



Sexual Assault in Diverse Communities – Invisible Disabilities

Individuals with disabilities are a large part of the United States population. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), that number is about one in four people in the U.S. As someone who works with survivors of sexual assault, you will surely work with people who have disabilities. Sexual assault intersects with disability in two major ways. First, perpetrators see vulnerability in someone with a disability and decides to perpetrate violence on them. Second, someone who experiences sexual violence can result in trauma to one's body and mind in a way that results in a disability. It is important to know that disability is not a static state or an identity that you must be born into. All of us have the potential to become disabled in our lifetime.

We must ensure that sexual assault services are accessible for people with disabilities. Only then can those services truly be accessible to everyone.

If a survivor with a disability has difficulty accessing services, it is not a problem with the survivor, it is a problem of barriers to services. Our world has been built in a way that puts up barriers and people with disabilities are limited by those barriers. Barriers include: Physical barriers, communicational barriers, policy and procedural barriers, and attitudinal barriers (or fears and beliefs about people with disabilities). Working with a survivor to find ways to navigate those barriers is not just a legal requirement. You can read more about the Americans with Disabilities Act and reasonable accommodations at <https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/disability/ada> (US. Department of Labor, (n.d)). It is also vital to ensuring that all survivors are supported, listened to and believed. It is critical that our advocacy comes from a survivor-centered, trauma-informed and intersectional lens. We cannot do that without centering on the experience of survivors with disabilities who are seeking our services.

Survivors with invisible disabilities may have trouble asking for accommodations. Invisible disabilities are a specific illness or condition like psychiatric disabilities, traumatic brain injury, diabetes, chronic fatigue syndrome, learning disabilities, or attention deficit disorder to name a few. They may feel like they have less of a right to an accommodation than a person with a physical disability. They may have bought into the notion that



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their disability doesn't count if it is not visible. Advocates should reassure survivors that it is the advocate's job to ensure that services are accessible for everyone.

Survivors do not need to provide documentation to prove that they have a disability. Advocates must ensure that documentation free services run through the organization as a whole. If an advocate is concerned that other staff might request evidence of a disability for the survivor to continue to receive accommodations, then the advocate should seek supervisory support.

Survivors with invisible disabilities may not have ever requested or received accommodation in the past. They might experience what it is like to pass as someone without a disability. They may continue trying to pass as that for as long as possible in an attempt to avoid attitudinal barriers that are created by fears about people with disabilities. However, this choice to disclose or not disclose is still a choice. When a survivor makes the choice not to disclose in order to avoid marginalization, they still experience harm through stress, decision making process, and the shame of feeling like they are broken because of their disability.

It is important that survivors are asked about accommodations more than once. If the survivor says "no" one time they have a right to later change their mind and share their needs with the advocate. This may be because of trust that is established over time or, it may be because a survivor plainly did not need an accommodation earlier, and now they do. Survivors also may not relate to the word "accommodation." This might be due to a differing language ability, or because they do not relate culturally to the word "accommodation." Try phrasing the question in different ways and avoid using long words or jargon. You could ask, "What could I do to make this process better?" or give options, "Would it be better for you if I read the form to you, or maybe I could get this for you in a larger print?" Ask about needs and accommodations frequently, and in different ways.

If a survivor does disclose an invisible disability, continue to provide them with trauma-informed advocacy rooted in self-determination, respecting their many intersections of identity. Do not label a survivor as only



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“disabled.” People are complex and have many different identities and experiences. This includes a disabled survivor’s reaction to trauma.

Trauma impacts everyone’s mental processing dramatically different. Survivors can experience reactions like racing thoughts, inability to think clearly, difficulty expressing themselves, among many other trauma reactions. We can never predict what kind of reaction a survivor will have. For a survivor with a neuro-processing disability, a traumatic event can also exacerbate their disability. This means we must give all survivors time and space to feel their feelings, experience their reactions, and tell us what they need from us.

Survivor’s with invisible disabilities may have been told that their invisible disability makes them “crazy.” Survivors who are doubting their memory recall after a sexual assault may accept that they have been labeled “crazy” and therefore cannot trust their memory. Respect the strength that it takes for a survivor with disabilities to seek help. Validate their experience.

Survivors with invisible disabilities face barriers to asking for help that have been created by years of social narratives being placed on them. As an advocate, understand and consider these barriers. It supports the effort to address the harm that these narratives about invisible disabilities has caused.

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To request a copy: JClark@kcsdv.org

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