



2026 MNCASA SYMPOSIUM

REAL-WORLD HEALING:

Tools for Supporting
Survivors and Sustaining
Ourselves

MAY 6 - 7
2026

Chase on the Lake
Walker, MN



Schedule At-A-Glance

Wednesday, May 6

8:00 a.m.	Registration Opens
9:00-10:15 a.m.	Pre-Conference for People New to the Movement
10:30-11:45a.m.	Welcome & Plenary Session
12:00-1:15 p.m.	Lunch
1:30-2:45 p.m.	Workshops
3:00-4:15 p.m.	Workshops
4:30-5:30 p.m.	Wellness Activities

Thursday, May 7

9:00-10:15 a.m.	Workshops
10:30-11:45 a.m.	Workshops
12:00-1:15 p.m.	Lunch
1:30-3:15 p.m.	Plenary Session & Closing

Wednesday, May 6

9:00-10:15 a.m.

Pre-Conference | Beyond Trial by Fire: A Panel Discussion

MNCASA Staff

Knowledge sharing is a cornerstone of our work, but too often we find ourselves in the deep end as we learn how to swim. Join MNCASA staff for a pre-conference session designed exclusively for people in their first two years in the anti-violence movement. We will share practical tips, tools, and wisdom gained from a collective century of advocacy experience that we wish we had known from the start.

10:30-11:45 a.m.

Welcome & Plenary Session | Rooted in Comunidad: Collective Healing and Advocate Sustainability in Practice

Angie Mejia, Ph.D., Mayte Rodriguez Ortiz, and Linda Parranto Vita, Esperanza United

Advocates working with immigrant survivors are navigating increasing complexity as limited eligibility for formal systems intersect with the possibility of burnout. This session draws from Esperanza United's current advocacy practice to explore how DV and other service organizations, as well as advocates, can sustain themselves while realistically navigating these barriers.

The first portion of the session will focus on organizational practices Esperanza United made to support advocate well-being during this period, such as collective care practices to process the emotional labor of grassroots advocacy. Rather than framing emotional sustainability as an individual responsibility, the session centers how an organizations can set the conditions that support advocates and nurture long term practice.

The second half of the session will provide a demo on advocacy skills for working with immigrant survivors. Participants will learn safety planning strategies that go beyond standard state and county resources and incorporate culturally specific organizations, hyper local mutual aid networks, and consulates. Through interactive group work, participants will practice identifying and vetting community-based resources and gain familiarity with how Esperanza United navigate existing complex systems. Participants will leave with concrete tools, shared resources, and practical strategies that support survivor safety while sustaining advocates and teams.

12:00 - 1:15 p.m.

Lunch

1:30 - 2:45 p.m.

Collective Care in Movement Workspaces

Hunter Beckstrom and Lakeisha Lee, MNCASA

Designed for new and seasoned advocates, this interactive workshop situates collective care as a necessary means to advance, empower, and sustain the movement to end violence. This session roots care through the collective action and lens of Black Feminism. Through advocate-based research, participants will examine barriers to collective care, including oppression, white supremacy culture, burnout, and lack of survivor-centered care. Each barrier is illustrated through real-world examples and relevant experiences. This workshop weaves frameworks of prevention and radical love to actualize skills and strategies. Participants will learn, discuss, and envision tangible actions to build power for collective liberation, inside and outside the movement.

Writing to Wholeness: Workshops to transform lives and communities

Elena Anderson Eggert, Writing to Wholeness

Stories serve as a vital bridge connecting us to one another and our community. As activists and survivors of sexual assault, Elena Anderson Eggert and Wendy Brown-Baez created a writing practice designed for other survivors, focused on harmonizing our nervous systems and organizing around shared experiences. The mission of the Writing to Wholeness Collective is to improve individual and community well-being by promoting writing as a strategy for personal and social change.

Through creativity, mindfulness, and embodied somatic techniques, this trauma-responsive artistic process enables participants to transform self-reflection into self-empowerment. Writing to Wholeness workshops center the role of storytelling in social justice movements, offering space for participants to unite and challenge isolation and oppression. Sharing our truths becomes an act of resistance when we create a courageous space for one another, fostering both personal and collective transformation.

This session will introduce the Writing to Wholeness method, providing background on the survivor-led and -centered creation process. Then, participants will engage in an experiential Writing to Wholeness workshop, emphasizing healing reflection and community-building. Finally, the session will highlight practical strategies to utilize the free Writing to Wholeness toolkit. We welcome both new and experienced writers.

1:30 - 2:45 p.m.

Self Defense for People with Disabilities

Sindy Mau, Aging Options LLC

More than 90% of people with disabilities will experience sexual assault (NOW, 2020). Come learn about a hands-on workbook of self-defense tools funded by MN DHS, Disability Services titled Taking Care of Me: Building Confidence and Assertiveness Skills. The workbook promotes self-advocacy and self-determination. Chapters include self-esteem, confident body language, intuition, assertiveness, drawing boundaries, involving others, yell, surprise and surviving and healing, with suggested activities such as role plays and affirmations. The workbook also analyzes how ableism has reinforced the vulnerability of people with disabilities through a reliance on a "protection" model instead of building a foundation self-advocacy and self-defense options, leading to both the empowerment of people with disabilities and a decrease in sexual assaults.

3:00 - 4:15 p.m.

Safety Planning with Sexual Violence Survivors

Lakeisha Lee and Ashley Sturz Griffith, MNCASA

This session invites advocates to participate in a listening session to shape the development and implementation of MNCASA's Sexual Safety Planning resource. While safety planning often focuses on physical violence, victims/survivors of sexual violence face unique and ongoing safety needs across workplaces, schools, families, and systems. This session will briefly introduce the draft resource, grounded in harm-reduction, survivor autonomy, and reproductive justice, and then center advocate feedback.

Participants will be invited to reflect on how sexual safety planning shows up in their work, identify gaps in current approaches, and share strategies, challenges, and ideas. This session is designed to uplift advocate expertise, ensure the resource reflects real-world practice, and strengthen collective approaches to supporting survivor safety.

3:00-4:15 p.m.

Bridges Built with Understanding

Cheyenne Wilson and Briana (Bree) Theising BS, MPA, MNCASA

In a world shaped by uncertainty, connection is not optional, it is essential. Through shared experience, collective wisdom, and mutual support, we can build a culture of safety, resilience, and transparency that sustains us and fuels change. Survivors have been creating these kinds of resources and communities for decades. Now, those of us who wish to support them have the opportunity, and responsibility, to learn from their leadership and follow their example. Camaraderie becomes care. Story becomes strategy. Growth is collective, grounded in dignity and trust. We recognize that healing does not happen in isolation, and neither does accountability. By standing together, we amplify survivor voices, challenge systems that have failed us, and insist on truth, justice, and responsibility, even when the path forward is unclear. This session offers a space to strengthen relationships, learn from one another, and recommit to a future shaped by survivor leadership. It is a reminder that our presence matters, our evidence is lived, and our solidarity is powerful. We move forward together.

Harm Reduction in Practice

MNCASA Staff

This session will explore what harm reduction looks like in practice, with a focus on supporting safety and responding to overdose. Participants will be introduced to key approaches, tools, and considerations that can be applied in real-world settings. Further information will be provided closer to the symposium.

4:30-5:30 p.m.

Wellness Activities

Join us for:

- Print making (bring a shirt, bag, or anything else you'd like to print on)
- Button making
- Outdoor activity

9:00–10:15 a.m.

Before the Bloom: Rethinking Readiness, Behavior, and Belief in Survivor Healing

Nyki McNamee, Corrie's House

Survivors of sexual exploitation and trafficking are often labeled "not ready" for services, housing, or healing. But what if readiness is not something survivors arrive with, what if it is something that grows when someone believes in them first?

As a survivor of trafficking and a professional who has spent years advocating for and overseeing services for survivors of all ages, I have seen firsthand how trauma reshapes self-worth, trust, and behavior. What systems often label as resistance, non-compliance, or lack of motivation is frequently a nervous system still operating in survival mode. Trauma disrupts the very capacities, emotional regulation, trust, consistency, and self-belief, that survivors are expected to demonstrate in order to receive support.

This session uses the metaphor of a seed becoming a sprout, then a bud, and eventually a bloom to reframe survivor readiness and behavior. You cannot rush a seed to bloom, and if you try, you will get pricked by thorns. In survivor work, those thorns often appear as running, relapse, anger, or withdrawal. These are not failures; they are signs of growth.

Participants will leave with a trauma-informed framework for understanding readiness, reducing burnout, and supporting survivors through the long game of healing and transformation.

For Our Future Generations: Breaking the Cycle Through Culturally Guided Prevention

Alyssa Cherry, Indian Health Board of Minneapolis; and Dylan Daniels, IHB Cultural Care Nurse

This session explores strategies to engage Native youth in preventing sexual violence and fostering healthy relationships. This session highlights the cultural significance of breaking cycles of harm that have roots in historical trauma, including the lasting impacts of the boarding school era. Participants will examine how ongoing systems of colonization continue to shape risk factors for Native youth today, from disrupted family structures to limited access to culturally relevant support.

The session emphasizes prevention methods that are culturally inclusive and youth-centered, demonstrating how traditional teachings, storytelling, and community practices can be integrated into modern prevention efforts. Attendees will learn practical approaches to empower youth as leaders in creating safe and respectful spaces, strengthening community resilience, and reinforcing cultural identity. Through discussion, case examples, and interactive strategies, this session provides tools for practitioners, educators, and community members to support the next generation in breaking cycles of violence and building healthy, connected, and culturally grounded futures.

9:00-10:15 a.m.

Empowerment Self-Defense

Chloe Vraney and Brontë Stewart, The Aurora Center for Advocacy & Education

Empowerment Self Defense (ESD) is an evidence-based, risk-reduction sexual violence prevention program that promotes self-confidence, safety, and empowerment. Far from a traditional self-defense program, the Aurora Center's ESD workshop teaches self defense as self-care and self-advocacy. ESD offers a toolbox of skills and strategies including emotional regulation, environmental and self awareness, verbal and physical boundary setting, de-escalation, assertiveness, and basic active resistance skills. This workshop is taught from an empowering, trauma-informed approach, where violence is never the fault of the victim, and that while sexual violence continues to occur, there are strategies we can learn that may enhance safety. ESD has proven to reduce rates of sexual violence as well as feelings of self-blame, guilt, and shame for survivors who participate.

10:30-11:45 a.m.

Beyond "How Are You?"

Tascha Just, SEL Academy

Many advocates know that the question "How are you?" can land like a pop quiz for survivors, especially those living with trauma, neurodivergence, or ongoing danger. This workshop offers simple, practical alternatives. Together, we will explore why common "wellness" questions can feel intrusive or silencing, and how power, culture, and context shape the way people respond. Participants will learn a set of consent-centered check-in strategies that give survivors more choice and control, while still giving advocates the information they need to offer meaningful support. We will practice short scripts, color-based check-ins, and body-aware prompts that can be used during crisis calls, forensic exams, support groups, and one-on-one advocacy. Throughout the session, we will also translate each survivor-focused tool into an option for team use "within staff meetings, supervision, and debriefs" so advocates can care for themselves and each other. Attendees will leave with clear language and ready-to-use check-in practices they can bring into their work right away.

10:30 - 11:45 a.m.

Venting Without Damage: Learning the Difference Between Productive and Toxic Venting

Emilyn Wahl, Someplace Safe

Volunteers and staff regularly carry the emotional weight of difficult cases, secondary trauma, and complex system dynamics. Venting can be a healthy way to release that stress, but when done without intention, it can quietly damage morale, relationships, and team effectiveness. This session explores the critical difference between productive venting and toxic venting, helping participants recognize when venting supports resilience and problem-solving versus when it reinforces burnout, negativity, or disconnection. Participants will learn practical strategies for expressing frustration in ways that are respectful, purposeful, and aligned with our values. Through real-world examples and guided discussion, attendees will identify common venting patterns, understand their impact on individuals and teams, and learn simple tools to redirect conversations toward clarity, accountability, and forward movement. This session emphasizes skill-building, not suppression, so participants leave feeling equipped to support themselves and others in emotionally demanding work. By the end of the session, participants will be better prepared to engage in healthy conversations that protect professional relationships, strengthen team culture, and ultimately support more effective advocacy.

The Advocate's Toolkit: Preventing Burnout & Vicarious Trauma in Real-World Response

Kenosha Alexander, Sexual Violence Center

Direct service advocates do deeply meaningful work while constantly exposed to trauma, crisis, and injustice. Over time, this can lead to exhaustion, burnout, and vicarious trauma, especially when workplace support systems don't reflect the realities of advocacy. This session centers on the lived experience of frontline advocates and explores how supportive supervision and team practices can help sustain people in the work. Participants will examine common signs of burnout and vicarious trauma as they show up in advocacy roles, including emotional fatigue, disconnection, and feeling overwhelmed or unsupported. Using a human-centered, trauma-informed lens, this session introduces practical tools that advocates and teams can use to strengthen communication, increase emotional safety, and create healthier boundaries at work. Through real-world examples from advocacy settings, participants will learn strategies for naming support needs, navigating supervision conversations, and advocating for wellness practices that do not place the burden solely on individual self-care. The session emphasizes collective care, shared responsibility, and realistic approaches to sustainability within high-demand environments. This session offers direct service advocates concrete tools to support their own well-being, strengthen team connection, and remain grounded while continuing to provide survivor-centered support.

12:00–1:15 p.m.

Lunch

1:30–3:15 p.m.

Plenary & Closing | Leading As We Heal: Building a Victim-Led Movement That Includes All of Us

Victoria Pickering and Katelyn Page, MNCASA

This plenary invites participants to examine what it truly means to build a victim-led movement – not just in theory, but in practice. It centers lived experience, challenges professional silencing, and highlights the invisibility of LGBTQI abuse and sexual assault, particularly in rural communities.

The session weaves lecture, reflection, and facilitated moments of connection while grounding the content in personal narrative – including our experiences as survivors working in advocacy and feeling unable to disclose harm for fear of losing credibility and work.