

# Domestic Violence & Disabilities



## Disabilities

### Overview

According to the U. S. Census Bureau, about 49.7 million Americans of all ages, have a disability, (Office of Disability Employment Policy). Disabilities can be cognitive, physical, or sensory . Women with disabilities are confronted with multiple layers of oppression: discrimination, sexism, and violence against their person. These power dynamics increases their victimization, as studies show— women with disabilities experience violence at a greater rate than non-disabled women. Men with disabilities are also cited as experiencing abuse at a higher rate. Perpetrators intentionally target people with disabilities, of both genders, who they see as unable to understand, defend themselves, or communicate with others , (Hoog, 2003).

### Impact

Intimate partner violence is a direct threat to the civil rights, quality of life and health of women with disabilities. Women with disabilities suffer crimes such as: neglect, child abuse, domestic violence, sexual victimization, financial abuse, emotional abuse, physical, abuse and homicide, (Abramson, W., Emanuel, E., Gaylord, V., & Hayden, M. (Eds.) (2000). Victims may be dependent on their partner or caregiver for survival, undergo numerous assaults, have a higher number of perpetrators, and challenged by additional barriers to reporting abuse and finding services, (Transforming Communities: Technical Assistance, Training and Resource Center, 2007). Addressing violence in the lives of people with disabilities is a key priority.

**Legal Definition:** The American with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 ADA defines the term disability as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life events, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.



### THE FACTS

- *The most common perpetrators of violence against women with disabilities are their male partners*
- *40% of women with disabilities have been assaulted, raped, or abused (Stimpson and Best, 1991)*
- *54 % of boys who are deaf have been sexually abused (Sullivan, Vernon and Scanlan, 1987).*
- *Studies estimate that between 70%-85% of abuse go unreported.*

## Link Between Domestic Violence & Disabilities

The abuse of non-disabled victims is often silenced. Similarly, unspoken and unacknowledged are the high levels of victimization among people with disabilities. As advocates, it is important to understand the impact a disability has on a victim/survivor. To assist people with disabilities, it is essential to use and build on your existing knowledge and experience in working with survivors of abuse.

**What Is the Connection?** **Violence can lead to disability. Victims can be economically and physically dependent. Victims lack control in their relationships. Perpetrators use a relationship of trust to their advantage** (e.g. economic gain through a boyfriend or employer). **Victims are socialized into compliance.**



**The Violence Against Women Act of 2000** addresses the needs of women with disabilities, and provides funding for expanded protection, services, and education.

### Do I Witness Abuse of People with Disabilities?

It can happen.  
**Apartment/ Houses. Grocery stores. Banks. Hospitals. Nursing homes. Group homes. Bus stops. Food banks. Health clinics. Sheltered Workshops.**

### Sources

disAbility Access: A Summary of the State of our State for Victim Advocates  
 By the Washington State disAbility Advocacy Project  
 For the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
 2008

Transforming Communities: Technical Assistance, Training and Resource Center  
 2007

An Educational Resource Manual On Domestic Violence Advocacy For Persons With Disabilities In Washington State  
 Cathy Hoog, Principal Author,  
 Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2003

Impact  
 Feature Issue on Violence and Women with Development or Other Disabilities,  
 Volume 13, Number 3, 2000  
 Abramson, W. et. al (Ed).

## The Abusers

The reality is that abusers of victims with disabilities are mostly known and trusted individuals. In relationships of people without disabilities, the perpetrator have been typified as boyfriend/girlfriend, husband/ wife, and ex-partner. The definition of abusers is expanded for people with disabilities, as intimacy and intimate relationships can occur outside of the categorized groups. A list of possible abusers may include: family members, caregiver/personal attendant, other people with disabilities, and intimate partners. Family members and caregivers use the access and opportunity given by their intimate contact to abuse, (Hoog,2003)

## Safety Planning

Following are tips for domestic violence advocates to consider when safety planning with victims/survivors with disabilities.

Before crises:

- Form partnerships with local disability advocates

During:

- Continue to employ a victim centered approach.
- Explain your role as an advocate and your agency's responsibilities.
- Understand how the experience of living with a disability influences a person's daily choices, decisions, and family.
- Talk openly with survivors about the type of support they need.
- Educate victims on services available to them.
- Have knowledge of adaptive devices and information on new technology to support safety.
- If caregiver or signer accompanies victim seeking services, assure that they are not the abuser.
- Maintain confidentiality.

## Where do I find DV & Disabilities Assistance?

**For immediate law enforcement response:** 9-1-1

**To speak with a domestic violence advocate:**  
 Interface Family Violence Response Team (IFVRT)  
 1-800-636-6738 24 hr hotline

**To report adult and elder abuse :**  
 Adult Protective Services  
 1-888-436-3600

**To report child abuse:**  
 Children Protective Services, Human Services Agency  
 805-654-3200 24 hr hotline