

Community ownership and relationship building with multicultural communities: How Multicultural Efforts to End Sexual Assault (MESA) supports holistic prevention in Indiana

Practitioners and Advocates Featured:

Kimber J. Nicoletti-Martinez

FOUNDER

[Multicultural Efforts to end Sexual Assault](#)

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Founded in 2008, [Multicultural Efforts to End Sexual Assault \(MESA\)](#) is a statewide program focused on preventing sexual violence in traditionally marginalized communities in Indiana, including, Asian/Pacific Islander, immigrant, farmworker, Latino/Hispanic, LGBTQ, Native American, Indigenous, and people with disabilities. With the goal of establishing healthier relationships, families and communities, MESA organizes, engages, and mobilizes in culturally-informed ways.

“KITCHEN TABLE LEADERSHIP”: REACHING MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITIES

MESA, which means “table” in Spanish, is based on the idea of kitchen table leadership, an approach that invites people to the table whose voices and needs are typically excluded at other tables. As MESA’s director Kimber Nicoletti-Martinez says, “It involves working with mothers, fathers and grandmothers and grandfathers, and calling all voices, especially those who are underserved.” Kimber found herself working in unconventional places such as the laundromat or farmworker camps to truly meet communities where they were. Through this approach, MESA has been able to reach people who aren’t adequately supported by mainstream prevention efforts.

DEVELOPING TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH LISTENING, UNDERSTANDING, AND LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

MESA works with a range of communities every year where talking about sexual violence may be considered taboo. Cultivating trusting relationships is essential, and to do so, MESA staff members attend events, gatherings, and meetings, getting to know the community deeper than face value.

The program believes it is important to develop relationships, not from a business perspective, but from one that is concerned about how the community is doing and what's important to them. MESA develops relationships with both formal and informal leaders to show the community that they matter and are important, even before bringing up the issue of doing sexual violence prevention work.

MESA takes the time to listen to the communities' needs and provides an opportunity for people to express themselves. "You can tailor the approaches and solutions to meet the needs and strengths identified by these communities," says Kimber. "It's a process that takes a really long time, but it's imperative to the understanding of a community's well-being and needs." One way the program listens to community members is by hosting community forums across the state. These "pláticas" ("talks") help assess where the community can discuss what prevention in the community looks like to them.

Community-based work is dependent on the relationship established amongst organizations as well as relationships established between community members. Kimber recognizes the importance of continuing relationships based on trust and mutual concern, even if funding runs out.

ALIGNING TO CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND PRACTICES FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Working across multicultural communities involves adjusting one's work to best suit the population of focus. With the goal of empowering communities to shape the agenda, MESA assesses community strengths in order to base the work they do in community methods. At times, MESA needs to interpret activities in communities to funders so they can better understand cultural nuances and how certain activities connect to prevention. For instance, to address barriers to sexual violence prevention such as taboos surrounding sexuality or safer sex, MESA facilitates dialogue in communities that value oral traditions through activities like Theatre of the Oppressed (using theater as a tool for social change) or creating fotonovelas (graphic novels). In Native American communities that they've worked with, MESA has learned that coming to a meeting with a formal agenda is not culturally appreciated. Rather, the community prefers organically working together toward solutions.

To explain working in multicultural communities, Kimber uses the analogy of a doctor getting ready to do surgery. Rather than just cutting a patient open, which in this case would mean going to a community and starting to talk about sexual violence right away, a doctor first begins by developing a relationship with the patient. One begins working in communities by developing a relationship, describing different processes, and then preparing them. Kimber states, "after doing important work that may go against many cultural norms, we always try to close the patient up or bring the community back to feeling safe through various games and activities." The patient or community of focus is involved during every step of the process.



Farmworkers engaging in Teatro Campesino, an interactive theatre presentation where topics such as sexuality or sexual violence can be freely discussed. Photo provided by: MESA

ADDRESSING HISTORICAL TRAUMA AND INTERCONNECTED NEEDS THROUGH COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

Working in multicultural communities requires the recognition of historical trauma and the recognition that language matters. Sexual violence work cannot be done in isolation and instead needs to be a piece of a larger holistic approach. Kimber says, “You can’t walk into a community and only talk about sexual violence work when people can’t access food or when they’re afraid to drive.” MESA stresses the importance of acting as facilitators and allowing the community to take ownership of the various processes as the best way to ensure that the issues and barriers most affecting communities are being addressed.



Participants made costumes out of everyday items, such as pipe cleaners.

Photo provided by: MESA

Kimber is the founder and director of MESA. She was named the 2018 National Social Worker of the Year by the National Association of Social Workers for her sexual violence prevention efforts. She is a founding member of Alianza Nacional de Campesinas.

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RESOURCES

- [Visioning BEAR Intertribal Coalition](#)
- [MESA PSA on the intersection between food insecurity and sexual violence in farm worker communities](#)
- [MESA fotonovela on CSA prevention](#)
- [NSVRC Latinx sexual violence prevention needs assessment](#)
- [The Salas Study](#)

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