



Working with a Sexual Assault Survivor and their Guardian

Many survivors of sexual violence bring someone from their support system with them when they seek help. Sometimes it is a parent, partner, or friend whom the survivor has a close relationship with. Sometimes there are power dynamics that show up between the support person and the survivor. This can be a sensitive situation. As an advocate, focus on how to proceed with supporting the survivor's self-determination.

Survivors with disabilities may bring a support person, who may be paid or unpaid, to help them complete tasks related to their disability. These tasks may include getting dressed, helping to make decisions, managing finances, running errands, and many others. It is important for advocates to understand the different roles of these support people.

Take time to ask the survivor about the support person and the role that they will play. Remind the survivor that your role is to support the survivor first; they can direct the speed of the process. Make sure you understand the role of the support person without locking the survivor in time. The survivor has permission to change their mind about decisions in the space.

If a survivor brings a support person with them who calls themselves a Guardian, it is important to know the limitations of those roles. In Michigan, a Guardian is an adult who can make legal decisions regarding another adult's medical care. A court will provide paperwork that states the duties a caregiver is allowed and expected to perform. A caregiver who is not mandated by the court may call themselves a guardian, but if they are not approved by the court, their role and the legal obligations attached is different.

A Guardian will have the legal duty to arrange for the survivor's care and comfort. They also have more legal access to a person's medical information than an informal support person. Although a guardianship is only intended for people who are unable to make decisions about their care, it does not supersede the self-determination of person with disabilities.

Always address the survivor first, directing your attention and questions to them. A survivor with disabilities may indicate that they would like their guardian to help communicate, but you must create space for the survivor to make that decision. Take time meeting the survivor and allow the survivor to establish their preferred communication method.

Self-determination is an important piece of dignity and humanity that all survivors and people with disabilities deserve. Even if a survivor cannot communicate with you directly, the survivor deserves trauma-informed and intersectional care. Trust, empathy and believing are vital advocacy needs for survivors of sexual assault.



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Caregiver abuse is a real threat to people with disabilities. Advocates can be vigilant in looking for signs of power and control in the relationship between the survivor and the support person. Yet, building a trusting relationship with sound communication between the survivor and the advocate will be effective in disclosing caregiver abuse.

Lastly, support people who accompany a survivor of sexual assault may need care too. They may feel like they cannot believe this could happen. They may feel like it is their fault that the survivor was assaulted. They may experience a range of emotions from anger to sadness. They may even try to distance themselves from the survivor at this time. We cannot predict how they will be responding. If and when they seek out support, let them know that you are glad they came in to seek help. Provide them with resources and information on how to support survivors and also about what secondary trauma can look like. Give them the number for the statewide sexual assault hotline 1-855-VOICES4.

References:

Geller, B. (2000). Alternatives To Full Guardianship For Adults. Michigan Long Term Care Ombudsman Program. Retrieved from https://www.michigan.gov/documents/osa/Alternatives_to_Full_Guardianship_to_print_500881_7.pdf

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