Abuse*, 22(5), 1279-1295. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838020916254>

⁶ Rose, L. E., Campbell, J., & Kub, J. (2000). The role of social support and family relationships in women’s responses to battering. *Health Care for Women International*, 21, 27-39; Rose, L. E., Campbell, J., & Kub, J. (2000). The role of social support and family relationships in women’s responses to battering. *Health Care for Women International*, 21, 27-39.

Our Listening Process

How We Did It and Limitations to Our Research

ICADV's research and inquiry fits within experiential and contextual forms of evidence. These forms of research are recognized as core components for leveraging evidence-based decision making, along with best available research.¹⁰ In other words, we are listening to those who do the work and the conditions they are operating in to understand their role in serving survivors.

We interviewed 19 grassroots supporters. Some serve survivors on a statewide basis while most are spread out over 27 different counties. Since grassroots supporters are harder to find than traditional service providers, we had to rely on a convenience sample of recruiting who we knew and had access to through different community connections. For a few, they called us seeking technical assistance and we were able to then identify them as grassroots support. Since most had some level of relationship with ICADV before interviewing, there could be a degree of respondent bias to their answers. For example, our questions regarding what kind of support they need from ICADV may be more positive because they have a pre-established relationship with ICADV versus someone who has never worked with us or has had negative experiences working with formal domestic violence service agencies.

Nearly all participants identified as survivors, however, there was one who did not and a few others who did not say whether they were a survivor or not. We included them in the final report due to the strong overlap between their work and that of survivors.

Additionally, we address the specifics of how helping a survivor as a survivor is important in grassroots work rather than generalizing it as a feature of the work. Anyone willing to help survivors ethically and safely in a grassroots capacity, regardless of being a survivor or not, should be considered as part of the overall form of support.

During the interviews, we asked participants to share how they do the work and what they believed was necessary to do the work well. We asked what kind of support they needed as well as what they perceived as limitations to their work. We do not know how survivors feel about this form of support since this research relied exclusively on grassroots supporters' own self-awareness and self-analysis of their impact. They could evaluate their support and impact favorably when the survivors they serve could see it very differently.

All participants were compensated for their time interviewing with a \$40 gift card. Interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes. Two requested to submit written responses in lieu of interviews for accessibility purposes. Some interviews were held in person while most were conducted via a virtual meeting application (i.e. Microsoft Teams or Zoom).

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were then reviewed and edited for errors, then coded. After completion of coding, this report was written to reflect what we learned and recommendations for next steps. The report was then shared with key staff members as well as the grassroots supporters we interviewed to get their final input before publishing.

⁷ Goodman, L.A., Banyard, V., Woulfe, J., Ash, S., & Mattern, G. (2015). *Bringing a Network-Oriented Approach to Domestic Violence Services*. *Violence against Women*, 22(1), 64-89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801215599080>

⁸ <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/eacdd84830c8afb60a70554ab7b73875/aspe-social-capital-peer-support-special-topics.pdf>

⁹ Repper, J., & Carter, T. (2011). *A review of the literature on peer support in mental health services*. *Journal of Mental Health*, 20(4), 392-411. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09638237.2011.583947>

¹⁰ <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/137401>

The Many Roles of Grassroots Supporters

The grassroots supporters we interviewed help survivors in a variety of contexts and roles. Some offer more direct support akin to domestic violence advocates while others steward their community's response to survivors. They are passionate and purposed individuals creatively leveraging their talents and skills to support survivors across the state of Indiana. Because their support can sometimes mirror formal domestic violence services in important ways, we start by defining “grassroots” before describing the range of support roles they do. Anchoring this work in the contextual differences to formal services and grassroots support helps illuminate the distinct features each offers as part of a broader domestic violence ecosystem.

Defining “Grassroots”

In defining “grassroots,” we want to be clear that these definitions are intended to describe patterns observed across interviews rather than prescribe how grassroots support must be structured or practiced. This approach helped us identify at least two key descriptive features of grassroots support: being volunteer-based or lowly funded, and the informal context of relationships with survivors.

All 19 participants interviewed operated in either volunteer-based or lowly funded capacities. In most cases, this meant supporting survivors during their free time while maintaining other forms of employment. Some operated grassroots organizations that received limited funding; in those circumstances, funds were directed toward direct survivor needs—such as hotel stays—rather than covering full salaries. Even when recognized as 501(c)(3) organizations, these efforts largely depended on volunteer labor and personal commitment to sustain their mission.

In addition to limited funding, grassroots supporters often operated in more informal roles with survivors—both by circumstance and by design. Many described the informality of their role as contributing to their effectiveness. The freedom to set boundaries, respond quickly, or offer relational support without institutional barriers allowed them to meet survivors' needs in the moment. For example, sharing personal experience when appropriate, or purchasing a meal for a survivor and their children without navigating formal approval processes, enabled acts of care that might otherwise be delayed. This capacity for informality consistently emerged as a defining feature of grassroots support overall.

Their informal, or less formal, relationship with survivors also means they encounter survivors in many different contexts. Oftentimes the support they provide is dependent on the context. Meeting survivors where they are takes on a more literal meaning for grassroots supporters. This leads to role fluidity where they often adapt their role based on the context. Formal domestic violence services rely on advocates who perform multiple roles in supporting survivors. However, when program policies or grant requirements shape how and where formal advocates engage with survivors, grassroots support often retain greater flexibility to meet survivors across varied contexts.

Volunteer capacity, informal relationships, and the fluid contexts for encountering survivors appear to be the most consistent defining characteristics of grassroots support across interviews. Other features—such as shared values, guiding principles, or survivor identity—also surfaced in conversations, but these were not unique to grassroots efforts and were present in many formal domestic violence services as well. It is the combination of limited funding, informality, and context-driven support that most clearly distinguishes grassroots support within our report.



Defining Support

Through our interviews, we identified at least four different types of support provided by grassroots efforts: helping meet basic needs, increasing community support, providing empowering relationships, and supporting people who cause harm in seeking accountability. The first three center directly on survivors and were represented most frequently across interviews. While fewer grassroots supporters focused primarily on accountability work with people who cause harm, those efforts nonetheless surfaced as an important part of the broader grassroots support landscape.

Most grassroots supporters operate across multiple types of support rather than within a single role, often adapting as needs arise. This section outlines the primary ways they described supporting survivors, strengthening community responses, and working to stop cycles of abuse and harm.

Meeting Basic Needs

Amanda is one of the grassroots supporters we interviewed. She knows what it was like to be a survivor and not know where to go for help. While working a full-time job and caring for her children, she spends her free time supporting survivors through her non-profit. She meets survivors in her community who—like she once did—are trying to figure out a path forward but do not know where to start.

Amanda prides herself on being “readily available” to survivors. For her, being “readily available” means calling every resource and provider in her area on a weekly basis to know if they can serve at this time. She is constantly keeping track of who has bedspace here and who has resources there. She knows what numbers are working and which are outdated. Then, when she meets a survivor, she’s able to direct them to what they need. Amanda helps those survivors meet their basic needs.

Like Amanda, many other grassroots supporters described meeting basic needs as a central part of their work with survivors. This type of support most closely mirrors some of the work formal domestic violence agencies provide. Both meet with survivors, identify urgent and longer-term needs, and work alongside survivors to increase access for resources that support their safety and stability.

Through our interviews, we identified several roles that fall under meeting basic needs. These include helping survivors navigate and access essential resources, connecting survivors directly to formal domestic violence programs, and supporting their safety planning. In practice, these roles often overlapped as grassroots supporters adapted their approach based on the context in which they encountered survivors and the needs present in the moment.

Navigating and Accessing Essential Resources—the Resource Navigator

Amanda’s knowledge of resources and ability to direct survivors on how to access them reflects her role as a resource navigator. She knows what is working and what is not—where there is availability and where there are waitlists. Other grassroots supporters who act as resource navigators shared similar practices. They go to community events, maintain professional contacts, and keep up to date on all the resources available in their communities. They share this information with survivors. When they do not know any information off hand, they know how to find it. As one grassroots supporter explained, “I try to stay on top of the resources in our community and if I don’t know, if they’re from a different community, I at least know how to find out what the resources are in their community.”

Resource navigation also extended beyond sharing information. When resources were unavailable, delayed, or inaccessible, many grassroots supporters described collecting and providing essential items directly to survivors. These essential items included diapers, food, clothing, hygiene products, and gas cards. This allowed them to help a survivor with immediate need while they navigated securing longer-term support.

As Amanda explained, “I provide a lot of resources for mothers as far as the child’s needs. School clothes, household items, just things that they don’t have to necessarily ask the abuser for if they’re financially dependent on them. So, the point that I’m making is I think the strength of what I do is that I’m readily available.” The ability to provide essential items can help a survivor avoid depending on the person causing harm or going without basic necessities. Resource navigators help ensure survivors have access to the critical information or essential resources necessary for meeting their basic needs.

“I think the strength of what I do is that I’m readily available.”

Connection to Formal Domestic Violence Services—the Referral Source

Esther utilized a formal domestic violence service and credited their services with saving her life. While these services supported her when she needed them most, Esther also knows how hard it can be for survivors to reach out to a formal domestic violence service provider.

Esther comes from a community that is largely closed off to formal service providers. Problems are expected to stay within the community, and domestic violence is not recognized as an issue—especially not an issue that requires outside support. This reality creates significant barriers to survivors accessing help. Esther’s escape from domestic violence is an exception to the norm. In response, Esther has made it her mission to act as a bridge for survivors within her community. As she shared, “When there are women in the community that are having struggles, they’ll sort of find me and talk to me at community gatherings. My goal is always to connect them to actual resources through the coalition or local agencies as quickly as possible.”

Grassroots supporters like Esther act as a lighthouse in their communities—but one whose light is most visible to those who know where to look. She is a referral source connecting survivors to life-changing support who may not otherwise seek it out—whether due to lack of knowledge or isolation because of relational and community dynamics.

In this role, they help get survivors connected to the services they need. They walk survivors through what to expect, share the benefits and limitations of seeking formal support, and, with survivor consent, often leverage existing relationships with formal domestic violence services to create a softer hand-off for survivors. By building trust and reducing uncertainty, they help bridge survivors to formal domestic violence programs for support. Even in circumstances with less isolating dynamics than Esther’s community, grassroots supporters reported having that knowledge of what happens at a shelter helped them assure survivors to make informed and empowered decisions when deciding to seek a formal domestic violence service. As referral sources, they help make formal services more accessible for survivors.

Increasing Survivor Safety—The Advocate

Rita has supported survivors for years in informal and formal roles. She worked as a formal domestic violence advocate serving survivors in shelter before becoming a licensed therapist serving survivors. Sometimes she provides free therapy to survivors of domestic violence who otherwise may not be able to access therapy and has created her own grassroots non-profit to help survivors access funds to escape domestic violence. She knows firsthand, as a survivor, how critical access to funds can be to secure escape and safety from a high-lethality situation.

Rita meets survivors in many different contexts because of the breadth of her work and uses her professional expertise to help survivors assess and plan for their safety. She shared, “I have safety plans for when someone

is planning to leave a violent situation. There's a lot of things that I can do before a client wants to leave their abuser to see if they're safe currently. If not, I can help them by reaching out to the women's shelters in town. I'm looking at all angles here before they leave because I'm looking at the lethality." Rita trusts and empowers survivors to leverage their own risk assessment and understands that sometimes survivors need a guide for creating a safety plan that helps them escape the harm successfully.

Rita is a grassroots supporter acting as an advocate for survivor safety. Her skills and expertise reflect many of the same advocacy practices found in formal domestic violence agencies, adapted to grassroots [contexts]. She knows and understands her ethical and practical limitations, and she is intentional about what support she can safely offer and when to engage in more formal support.

For many of the grassroots supporters we interviewed, like Rita, they help survivors meet their basic needs by supporting their plans for immediate safety and preparing to leave. This goes a step beyond acting as a referral source or a resource navigator—though many grassroots supporters do all three roles. They work with survivors to identify and validate safety threats and to plan for maintaining safety—especially during the most critical moments. Grassroots advocates help survivors walk through their options. They are careful to act as a guide and not make a survivor feel forced to do anything, even when the circumstances make them fear greatly for the survivor's safety and well-being.

Grassroots advocacy includes supporting survivors as they complete tasks to increase their safety. This may include walking survivors through their experiences in court or accompanying them when they complete a civil protective order. Grassroots advocates figure out the barriers and help survivors overcome those barriers. Oftentimes this includes identifying tangible barriers to safety like financial dependence. A grassroots advocate may help a survivor complete a HUD housing application or secure a bus ticket to stay with a loved one out of state. This is especially critical since financial abuse impacts nearly all survivors and the lack of financial resources are one of the reasons survivors report staying in an abusive relationship longer than they want.¹¹

Grassroots advocates focus on doing whatever is necessary within their role—led by the survivor—to ensure their safety. They stay with the survivors through their journey. Even in situations where a survivor is not ready or does not want to leave, they provide safety planning and support. They ensure the survivor has someone they can trust to contact for their safety. While this work often requires sustained engagement and practical skills like case management, grassroots advocates emphasized that their role is not to replace formal services, but to strengthen survivors' ability to access safety and support on their own terms.

Leading (Increasing) Community Support

Some grassroots supporters we interviewed described their work extending beyond individual survivors to strengthening how communities show up for survivors. In this way, support is not only about meeting basic needs, but about increasing awareness and resources within the community.

Amy is one such grassroots supporter. She is the president of a local survivor council—a group funded and supported by the same formal domestic violence program that helped save her life. In this role, Amy often uses her skills as a public speaker to increase community support for survivors, including by encouraging donations to formal domestic violence providers.

At an upcoming event, Amy planned to share about her experience as a survivor before asking the audience to stand. As she explained, "Stand up if you are here to support (formal domestic violence provider) and be part of the solution when it comes to domestic violence. Look around. This is a community issue that requires community action. Look to your left and look to your right. We all have the same thing in our heart. We want to help, right? That's why we're here."

¹¹ Hess, C., & Rosario, A. (2018). *Dreams Deferred: A Survey on the Impact of Intimate Partner Violence on Survivors' Education, Careers, and Economic Security*. https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/C475_IWPR-Report-Dreams-Deferred.pdf

Some grassroots supporters, like Amy, seek to increase community support for survivors in addition to providing one-on-one assistance. They leverage different opportunities, skills, and partnerships to make space for broader support. Some increased awareness through public speaking—challenging judgmental preconceptions and highlighting critical nuances. Others facilitate support groups or help raise funds for formal domestic violence providers. Still others create small start-up non-profits. Or they act as developers strengthening partnerships and collaboration across their community and different systems. Through these roles, they are leading their communities to support survivors for the better.

Increasing Public Awareness—The Public Speaker

Grassroots supporters acting as public speakers work to increase public awareness about domestic violence by moving beyond surface-level messaging and addressing the nuanced ways survivors need support from their communities. By sharing their lived experiences, they challenge assumptions about who domestic violence impacts and create moments of recognition that help survivors feel seen and less alone. In doing so, they increase visibility, build trust, and create permission for survivors and those who love them to reach out for support.

Celeste is a public speaker. As a survivor, she shares her story to help her community understand that domestic violence can affect anyone. After all, she was working as a formal domestic violence advocate while experiencing abuse. Celeste uses this experience to disrupt common narratives about survivors. As she said, “A lot of people see somebody like me who has a decent job and career...and they never assume that I would be in an abusive relationship. So, I tell my story so that people can identify themselves when they see me.” Through public speaking, grassroots supporters like Celeste reshape public understanding by illuminating the realities that often remain hidden and make it harder for survivors to access the support they need. This is especially true when the support they need is more relationally focused than basic needs. Something that asks for a more specific kind of community support than the amount of food pantries or hotlines to call.

“I tell my story so that people can identify themselves when they see me.”

Many grassroots supporters we interviewed described public speaking as a core feature of how they support survivors. By being visible and open, they create access points for survivors. Celeste, for example, regularly has survivors approach her after speaking events thanking her for helping them build up the courage to connect and seek support. In these moments, her role transitions into that of a listener and resource navigator—turning awareness into action.

Public speaking takes many forms. Some grassroots supporters speak at domestic violence awareness events, while others visit schools, shelters, or faith-based spaces. Some leverage social media and digital platforms to reach broader audiences. Arianna, a survivor of teen dating violence, speaks to audiences in all these forms. She combines in-person speaking with online storytelling through a website she created to uplift other survivors’ voices. As she explained, “I give (survivors) a chance to share their story. Kind of talk through all of those things, really honor what they went through. Because people don’t understand, they don’t realize what domestic violence really is, and all of the little nuances that kind of go into it.”

Arianna’s purpose is shared by many grassroots supporters who publicly speak. They noted the importance of sharing more than the traumatic details of their worst experiences. Instead, they spoke about healing, resilience, and the possibility of thriving after abuse. They want survivors to see their past, present, and future selves in



them. When listening to survivors, Arianna empowers them to talk about these components, “We talk about the healing journey. Their process of moving through those feelings, moving through that experience. It is a guideline for someone who’s going through something similar, because sometimes you don’t know who to ask. You don’t know where to turn. I wanted it to be something that was there for anybody that needs it. Anybody that’s feeling alone and each story is so different and so unique. It reaches that demographic of just about everybody that would need it.”

Beyond breaking isolation and empowering survivors, some use public speaking to increase community awareness and knowledge about the dynamics of domestic violence, available services, and how to respond supportively. For example, Amy uses her employment with an international corporation to speak regularly about domestic violence. She reflected, “I talk weekly about it. By doing that and being visible and okay with discussing it, people that have come to me privately about ‘hey, how do I help my sister who’s going through this?’” Her visibility alone is creating additional pathways for survivors and loved ones—in non-domestic violence focused spaces—to seek information to help. Through these varied approaches to increasing public awareness, they are helping to ensure survivors receive the support they need.

Facilitating Survivor Groups & Events—The Facilitator

Other grassroots supporters strengthen their community’s response to domestic violence by intentionally creating and facilitating survivor-centered groups and events. This form of grassroots support helps create and hold the spaces survivors have consistently advocated for—spaces that foster connection and community with other survivors.

Melinda is a survivor who facilitates and organizes coffee meetups and healing retreats for survivors in her area. She shared, “I found a lot of enjoyment in doing those. It’s not only a great way to get our community together, but so many women—and men too—need to know that they’re not alone. It gives them a sense of community when we gather together.” Through these gatherings, Melinda responds directly to survivors’ calls for connection and peer-led community.

Formal domestic violence providers often offer survivor-centered support groups as well. However, limited funding, staffing constraints, or grant restrictions can make it difficult for formal services to facilitate groups that respond to specific identities, beliefs, or lived experiences within their communities. In these gaps, grassroots facilitators can step in.

Betsy’s work as a facilitator reflects this role. As a survivor, she credits formal domestic violence services with helping her leave an abusive relationship and later worked as a formal domestic violence advocate. Yet she found something missing in those contexts—especially as it related to her healing process—her faith. She recognized that formal services were often limited in their ability to offer direct faith-based support. In response, Betsy created online and in-person support groups for survivors seeking Christian, faith-based spaces for their healing. As she explained, “I just want you to have it available in case you have a Christian woman in your facility and they’re like, ‘Where is God in this equation?’”

Betsy was not alone in this approach. Many of the grassroots facilitators we interviewed described creating groups that reflected the specific cultures and identities of their communities. In these spaces, facilitators could speak directly to shared experiences and use familiar language and frameworks for healing. Facilitation in this context goes beyond simply creating space for survivors—it creates intentional, culturally specific environments where survivors can be more fully seen, heard, and understood.

Fundraising & Collecting Resources—The Developers

In addition to raising awareness or facilitating support groups, some grassroots supporters strengthen community responses to domestic violence by developing tangible resources for survivors and the organizations that serve them. They are developers. In this role, they focus on mobilizing financial and material

support to increase the capacity of survivor-serving efforts. Their work centers on building and sustaining the resources needed for survivors to access safety and stability within their communities.

Survivors like Amy and Arianna use their public profiles and community relationships to help develop resources for formal domestic violence providers. They act as ambassadors—helping to increase tangible support for essential domestic violence services. As Amy shared, “Throw me in a room of strangers, man. I will make friends with everybody. I will find a way that we can all connect...invite me to come speak at your next board meeting. Invite me to come speak or just grab coffee with you.” Through relationship-building, Amy creates opportunities to increase financial investment in survivor services.

Arianna similarly uses her platform to organize fundraising events that directly benefit local domestic violence shelters. One recent event raised nearly \$18,000, which she donated to a local provider. Another grassroots developer and survivor, Tierra, joined a local fundraising sorority and now helps create and sustain an annual campaign supporting domestic violence and sexual assault services in her community. In these examples, survivors leverage their voice and relationships in the community to help sustain the resources survivors rely on.

Not all developers focus on monetary fundraising. Erika, another survivor, began her grassroots support by asking her community to donate essential items to a local domestic violence provider. Although she did not personally receive formal domestic violence services, she understood their importance for survivors in her community and wanted to help in a tangible way. After sharing her story and posting a simple request online, the response exceeded her expectations. As she recalled, “It was an idea and then people got on my post and it was like ‘let me know what you want to collect and I’ll donate.’ And I’m thinking Dollar Store, you know just two Dollar Store items and it went from a post to a full U-Haul truck filled up of brand-new items. It blew my mind. I was in an apartment and my entire dining room, and my apartment was filled with items.”

Developers often start with what they have: time, relationships, influence—and allow those efforts to grow organically. Through fundraising, resource drives, and ambassador roles, grassroots developers help support formal domestic violence service providers’ ability to serve survivors sustainably.

Organizing Community Responses & Creating Non-Profits—The Start-ups

Start-ups are grassroots supporters who respond to service gaps for survivors in their communities by creating organized forms of support—often in the form of their own nonprofit organizations. Through these efforts, they create new critical pathways for survivors who otherwise lack safe and reliable access to help.

Selena is a grassroots start-up. Her experiences as a formal domestic violence advocate, a survivor, and an immigrant to the United States allowed her to see gaps in services for survivors like her. Services that deeply understood their language, culture, and lived experience were missing. She understands how difficult navigating to a new country can be when just language itself is a barrier. This can push survivors into isolation—not knowing where to turn for help. In response, she recruited and trained deeply trusted and multilingual members of her own community to serve as volunteer advocates. Selena does not have enough access to state or federal grants to support a payroll. Instead, she relies on the volunteers she trained to serve as advocates. As she shared, “I have a group of volunteers, wonderful women—80% of them are pastors, women pastors from churches. They belong to the community, do a great job in the community, and work for great organizations.”

While securing funding to build a fully staffed organization remains challenging, Selena continues to build sustainability in real time by leveraging her skills, relationships, and persistence to ensure survivors in her community do not go without support. Since starting her organization, they have served hundreds of immigrant survivors.

Selena is not alone. Other grassroots supporters like Rita, Betsy, Arianna, Erika, and Amanda all created their own organizations using precious personal time and resources. None of them have yet generated enough funding to sustain the work full-time, though one leveraged her experience to help establish a formal domestic violence provider now fully funded by a local government. Using her grassroots she created a new



organization that filled a service gap in her local domestic violence ecosystem. As these organizations take shape, their founders remain focused on meeting survivors' needs in the present, often at significant personal cost and dedication.

Rita, who created an organization to provide survivors with funds to support them while fleeing domestic violence, reflected on the strain of this work: "I've thought to myself, gosh, this is so hard. I really don't have a lot of support to help me understand how to do a nonprofit. Part of me sometimes thinks, oh, I'll just throw in the towel and just work for the agency that I'm working at and see what else I can do to help others. But no, I'm not going to just give in. I'm going to keep going."

The grit, determination, and sacrifice of grassroots start-ups reflect one of the most critical ways survivors support one another by closing service gaps. In doing so, they help evolve the domestic violence landscape to better reflect what survivors need.

“Part of me sometimes thinks, oh, I’ll just throw in the towel.... But no, I’m not going to just give in. I’m going to keep going.”

Strengthening Systems & Partnerships—The Steward

Lastly, some grassroots supporters strengthen their community's response to domestic violence by tending to the systems, relationships, and partnerships that shape how survivors access safety and support. They are stewards who focus less on developing resources and more on improving how existing resources, institutions, and community stakeholders respond to survivors over time. They are caretakers of a broader domestic violence ecosystem helping to cross-pollinate new and stronger support for survivors.

Esther is one such steward. Through her participation in the local chamber of commerce meetings, she has built relationships with business owners and community stakeholders whose resources can make a direct difference for survivors. In one instance, Esther formed a relationship with a local rental property owner and persuaded them to rent properties to survivors escaping abuse at a lower-than-normal cost. This kind of relationship-building directly improves safety and stability for survivors in her community. Rather than creating new resources—especially resources related to housing—she influences how community stakeholders choose to use their existing resources to support survivors. In doing so, she helps reshape how responsibility for survivor safety is carried within the community.

Stewards help in other ways, too. Sometimes they use their roles within the community to influence how domestic violence is understood and addressed. For example, Tierra is also a part of her local parent teacher association. She uses her experience as a mother and survivor to influence how the school addresses domestic violence. She meets regularly with school staff to understand what students and families need and uses her influence to ensure the PTA consistently supports prevention-based resources and events. When she experiences barriers, she can rely on other roles in the community like her membership with the fundraising sorority to resolve barriers. In doing so, Tierra acts as a steward ensuring her local school systems have pathways for addressing domestic violence as it impacts their students.

Other stewards engage with public policy. They meet with local legislators, serve on city committees, or create petitions advocating for policies that help survivors. Others help steward formal domestic violence service providers by sitting on their board of directors or joining their survivor advisory councils. Many of

the grassroots supporters we interviewed occupy these roles intentionally to help guide decision-making, inform priorities, and ensure survivor perspectives are reflected in how communities and services respond to domestic violence.

Stewardship is often less visible than fundraising or public speaking, but its impact is lasting. By tending to relationships, shaping partnerships, and influencing systems, grassroots stewards help ensure that community responses to domestic violence remain responsive, coordinated, and grounded in what survivors need most.

Empowering Relationships

Grassroots supporters also seek to create empowering relationships with other survivors as a distinct form of support. This work reflects the intentional, survivor-centered use of relationships as a form of intervention—providing presence, validation, and walking alongside survivors in ways that restore voice, build readiness, and support survivors across the continuum of their safety and healing.

While this form of support may intersect with other roles—such as the public speaker or resource navigator—the distinction lies in how empowering relationships increase the likelihood that survivors can hear, trust, and act on the information and resources shared with them. They view relationship-building as a way of fortifying survivors for whatever they are facing in their journey, whether preparing to flee or healing from years of trauma. This work involves listening to empower, supporting healing, and being a steady presence amidst the storms survivors navigate and overcome.

Presence & Validation—The Anchors

Most grassroots supporters we interviewed described helping survivors through relationships by listening in ways that support empowerment. They sought to become anchors for survivors—steady, trustworthy points of connection that help survivors regain their footing when everything around them feels uncertain. Because every survivor's path is different, anchors highlighted empowering survivors in choosing what feels safest and best for them—resisting the urge to second guess. Sometimes this meant disrupting conflicting messages survivors were told. At other times, it meant consistently building survivors up—helping them discover their voice and power.

Many survivors shared how difficult it can be to break free from domestic violence when the person causing harm repeatedly undermines their confidence and sense of reality. This can include constant verbal abuse and manipulation—telling survivors “no one will believe them.” These dynamics are often compounded when friends or family—intentionally or not—reinforce similar narratives, such as encouraging survivors to stay for the sake of children or assuring them that things will eventually improve. Together, these messages create conflict and doubt for survivors.

Theresa knows this experience firsthand. She spent decades in an abusive relationship, in part because the conflicting messages around her made it difficult to trust what she knew to be true in her body. Today, she supports survivors by offering presence and validation. As she shared, “My primary responsibility in this work is to listen well...I am specifically attempting to identify those lies a sufferer may be believing that need to be replaced with truth.” Grassroots supporters like Theresa act as anchors by listening in ways that help survivors counter abuse, manipulation, and judgment—building survivors up where they have been broken and torn down.

Because stigma and isolation remain significant barriers for survivors, reaching them often requires taking advantage of small windows of opportunity to express unconditional support and care. For some survivors, this means maintaining a consistent open-door approach that, over time, makes a meaningful difference.

Sophie is keenly aware of this. She supports survivors in her proximity but describes the process as delicate and ongoing. “It’s an emotionally abusive relationship, and I think it’s very hard to clarify it as a straight-up domestic violence situation,” she shared. “I try to be careful in how I respond so they will keep talking to me...I’m always

afraid that I'll say the wrong thing and get them to hold back." Anchors like Sophie understand that how they respond can determine whether a survivor continues to reach out or retreats further into isolation.

Across interviews, grassroots supporters emphasized that anchoring relationships are rooted in presence without pressure. Sometimes the most meaningful support is simply listening—what Theresa described as “relieving the weight of their emotional backpack.” By being a safe and trusted person, anchors create space for survivors to process, reflect, and regain their agency without being rushed or directed.

Through these relationships, they help create opportunities for relief, escape, and healing. They become anchors within everyday community. They can be found online, at public events, or through informal relationships with neighbors and acquaintances—sometimes friends and family. In providing this form of support, they help survivors feel less alone, more grounded, and better supported as they navigate their journeys of survival and transformation.

Supporting Accountability for People Who Cause Harm

A few of the grassroots supporters we interviewed work with people who cause harm in addition to survivors. Survivors have long called for more options to stop harm and violence. They want the harm and violence to end. They want to be safe. They want accountability that works.

Currently, the options available to people who cause harm are limited. Primary accountability pathways often require reporting a crime that is then prosecuted to completion. This approach assumes the harm meets legal thresholds for conviction beyond a reasonable doubt. Even when harm is real and ongoing, not all forms of domestic violence are illegal.

Accountability programs do exist, but participation requires awareness of the program, access to resources and stability to participate, and a willingness to acknowledge that harm has occurred followed by a desire to change. That willingness is often shaped by stigma and fear of judgment, which can prevent people from seeking help altogether.

In response, communities across the country are exploring additional accountability pathways. These include restorative justice approaches¹² dynamic accountability ecosystems¹³ and creating a survivor-centered hotline for people causing harm to seek support for stopping their harmful behavior.¹⁴ Increasing safe, effective, and survivor-informed pathways to accountability strengthens our collective ability to reduce violence. The grassroots supporters we interviewed recognize these gaps and see themselves as playing a limited but important role in making their communities safer for survivors.

The Accountability Partners

Accountability Partners are clear about the seriousness of their work. They understand the risks of engaging with people who cause harm and are intentional about not becoming complicit in violence through their actions or inaction. Rather, they leverage relational and trust-building techniques to create opportunities for meaningful change.

¹² <https://vermontbiz.com/news/2023/july/29/new-law-lets-sexual-and-domestic-violence-cases-go-community-justice-centers>

¹³ <https://criminaljustice.cityofnewyork.us/reports/safety-accountability-and-support-exploring-alternative-approaches-to-intimate-partner-violence/>

¹⁴ <https://truthout.org/articles/a-new-domestic-violence-hotline-aims-to-stop-people-from-doing-harm/>

For example, Thomas is an accountability partner. He is a social worker deeply involved in his recovery community. Thomas volunteers as a mentor through programs like Narcotics Anonymous (NA). The mentees he supports are sometimes individuals who also have caused harm. He sees stigma towards them as a barrier to accountability similar to stigma around substance abuse. “A lot of them don’t even engage in some of the programs that are out now for abusers because of that one thing—being judged,” he shared. Thomas meets people where they are, supporting their accountability by helping them get involved in an accountability intervention program or by addressing the conditions that increase risk of harm, such as housing instability, substance use, or unemployment.

Like many grassroots supporters, Thomas draws on personal experience to inform his work. “I’ve been untrustworthy and I’ve done harm to people and then wanted to fix it later,” he reflected. “Somebody needed to show me some grace.” For Thomas, recognizing his own capacity to cause harm also helped him understand that others can build the capacity to stop harming. He is clear, however, that accountability requires directness. “It’s most effective for me not to step lightly around the issue of domestic violence and to be very upfront about it having occurred,” he noted. This clarity helps him assess readiness for accountability and determine what kind of support is appropriate. Sometimes this means disengaging from supporting the person altogether. Thomas’s work demonstrates how accountability partners can function as mentors who support meaningful behavioral change without minimizing harm.

“Somebody needed to show me some grace.”

Other accountability partners provide more structured accountability support. Ellis, for example, is trained in transformative justice methods and facilitates accountability work both one-on-one and in group settings. Similar to formal accountability programs, Ellis cannot force someone unwilling to change to stop their behavior. What they can do is offer structure, guidance, and support to individuals who are motivated to take responsibility and change.

Transformative justice approaches allow individuals to take accountability for harm without being removed from their community. In situations where survivors do not want separation but do want behavior to change, this can be a viable option. Ellis engages in this work because their own community asks for it—they want ways to acknowledge harm, stop it, and support healing. As Ellis reflected, “Having those conversations about accountability, how we move from a punitive mindset into a repair and accountability mindset. One of embracing our humanity; we do make mistakes and we can course correct. It’s a complex endeavor.” This work is labor- and expertise-intensive and is not appropriate for everyone to do or what every community or survivor wants. Still, it represents one possible pathway for addressing harm when survivors desire accountability and change.

Accountability partners like Thomas and Ellis respond to survivors’ long-standing call to end harm and violence by helping create survivor-informed pathways to accountability. Their work is compassionate but firm, grounded in the belief that change is possible without excusing the harm. While limited in scale and requiring deep ethical awareness and competence, these grassroots accountability efforts point to possibilities for expanding how communities support accountability—and ultimately, support survivor safety.

Survivor-Defined Essentials to Grassroots Supporters

When we interviewed grassroots supporters, we did not ask them, “What makes a good grassroots supporter?” Instead, we asked what standards and ethics they believed survivors like themselves should be held to when serving others, as well as how they approached safety and boundaries in the work. Their responses led us to consider the ingredients that make a strong grassroots supporter—at least from the perspective of those doing the work.

Across interviews, grassroots supporters uplifted safety and confidentiality, boundary-setting, centering the specific needs of survivors, and caring for their own needs in order to sustain the work. They also shared how lived experience informed trust-building and how many leveraged professional skills or training to support survivors more effectively. In many ways, what they described closely aligned with core principles of trauma-informed care: empowerment, choice, collaboration, safety, and trustworthiness.¹⁵

Regardless of the sources for their practice and skills, everyone interviewed seemed to have a central “passion and purpose” as their guiding principle in serving survivors according to their needs.

Safety

Grassroots supporters consistently described safety as a central and ongoing concern in their work. Helping survivors was understood as inherently risky with predictably unpredictable circumstances. Safety was not framed as something that could be guaranteed, but as something that required consistent attention, assessment, and responsive action.

Many grassroots supporters spoke about holding their own safety alongside the safety of the survivors they support—especially because they lacked formal institutional backing. While few described incidents of harm occurred, most shared a persistent awareness of risk informed and shaped by their own lived experiences. For some the threat of retaliation from the person who caused harm towards them factored into their risk assessment. Some grassroots supporters the risks of physical harm, legal abuse, or other forms of power and control years after leaving the relationship.

“Being Aware of Your Surroundings”

This phrase emerged as a common phrase and central focus among grassroots supporters regarding their safety. Their safety was understood as more of an ongoing posture and foundation that required attentiveness, restraint, and a willingness to respond when something did not feel safe. They noted trusting their instincts and recognizing when a situation exceeded what they could safely address.

Boundaries and Discernment

Boundaries were repeatedly named as an essential tool for maintaining safety. Grassroots supporters described being clear—both with themselves and with survivors—about what they could and could not do. Actively unsafe situations were often identified as hard limits. Many spoke about the importance of not making promises about safety they could not guarantee and of being transparent when additional or emergency support was necessary.

¹⁵ Menschner, C., & Maul, A. (2016). Key ingredients for successful trauma-informed care implementation. In SAMHSA (pp. 1-12). Center for Health Care Strategies. https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/programs_campaigns/childrens_mental_health/atc-whitepaper-040616.pdf

Safety was also described as conditional and context based. What felt safe for one survivor—or one grassroots supporter—might not feel safe for another. Grassroots supporters advocated centering the specific conditions of each situation, rather than relying on assumptions or universal rules. They noted that these approaches reflected their own experiences and judgment, not universal rules for safety. Ultimately, what might work well for one person may not work well for another.

Centering Safety Around Survivor Needs

For many survivors, connecting with a grassroots supporter was one of the first steps towards breaking free from domestic violence. Grassroots supporters recognized the gravity of that moment—especially in situations where accessing formal domestic violence services was not immediately safe or possible. In these contexts, safety was often centered through careful communication, shared awareness of risk, and survivor-led decision-making.

Grassroots supporters described prioritizing survivors' own knowledge of their situations. Rather than directing survivors toward predetermined actions or outcomes, they focused on checking in about safety, asking questions, and supporting survivors to make choices that felt feasible and protective with their realities. Survivors were consistently described as experts in their own experiences, particularly when navigating danger and making their own risk assessments. Even if survivors did not have all the answers, they knew best what to expect and predict which made them central elements to approaching safety.

At the same time, grassroots supporters acknowledge that safety needs can shift over time. Some survivors sought support after physical violence had ended, looking primarily for emotional support, social connection, or healing. Even in these contexts, they emphasized maintaining safety awareness because circumstances can always change.

In Their Own Words

“I’m here to protect myself and give them the best resources. And I would never put myself in danger.”
— Rita

“We have to be careful in what we’re doing.” — Amanda

“The honor of connecting with survivors is bigger than the fear of something bad happening.”
— Arianna

“I have to ask them, ‘are you going to be safe if we have this conversation?’” — Celeste

Confidentiality

Throughout the interviews, confidentiality emerged as a non-negotiable when supporting survivors. Grassroots supporters described honoring survivors' right to control their information as essential to creating safety, reducing fear, and allowing survivors to engage at their own pace. Violations of confidentiality were viewed as having the potential to increase risk to safety, erode trust, and deepen isolation.

Confidentiality at Every Stage

Grassroots supporters spoke about confidentiality as something that must be actively protected and earned, not assumed. This included being intentional about when and how information was shared and recognizing that even well-intended disclosures with trusted allies or community partners could put survivors at risk.

They underscored the importance of being transparent with survivors about confidentiality early on. This included clearly communicating how the information they shared would be handled, what could and could not be shared, and where limits to confidentiality existed. Making these boundaries explicit empowered survivors to make informed choices about what they shared and when.

Consent was described as central to confidentiality. They stressed that sharing survivor information, whether directly or indirectly, required explicit permission even when identifying details were removed. This included avoiding hypothetical sharing or name-dropping in efforts to mobilize resources without consent.

In situations where coordination with formal domestic violence providers was necessary, they described relying on consent-based mechanisms to support safer hand-offs. This sometimes meant accepting limits on what they would know once a survivor engaged with formal services. Grassroots supporters described respecting these limits as a necessary part of the process, even when it meant stepping back from the relationship and not knowing what happened next.

Protecting Information

Many grassroots supporters described confidentiality as extending to themselves as well. In some communities, being known as someone who supports survivors could compromise safety or undermine the ability to continue the work. In group settings, confidentiality was understood as a shared responsibility essential to protecting everyone involved and minimizing harm.

They also described being mindful of what information they retained and how it was stored. Protecting records, communications, and identifying details was viewed as part of reducing risk and preventing harm, not as administrative caution but as survivor-centered care.

In Their Own Words:

“I tell them every time this is Vegas, baby. What happens here stays here.” – Amy

*“...be mindful of their situation because we are all in Indiana. Everybody knows somebody...the last thing you want to do is name drop in a way that is a disadvantage for who you’re trying to help.”
– Amanda*

“There’s no excuse for sharing somebody’s information without permission.” – Esther

*“I always try to make a survivor know, they can confide in me and whatever is shared...it’s between us.”
– Tierra*

“Confidentiality is number one.” – Selena

Boundaries

Grassroots supporters advocated for boundaries as essential to both survivor-centered care and their own sustainability in the work. Like safety, boundaries were understood as highly contextual and shaped by lived experience rather than fixed rules. Many described symmetries in how boundaries function for both grassroots supporters and survivors. Setting boundaries was seen as mutually beneficial, creating conditions where support could be offered without causing additional harm.

For grassroots supporters who were survivors themselves, boundaries carried particular weight. Many reflected on how their own boundaries had been disrupted or erased through abuse and how reclaiming them became part of their healing. Because of this, they often prioritized helping survivors identify and practice boundary setting within the context of support—helping them to maintain control, build confidence in their instincts, and achieve greater empowerment.

Learning Boundaries Through Experience—Sometimes the Hard Way

Many grassroots supporters described developing clarity around boundaries through experience rather than formal guidance. Without supervisors or institutional structures to rely on, they often learned boundaries by navigating difficult situations and reflecting afterward. Some shared experiences of feeling taken advantage of or realizing too late that a boundary had been crossed. These moments, while challenging, helped sharpen discernment over time.

Boundaries were also described as flexible and responsive to context. What felt appropriate in one situation might not feel appropriate in another. Grassroots supporters emphasized trusting their instincts, honoring when something fell off, and acting when a situation exceeded what they could safely or ethically do.

Limits, Scope, and Saying No

Understanding personal limits was repeatedly uplifted. Grassroots supporters described being clear about what they could and could not offer, including time, availability, expertise, and emotional capacity. Saying “no” was framed as a necessary part of the work, not a failure. They noted that they were not obligated to work with everyone or to continue in situations that felt unsafe, emotionally overwhelming, or beyond their competence. Several described learning—sometimes through difficult experiences—that stepping back, referring to another provider, or declining involvement was an act of care rather than abandonment.

Boundaries around scope were especially important. Grassroots supporters spoke about being upfront when they could not serve as an emergency contact, could not provide legal guidance, or needed to step back to recharge. Protecting their own capacity was viewed as essential to being able to show up well for survivors.

Relational Boundaries and Avoiding Harm

Grassroots supporters consistently cautioned against forming unhealthy attachments or dual relationships. While authenticity and shared experience were seen as strengths, many noted the importance of not becoming overly personal, dependent, or entangled in a survivor’s life. Becoming too close made it harder to center survivor autonomy and to honor decisions survivors made, even when those decisions were difficult to witness.

Several grassroots supporters reflected on how maintaining internal boundaries with themselves also protected them from harm, particularly in situations where they might not know what happened to a survivor after support ended. Making peace with uncertainty was described as part of sustaining long-term involvement in the work.

Pre-existing relationships added additional complexity. When a survivor was a friend or family member, grassroots supporters described weighing the risks of dual relationships carefully. In some cases, this meant redirecting support to another support to avoid compromising the survivor’s needs or safety.



Accountability to Boundaries

Many grassroots supporters stressed the importance of accountability around boundaries. This included seeking training, developing personal ethics for the work, and identifying people they trusted to help them reflect when boundaries felt unclear.

Ultimately, boundaries were described as something that required ongoing attention, practice, and self-awareness.

Across interviews, they shared that strong boundaries allowed them to offer care without overextending themselves or causing harm. Honoring both their own needs and the needs of survivors sometimes meant recognizing they were not the right person to help in that moment. That discernment was viewed not as abandonment, but as an act of care.

In Their Own Words

“It’s OK to say ‘no’ and set boundaries.” – Arianna

“I cannot help anyone to decide where I’m putting myself or my children in danger.” – Amanda

*“If you don’t have those boundaries, you do more damage to the person you’re helping. You run the risk of becoming an attachment to them in a very unhealthy way...I was struggling with my relationships with the people I was trying to help because I was putting way too much of myself into their situation.”
– Celeste*

“When I am helping other people, I need to remind myself over and over that I can only do so much and that has to be enough. It’s really easy for me to want to take care of people.” – Stevie

“I’m not the only one that can help them. I have to set a boundary for myself to take care of myself, to let them know, there’s other people that can help.” – Rita

Centering Survivors’ Needs

Grassroots supporters consistently emphasized that centering survivors’ needs requires honoring the uniqueness of each survivor’s situation. There is rarely a one-size-fits-all approach to domestic violence. Survivors were described as coming in many “shapes and sizes,” shaped by different relationships, cultures, identities, resources, and risks. Even when there were surface-level similarities, grassroots supporters cautioned against overgeneralizing or assuming what a survivor needed based on past experiences.

Meeting survivors where they are was central to this approach. Grassroots supporters described intentionally setting aside judgment, criticism, or urgency to “fix” the situation. This included respecting survivors’ autonomy, even when survivors chose to remain in or return to relationships that caused harm. Many reflected on the limits of control in this work. Survivors could not be rushed into decisions they were not ready to make and attempts to do so often undermined trust and safety.

Listening to be Led by Survivors

Grassroots supporters repeatedly described centering survivors as an active and ongoing practice. Many drew from their own experiences of survivorship but noted the importance of ensuring the work was shaped primarily by the survivor, not themselves. This required ongoing self-awareness and reflection, especially when deeply personal experiences or emotions surfaced. Sharing personal stories, for example, was described as most helpful when it clearly served the survivor's needs rather than the support's own healing, even when that healing was a byproduct.

Several grassroots supporters shared learning through mistakes, such as realizing when their own preferences, habits, or emotional responses unintentionally shifted attention away from the survivor. Over time, they learned to slow themselves down, ask permission, adjust their communication style, and seek feedback from survivors. These practices helped them remain aligned with survivors' needs rather than their own assumptions, preferences, or intentions.

Building on this awareness, they also spoke about being mindful of limited access to all a survivor's relevant information, as well as their own biases or the risk of over-identifying with a survivor's experience. They described resisting the urge to take over, remaining attentive to how power and influence could subtly shift in the relationship, and reconnecting with their purpose for doing the work. Reminding themselves they were not meant to be saviors helped them stay grounded in survivor-centered practice. Sometimes survivors needed someone to talk to for a moment, not someone to save them.

Listening was described as a core way grassroots supporters centered survivors' needs. This included paying attention not only to what survivors said, but how they said it, noticing body language, tone, and shifts that might signal discomfort or uncertainty.

Grassroots supporters advocated listening to empower, validate, and uplift, rather than listening for opportunities to advise, correct, or direct.

Acting based on what survivors identified as their needs, rather than on assumptions or comparisons, was seen as critical. Grassroots supporters described striving to treat survivors with fairness and dignity, avoiding favoritism, skepticism, or suspicion. Survivors were approached as whole people, with strengths, limitations, and complex realities beyond the harm they experienced.

Ultimately, centering survivors' needs was described as an ethical posture rather than a set of techniques. It required humility, attentiveness, and a willingness to adapt, ensuring that survivors retained choice, dignity, and control throughout their journey.

Knowing Who You Best Serve

Grassroots supporters also noted the importance of understanding who they were best positioned to support. Some offered forms of support are not easily accessible through formal services, such as faith-based or culturally specific support. In these cases, centering survivors' needs meant being honest about fit and being willing to help survivors connect with other resources when another person might serve them better.

In Their Own Words

“It should all be completely about those that you’re serving. And it should be nothing about me.” – Amy

“I am very careful when I advocate in relationship with a survivor, to listen as carefully as I can, and to maintain as my primary aim/goal the empowering of the individual.” – Theresa



“The main standard that I think we should have is to allow the people we are helping to have total choice. It would be unethical for us to push them in any one direction.” – Stevie

“Meeting them where they are without any judgment.” – Melinda

“And you just have to let people take their own route and their own process. We have to go at their pace. We have to be careful to educate while also allowing them freedom.” – Esther

“I can share details with you, but it’s only because I think that those details are going to be what is necessary for you to feel comfortable enough to share with me.” – Celeste

“What works for one may not work for the other, and that’s OK, but we have to find out what will work for them. Don’t just disregard them.” – LaKeisha

Peer-to-Peer

Many grassroots supporters describe peer-to-peer connection as a defining ingredient of their work. Shared lived experience can reduce isolation, disrupt stigma, and create a sense of safety that helps survivors seek support. This does not mean a grassroots supporters must be survivors. Rather, it reflects how lived experience can ground trust, understanding, and relational depth.

Grassroots supporters who are survivors often described their own experiences as “on-the-job training.” Survivorship informed how they listened and responded—often informed as much by what not to say as by what to offer. Many shared a “passion and purpose” to ensure that survivors do not navigate the same hardships alone.

“We Just Get It.”

Grassroots support survivors often spoke about the relief that comes from not having to explain or justify their experiences. Fellow survivors understand the nuances to surviving domestic violence that are often difficult to articulate to non-survivors. These include how harm can coexist with love, hope, and moments of calm; how leaving is rarely straightforward; how self-doubt and self-minimization took root over time because of the abuse.

They also understand how abuse shows up in layered and less visible forms like emotional, financial, legal, or spiritual. Survivors know how deeply harm and abuse can isolate someone, disrupting their ability to find stability or clarity beyond the day-to-day realities of simply trying to survive. They understand what it means to constantly assess risk-making decisions for themselves and their children based on minimizing harm and responding to threats. Shared survivorship also informed how grassroots supporters held risk and danger with seriousness, restraint, and without minimizing harm.

Survivors also know what it is like to try to heal after the harm has stopped. They know the questions that surface afterward: “Why did this happen?” or “How do I move forward?” Many are rebuilding from a place of limited resources, carrying additional shame, fear, and trauma that only survivors fully recognize.

Because of this shared understanding, peer-to-peer support often begins with grounding and recognition rather than explanation. Survivors can simply be themselves without having to explain, justify, or translate their experience to someone without lived knowledge. This is especially important as several survivors described past attempts to seek help deepened their isolation when they were met with misunderstanding.

Disrupting Stigma & Fear of Judgment

Many survivors shared how fear of judgment kept them silent. They feared being judged for staying, for returning multiple times, for loving someone who caused harm, or for not recognizing the relationship as abusive sooner. Others worried their experiences would be minimized because they did not fit dominant narratives of who domestic violence impacts.

Grassroots supporters described their shared survivorship to reduce this fear. While being a survivor does not guarantee judgment-free support, many grassroots survivors reflected on their own experiences how knowing they were speaking with someone who had lived through similar realities increased trust. Shared experience often created a relational bridge—one that made seeking support feel safer and more accessible.

Tactful Sharing

Shared experience can foster immediate rapport, offering empathy rather than sympathy. At the same time, grassroots supporters stressed the importance of being intentional about what they shared from their own stories. They described choosing details based on what was supportive in the moment, rather than assuming sameness of experience. They focused on sharing in ways, with respect to boundaries, that put a survivor at ease while centering themes of validation, hope, and de-isolation.

In their own words

“They don’t need to hear, ‘I told you so....’ They need to hear, ‘It’s going to be OK and you can make it, and I’m here to support you.’ That helps.” – LaKeisha

“It’s easier to talk with someone that has been there and done that...” – LaKeisha

“I see you. I hear you. I feel you. I get you and I’m standing right next to you.” – Amy

“I needed somebody...even with certain people who were there for me they weren’t who I needed. They didn’t understand what I was going through.” – Erika

“My ex-husband is a good guy, but he was a horrible husband, both of these are true.” – Stevie

“I do not judge people who return.... I took my spouse back 7 times....” – Stevie

“I wanted to give her what I didn’t have.” – Stevie

“...I do get what it’s like for it not to make sense....” – Sophie

Building Trust

Grassroots supporters consistently described trust as foundational to their work with survivors. Many reflected on how difficult it can be for survivors to trust again after experiencing repeated betrayal in an intimate relationship. That history of broken trust often made reaching out for help feel risky, even when support was needed. Because of this, grassroots supporters stressed building trust as a gradual and intentional process.

Across interviews, trust was described as something that could not be demanded or assumed, but as something built through repeated acts of care, honesty, and respect over time.

Building Trust Over Time

Believing survivors was central to trust-building. Grassroots supporters described approaching survivors without judgment, skepticism, or pressure to prove harm. Rather than interrogating gaps or inconsistencies, they focused on receiving what survivors chose to share and trusting that it reflected what was safest or possible for them to share in that moment. Several noted that pushing for details or explanations often reinforced fear, shame, or silence from a survivor.

Trust was also shaped by consistency and reliability. They uplifted the importance of being clear and transparent about what they could and could not offer and then following through. Their word was their bond. Trust was strengthened when survivors experienced grassroots supporters as dependable, honest, and aligned in word and action. When limitations existed, naming them upfront was viewed as more trust-building than overpromising or stepping outside one's competence.

Many grassroots supporters described meeting survivors where they were, both emotionally and practically. This included moving at the survivor's pace, naming participation as voluntary, and prioritizing consent in all interactions. Flexibility mattered, whether that meant adjusting communication methods, allowing time and space for decisions, or offering a more personal and culturally aligned form of connection when appropriate. Trust grew when survivors felt they retained choice, dignity, and the ability to disengage if needed for any reason. Sometimes this meant grassroots supporters trusting the process, allowing themselves to be wrong, and trusting the path the survivor was forging.

Non-judgment was repeatedly emphasized. Grassroots supporters described resisting the urge to direct, pressure, or control outcomes, even when their own fear or concern was present. They noted that guilt, shame, and self-blame already weigh heavily on many survivors, and that judgment or urgency often pushed survivors away. Trust was built through patience, listening, and respect for survivors' autonomy.

Trust in the Community

Beyond individual relationships, grassroots supporters also spoke about the importance of trust within the broader community. Being known as consistent, values-driven, and accountable helped strengthen informal support networks and collaborative relationships with formal domestic violence providers, faith leaders, and community partners. Showing up, communicating transparently about their work, and maintaining ethical clarity contributed to credibility and increased access to resources for survivors.

In Their Own Words

“I’m not going to put my word on something and not be able to make that come into fruition.” – Amanda

“A lot of trust needs to be built there...you have to respect what they want to do.” – Esther

“I try to let people know ahead of time what they can expect and what they should expect and try to be very honest and transparent about that.” – Celeste

Competence

Grassroots supporters advocated for developing competence for serving survivors beyond personal experience. Lived experience provided deep insight, but it was not always sufficient on its own. Grassroots supporters reflected that without checks and balances to their support measured by competence, even well-intentioned support could unintentionally cause harm.

Defining Competence

Competence was described as having enough knowledge to recognize what a survivor might be navigating and to respond with care. This included understanding the dynamics of abuse, particularly forms of power and control that are not always visible or illegal, as well as how trauma can shape a survivor's behavior, decision-making, and readiness for support. Grassroots supporters shared that knowing when a survivor needed someone to listen, rather than to act or advise, was itself a critical form of competence.

Understanding systems was another component of competence. Grassroots supporters spoke about knowing how survivors might be impacted by interactions with legal, child welfare, housing, or criminal justice systems, including the risks and limitations of those systems. This knowledge helped them set realistic expectations, avoid giving misinformation, and support survivors in navigating complex processes without positioning themselves as experts in areas beyond their role.

Cultural understanding was also named as an important dimension of competence. Grassroots supporters described how survivors' experiences of harm, help-seeking, and safety were often shaped by culture, faith, immigration status, language, and community norms. Some reflected on the risks of relying on broad or generalized cultural assumptions and advocate for cultural humility. For others, cultural connection was a pre-existing strength they brought to work, allowing them to recognize forms of harm, fear, or coercion that might be misunderstood or overlooked by those less familiar or intimate with their specific culture and community.

Pre-Existing Competences Beyond Personal Lived Experience

Many grassroots supporters drew on skills and knowledge from their professional lives. Some had formal experience in domestic violence or related social service fields, such as housing, child welfare, substance use treatment, or mental health. Others brought expertise from outside traditional service systems, including education, labor unions, financial institutions, community leadership, or advocacy work. They described learning how to apply these skills thoughtfully within the context of domestic violence, particularly in areas where formal systems lacked capacity or cultural alignment.

Prioritizing Ethical Competence

Ethical clarity was repeatedly underscored. Some grassroots supporters held formal credentials and practiced under established codes of ethics that shaped how they engaged survivors, including clear boundaries around what they could and could not offer. Others described developing their own ethical frameworks to guide their work. Across both groups, competence was tied to accountability, transparency, and a commitment to not misrepresenting one's role or abilities.

They also emphasized the importance of recognizing gaps in their knowledge and seeking additional development when needed. This included formal education, trainings, mentorship, research, and learning

through experience. Several reflected on starting their work with limited knowledge and growing over time, including by drawing on their own healing journeys. Competence was described not as a fixed state, but as an ongoing process of learning, reflection, and adjustment.

Across interviews, part of measuring competence meant knowing when to step back, when to refer, and when another person or resource would better meet a survivor's needs was viewed as an essential part of doing no harm. Grassroots supporters advocated that being honest about limits and staying grounded in one's role helped protect both survivors and themselves.

In Their Own Words

“I literally was up day and night researching at the beginning.” – Erika

“To link people with those services is sort of the easy piece. The harder piece is to be able to support an individual who, for instance, has children, maybe has previous evictions, has their own involvement with the criminal legal system. And helping them to navigate those things.” – Thomas

“I would use all of my clinical judgment and expertise. I’ve worked in the system, and I know how to contact these places and advocate.” – Rita

“I bring this professional skill set that I can help you.” – Amy

Healing & Self-Care

Grassroots supporters described supporting survivors as emotionally demanding work that often requires confronting deep pain, loss, and hard injustices. Many shared that without attention to their own healing and self-care, burnout, emotional exhaustion, or vicarious trauma became likely outcomes. For grassroots supporters who were themselves survivors, the work also carried the risk of being triggered or re-exposed to familiar harms. Sustaining the work required tends to both healing and care over time.

Being in a “Good Space” Before Supporting Others

Many grassroots supporters advised the importance of being in a “good space” before supporting other survivors. Rather than defining readiness by timelines, they described healing as an ongoing and personal journey. Some were physically free from abuse but continued to experience forms of power and control, while others noted that healing unfolded in stages over many years. Being ready to support survivors was less about reaching a deadline post-abuse and more about having enough stability, awareness, and grounding to sustainably support the needs of the survivor. It did not mean never being triggered again or having a traumatic experience, but having the ability to recognize and respond to their needs without harming a survivor.

Healing was described as caring for their physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being. They advocated being kind to themselves and pursuing what was accessible and realistic rather than comparing their progress to others. Many shared that therapy played a critical role in developing coping skills, perspective, and emotional regulation, even among those who were initially hesitant to therapy. Others described finding healing through mutual support with friends, family, fellow survivors, retreats, faith practices, joy, laughter, movement, or by sharing their story. Several reflected on forgiveness as part of their healing, understanding it as an internal process to making peace with what happened rather than reconciliation.

Self-Care as Fortifying Practice

In addition to healing before engaging in the work, grassroots supporters stressed the need for ongoing self-care while supporting survivors. Many described developing routines and practices that helped them monitor their capacity, recognize when they were becoming triggered or depleted, and respond before harm occurred. Self-reflection and self-awareness were central, often supported by therapy, journaling, trusted relationships, or protected time to reflect. Knowing personal triggers, limits, and boundaries helped grassroots supporters remain grounded.

Some share about “letting go” of what they could not control as an important practice. They spoke about learning to accept uncertainty, not knowing outcomes, and recognizing that not every story would have the resolution they hoped for. Being able to step back, take breaks, or even take extended time away from work was viewed as necessary for sustainability. Several noted that frustration, anger, and grief were natural responses, and that maintaining a compassionate posture required intentional care.

Finally, grassroots supporters described their “passion and purpose” as a sustaining force. Many felt deeply compelled to support survivors, both as a way of giving back and as part of their own healing. At the same time, they argued that tending to their own needs was what allowed their work to remain life-giving rather than depleting. Healing and self-care were not separate from work, but foundational to being able to show up with empathy, clarity, and care for others.

In Their Own Words

“I stopped a long time ago holding myself to this idea that I should be over it, that I shouldn’t feel upset about it.” – Arianna

“From a psychological standpoint, I know that my ex is never going to put his hands on me again. And for a long time, I had to tell my body that...I had a lot of muscle memory, a lot of anxiety that I would receive when I was put in a situation where I’m dealing with something that’s triggering or talking with somebody else.” – Celeste

“It gets better and stronger when you’re healing from domestic violence. It’s kind of like anything else that breaks you. You heal, you grace it and you learn to move forward. You learn how to deal with it. You learn your own limits and boundaries.” – LaKeisha

“It’s a lifelong healing journey that we’re on. Even 16 years out and I am still triggered; there are still those moments.” – Melinda

Strengths & Limitations

We have explored how grassroots supporters understand their role, values, and practices when supporting survivors of domestic violence. If we think about the work to end domestic violence as an ecosystem, an important question emerges: What strengths do grassroots supporters bring to that ecosystem, and where are the limitations of their role?

The strengths and limitations described below are grassroots defined and reflect how they understand their own impact and constraints. These self-assessments may not always align with how formal domestic violence providers or systems view grassroots work, and they may evolve over time. Rather than offering a definitive judgment, this section is intended to support ongoing dialogue about how different roles can be leveraged, coordinated, and strengthened to serve better survivors.

Strengths

Grassroots supporters described their strengths not as replacements for formal services, but as distinct contributions shaped by proximity, lived experience, and flexibility within the domestic violence response ecosystem.

Flexibility to Leverage Shared Lived Experiences

“I can meet the survivors where they are and I see them where they are. So, you know, having that first-hand experience gives me more of an edge and understanding.” – Melinda

“I know the culture, so we can speak the same language that is the biggest strength that other organizations don’t have.” – Selena

“We don’t have to be in a support group constantly revisiting everything. We share a common background, so there’s no need to explain ourselves.” – Esther

Grassroots supporters overwhelmingly identified their ability to meet survivors where they are as a core strength—especially when compounded with shared lived experience and culture. They could share their stories, connect across personal parts of life, and know the nuances of how their experiences shape them. This can be true of individuals in formal domestic violence services, but ethics and standards in those settings necessarily limit the degree of personal lived experiences that can be shared and utilized for supporting survivors.

Increased Approachability and Accessibility

“I wouldn’t feel comfortable calling up a domestic violence agency...but I would feel comfortable reaching out to my neighbor or friend that I know has gone through this situation.” – Celeste

“It is just what naturally occurs in my life.” – Stevie

“I would say that most of the people I know would probably not avail themselves of that resource. They just wouldn’t want to be in a shelter situation. They would rather live with the abuse than lose their home and control over their environment. And what little control they have.” – Sophie

“I’m just a human and not an agency.” – Esther

Many grassroots supporters believed survivors were more comfortable reaching out to them than to formal agencies—especially as a first step. Some survivors associate formal services with fear, bureaucracy, loss of control, or being judged. Others felt their experiences did not “fit” dominant narratives of domestic violence, particularly when abuse was non-physical or when leaving felt impossible.

Grassroots supporters described being able to show up in ways that felt more human and relational—beyond just the shared lived experiences. They could sit with survivors over coffee, cry with them, attend funerals, or offer presence outside of an office or service setting. Several reflected that these moments of connection helped survivors feel seen and supported in ways that reduced isolation and opened pathways to additional help.

Because they often operate within everyday community spaces, they were able to connect with survivors who might never contact a hotline, shelter, or agency website. In some cases, especially where survivors were closely monitored or had limited access to technology, knowing someone personally who had lived through domestic violence created a safer entry point for seeking help.

Some highlighted their ability to respond organically to community needs, leveraging deep relationships with local leaders, faith communities, or informal networks. They described their work as rooted in authenticity and accountability to the community rather than allegiance to a single organization or funding stream.

Personal Autonomy and Boundary Control

“I’m not a nonprofit, and I’m not really looking to be one. I like what I’m doing right now. There are a lot of rules that come with that.” – Melinda

Grassroots supporters also identified autonomy as a strength. Because their work was not typically their primary source of income, they could choose how much capacity they had, when to step back, and how to care for themselves. This flexibility supported safety, boundary-setting, and sustainability, even if it required learning limits through experience.

It’s Personal

“It’s just more personal...going back to the heart.” – Tabitha

Finally, grassroots supporters described their work as intentionally personal. For many, particularly those who were survivors themselves, supporting other survivors was not simply something they did, but part of how they made meaning of what they had lived through. This orientation shaped how they showed up and why they continued the work, even without formal roles, compensation, or recognition—echoing the same internal motivations that gave rise to many formal domestic violence services decades ago.

They described having a clear and transparent purpose when engaging survivors.

Because their work was not tied to a job description or institutional mandate, they felt able to name their motivation openly and ground their support in shared values rather than professional obligation.

This personal orientation was not described as unlimited availability or a lack of boundaries. Rather, they underscored how meaning and purpose helped sustain their engagement while still protecting their safety, capacity, and well-being. In this way, the work was sustained less by formal structure and more by responsibility to community and commitment to survivors being met with care and dignity.

Limitations

Grassroots supporters were clear about the limits of their role. While they identified meaningful strengths rooted in accessibility, shared experience, and flexibility, they also acknowledged constraints that shaped what they could offer and where formal domestic violence services remained essential. These limitations were not described as failures, but as structural realities of working outside formal systems. Many emphasized that understanding these limits was critical to doing no harm and to sustaining the broader domestic violence response ecosystem.

Lack of Official Role

“I think because I’m not officially working for one of these formal agencies, that’s a limitation in itself.”
— Celeste

“I still feel our agencies are the backbone and the support that survivors need.” — Tierra

Many grassroots supporters identified the absence of an official role as a key limitation. Without formal affiliation, they lacked the authority to push referrals through, fast-track services, or influence how survivors were treated once connected to formal providers. Former advocates noted the contrast between their current grassroots role and prior positions where institutional backing allowed them to navigate systems more effectively.

They also described feeling outside the loop when it came to updated resources, eligibility changes, or new programs. Some experienced exclusion from coordinated responses with law enforcement, courts, or government agencies, even when they believed collaboration could benefit survivors. This lack of formal standing sometimes limited their ability to advocate at systems-levels, despite strong relational trust with survivors.

Cannot Provide Shelter, Housing, or Other Essential Resources

“A shelter can give them housing or give them a grant. I don’t have that ability.” — Arianna

“I cannot officially provide referrals to safe housing, offer legal counsel, or meet immediate physical needs.” — Theresa

Grassroots supporters were clear that they could not replace the core functions of formal domestic violence providers, particularly when it came to shelter, housing, legal advocacy, or sustained need assistance. While some helped survivors access food, diapers, or short-term support through community networks, these efforts were limited in scale and consistency.

Most did not view providing shelter as their role either—citing safety, liability, and boundary concerns. Instead, they emphasized the importance of formal providers continuing to lead in meeting survivors’ concrete needs, with grassroots supporters functioning as a bridge rather than a substitute.

Limited Capacity & Scale

“I didn’t realize how much energy it would take from me.” – Melinda “I can’t do the work that you guys do on that large level.” – Arianna

Because most grassroots supporters operated independently or in very small teams, they recognized inherent limits to their reach and capacity. Many noted that while they could provide deep, individualized support, they could not serve large numbers of survivors or sustain round-the-clock availability.

They contrasted their impact with that of formal providers, acknowledging that agencies might reach in a month what they as an individual reached in a year. Limits to their own time, energy, and capacities meant they could only do so much.

No Funding

“Yes, it has been difficult because I just started this with zero money, with no money.” – Selena

Most grassroots supporters described operating with little to no funding. Many relied on personal resources, unpaid labor, or sporadic donations. Even those who had formal nonprofit status often lacked sufficient funding to pay staff or sustain operations long-term.

They noted that financial instability compounded other limitations, reducing capacity, increasing burnout, and limiting access to tools and trainings that might otherwise strengthen their work. Several noted that while passion sustained them, it could not replace material resources.

No Formal Standards and Accountability

“I think there are some folks in grassroots work who don’t have the education to understand boundaries.” – Celeste

Grassroots supporters raised concerns about possible inconsistencies across grassroots efforts. Without shared standards, oversight, or accountability mechanisms, the quality and safety of support could vary widely. While all participants uplifted ethics and survivor-centered values, they acknowledged that not all grassroots supporters may have the training or self-awareness needed to avoid harm.

Unlike formal providers, grassroots supporters lacked clear external systems for accountability. This absence raised difficult questions about accountability when mistakes occurred, even if unintentionally.

Fuzzier Boundaries and Risk to Safety

“I’m just a friend.” – Esther

Grassroots supporters acknowledged that the same personal closeness that made their work effective could also introduce risk. Without institutional protections, safety protocols, or supervisory support, they carried greater personal exposure—emotionally, physically, and legally.

Some described learning boundaries through experience, including moments of overextension or emotional entanglement. Others shared the ongoing work of managing “fuzzier” boundaries while remaining survivor-centered. These risks reinforced the importance of self-awareness, peer consultation, and knowing when to step back or refer elsewhere.

Recommendations for Supporting Grassroots Supporters

“It shouldn’t be segmented, and we shouldn’t be working in silos...we can do more together.” – Selena

Grassroots supporters consistently expressed a desire to be part of the solution to ending domestic violence. Many described their work as deeply personal, rooted in lived experience, and sustained by a strong sense of passion and purpose. At the same time, they shared that they do not want to do this work alone.

Through our listening, they identified concrete ways that domestic violence service providers, community partners, and ICADV could strengthen collaboration and better support their efforts. These recommendations reflect a shared commitment to survivor-centered care, sustainability, and collective impact.

How the Domestic Violence Ecosystem Can Support Grassroots Supporters

Invest in Ongoing Learning and Skill Development

“If (survivors) feel that this is something they want to do, they need to look at themselves ethically too and say, is this best practice?” – Rita

Grassroots supporters expressed strong interest in continued learning opportunities that would strengthen their ability to support survivors safely and effectively. This included access to affordable or free trainings related to domestic violence dynamics, trauma, safety planning, boundaries, and survivor-centered practices, as well as opportunities for certifications where appropriate.

Several highlighted that ongoing learning helped them build confidence, reduce the risk of harm, and better understand the scope and limits of their role. Participants also advocated for a shared framework of standards and ethics to guide grassroots work—particularly for individuals entering this space without formal training. These standards were described as protective rather than restrictive—helping them to increase readiness, boundaries, competence, and sustainability.

Build Direct, Reciprocal Partnerships

“I just need the platform. I need the exposure. I need the opportunity to speak.... Welcome me in the room. See what services I have so we can see where we can help one another.” – Amanda

Grassroots supporters emphasized that relationships function as critical infrastructure for their work. Stronger connections with formal providers and community partners helped reduce isolation, offered informal accountability, and created opportunities for feedback, consultation, and shared problem-solving.

Many described the value of access to mentors, experienced professionals, and trusted peers who could serve as sounding boards when navigating complex survivor situations—especially in the absence of formal supervision.

Participants also shared the importance of intentional spaces that bring grassroots supporters together, such as survivor conferences, facilitated peer gatherings, or learning cohorts, which supported both skill-building and sustainability.

Grassroots supporters consistently expressed interest in deeper partnerships with formal domestic violence providers. These relationships were described as mutually beneficial rather than competitive. Participants highlighted the need for clearer referral pathways, access to professional consultation when survivor needs exceeded their scope, and opportunities to collaborate in ways that honored each role's strengths. Some also expressed interest in contributing their expertise back to agencies, such as facilitating peer space, supporting survivor engagement in shelters, or offering training on survivor-centered and compassionate practices.

Offer Platforms, Visibility, and Invitations

“I need my community number one to be welcoming. I need them to seek us out to not close the door on us who can help.” – Tabitha

Grassroots supporters consistently emphasized the importance of being welcomed into spaces where survivors and community members already gather. Invitations to speak at schools, faith communities, workplaces, and community events were described as powerful ways to increase awareness, reduce stigma, and connect survivors to support.

Visibility was also described as a form of trust-building. When grassroots supporters were known, named, and invited into community spaces, survivors were better able to identify who felt safe to approach for help.

Provide Concrete Resources

Grassroots supporters noted that tangible resources significantly shaped their ability to respond to survivor needs. Community members and organizations were encouraged to support grassroots efforts through donations of food, diapers, clothing, hygiene items, or financial contributions.

Several participants also noted that support with grant writing, fundraising, administrative tasks, or shared space could meaningfully strengthen sustainability—especially for those attempting to formalize or expand their work without losing the relational nature of their support.

ICADV's Commitment to Grassroots Supporters & Next Steps

Many grassroots supporters directly asked ICADV to continue supporting them and their work helping survivors. In response to what we learned through these interviews, we are committed to the following actions:

1. Publishing and maintaining a free training series for grassroots supporters, beginning in mid-2026.
2. Partnered with Indiana Counselor Association for Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Addiction (CAADA)¹⁶ to create a peer credential pathway for survivors seeking to help other survivors.
3. Continuing to offer technical assistance, resource sharing, and relationship-building support through an open-door approach.
4. Collaborating with formal domestic violence providers to facilitate connections with grassroots supporters.
5. Facilitating spaces for grassroots supporters to gather and build supportive communities for their work.
6. Engaging in further dialogue to jointly steward the future of grassroots work.

¹⁶ <https://icaada.org/>

Conclusion

Grassroots supporters are helping survivors across the state of Indiana. They come from a wide range of backgrounds—from pageant queens to corporate professionals to former domestic violence advocates—and they support survivors in countless ways: securing a box of diapers, offering a judgment-free presence, or organizing their communities to respond to harm.

They are part of our wider ecosystem and shared mission to end domestic violence. Together, we are meeting many critical needs of survivors, and we also know this is still not enough. The scale and complexity of domestic violence demand collective effort. We need each other.

This report offers one possible reference for how grassroots supporters, domestic violence service providers, and communities can partner and collaborate in that shared work. Regardless, survivors will continue to help other survivors—as they have long before formal domestic violence services existed.

They are purposed and passionate, committed to ensuring their fellow survivors are supported in the ways they need to move toward safety, healing, and an end to violence.

The scale and complexity of domestic violence demand collective effort. **We need each other.**

Notes



Notes



Indiana Coalition
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