



Effective Advocacy for Survivors with Disabilities

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People with disabilities experience higher rates of assault and abuse than the general population yet are less likely to report the crime perpetrated against them¹. The realities associated with various disabilities create vulnerabilities to sexual assault and abuse that are exploited by abusers². Many people with disabilities need assistance with activities of daily living such as dressing, bathing, and toileting. Expected compliance with medical and therapeutic interventions can diminish the ability to understand, convey, or enforce personal boundaries. Hearing and/or speech differences can impact the ability to effectively communicate instances of abuse or assault. People with disabilities are often isolated due to lack of access or meaningful accommodations for inclusion in public spaces, and many services occur in segregated spaces away from peers. Further, access for people with disabilities to education and training around healthy relationships and sexuality is often minimal or missing altogether.

When these vulnerabilities are exploited and abuse occurs, people with disabilities face additional challenges to reporting these crimes and seeking healing and justice³. The realities that create vulnerabilities to assault and abuse may also be part of the barriers to reporting and accessing services. The good news is there are steps your agency can take to provide meaningful, accessible services for people with disabilities. As with any underserved or marginalized community, improving access and response takes intentional and coordinated efforts to reduce barriers.

This month, we are talking to **Lisa Houck** who is the Disability Services Coordinator for Project Horizon in Lexington, Virginia to discuss strategies for victim service organizations to help meet the needs of survivors with disabilities.

Lisa, as the Disability Services Coordinator for Project Horizon, what do you do?

*The Disabilities Services Coordinator is a position that is somewhat unique to Project Horizon. In 2005, our Executive Director took a closer look into the agency's demographics and learned that 48–52% of the clients who we were currently serving had some type of diagnosed disability, including intellectual/developmental disabilities, physical disabilities, and /or mental illness. Studies show that people with disabilities are more likely to experience abuse than people without. One way that we assist survivors with disabilities is to bring the services to them. I lead weekly groups at local group homes, a day support program for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities, and a prevocational program for adults with severe mental illness. I use a curriculum called *Healthy Sexuality for Adults with Developmental Disabilities*. It is basically a curriculum teaching relationship/sex positivity for people who have had any exposure to this subject matter. We discuss topics like public vs. private, navigating friendships, and how to move from partner to sweetheart. This group has really developed into a safe space for vulnerable people to ask questions, connect with each other through experience, and empower each other in gaining, or regaining, their control.*

¹ <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/capd0919st.pdf>, retrieved 3/2/2023

² <https://www.endabusepwd.org/heightened-risk/>, retrieved 3/2/2023

³ <https://www.endabusepwd.org/about-the-movement/the-issue/>, retrieved 3/14/2023

What is your background and experience?

I began serving this population as a teenager. I quickly learned that I had compassion for people with disabilities, many who had no familial support. I started this work in West Virginia and continued it upon coming to Project Horizon in 2021.

What do you wish more people knew about responding to survivors with disabilities?

I wish that we could eliminate the stigma surrounding people with disabilities. While their abilities may differ from others, they are capable of telling the truth when someone has hurt them. People with disabilities typically face significantly more obstacles in merely reaching out for services than a person without a disability, which is why Project Horizon decided we needed a dedicated staff member to support our clients in navigating the disabilities system and services.

Can you describe what effective advocacy looks like for survivors with disabilities?

Advocacy for people with disabilities looks no different than people without disabilities. It is important to be trauma sensitive, which may require more patience and understanding, but the results are the same. The goal is to meet people where they are with services they desire.

How do you work with community partners to help survivors with disabilities in navigating the criminal justice process?

We have a legal advocate at Project Horizon who assists people with disabilities in the criminal justice system. My job is to refer clients to the legal advocate and provide additional support, if needed, in the criminal justice system. In addition, we offer a soft interview room so law enforcement can meet survivors with disabilities in a familiar, non-threatening environment.

What advice would you recommend to other victim service agencies that would like to improve their response to survivors with disabilities?

I think that the most important thing to recommend is to become familiar with local resources. Connect with your local Community Services Board and educate yourself on supportive services. Ask how you can best support the work that they are already doing. Join your Local Human Rights Commission and become active in the disability's services community.

Lisa, we thank you for sharing your time and experience, and for the work you do to provide accessible, meaningful services to survivors with disabilities.



For readers who would like resources to assess and improve the response to survivors with disabilities, the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Professional Standards team has compiled a [list of resources](#) to help you in your journey.