

HOUSING JUSTICE

National Housing Law Project

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New Report Details Need to Improve Access to Services for Deaf Survivors

Many domestic and sexual violence survivors within the Deaf community encounter significant obstacles when attempting to access services such as domestic violence shelters and law enforcement. For instance, many domestic violence shelters lack the capability to adequately serve Deaf survivors' needs, including providing qualified interpreters. A January 2015 report released by the Vera Institute of Justice explains that these services often lack language and cultural competencies necessary for serving Deaf survivors, and may fail to even recognize domestic violence in the forms that arise within the Deaf community.

The following article summarizes the Vera Institute report. First, the article provides an overview of issues confronting Deaf survivors specifically, as described in the report. The article then describes several pathways toward improving access to domestic violence resources for Deaf survivors discussed in the report.

Higher Rates of Domestic Violence in Deaf Community

Research, though limited, suggests that sexual and domestic violence impacts Deaf and hard of hearing individuals at higher rates than hearing individuals. While there are few ongoing studies specifically focusing on violence within the Deaf community, the existing

research shows that Deaf and hard of hearing individuals are up to twice as likely as hearing individuals to report experiencing domestic violence or sexual assault.

Domestic violence often presents itself differently in the Deaf community than among hearing individuals. Many Deaf individuals rely on their hands for communication, both through American Sign Language (ASL) and through electronic communications devices that facilitate communication through text and video. As a result, some abusers direct their violence on the survivors' hands. Abusers may also interfere with Deaf survivors' communication abilities by tampering with their electronic devices, preventing them from using those devices, monitoring their texts and emails, and deleting incoming messages. Because Deaf culture values collectivism over individualism and many Deaf individuals place great importance on maintaining their ties to the community, abusers can also cause significant distress to a survivor by isolating him/her from the community or spreading damaging information about him/her.

Opportunities for Mainstream Programs to Improve Access

Mainstream programs that serve domestic violence survivors generally do not have the resources to offer services specifically designed for Deaf survivors, and Deaf survivors often report many barriers to accessing mainstream programs. The report suggests several steps service providers could take to make

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their services more easily accessible to Deaf survivors.

Reducing language barriers

The best way to remove barriers standing between Deaf survivors and existing services may be to ease communication challenges, according to the report. ASL is the primary language within the American Deaf community, and written English is often learned as a second language. As a result, many Deaf survivors struggle to communicate with providers who only speak English. While some Deaf individuals can communicate with hearing people through speech and lip reading, many find these methods difficult and imprecise. Similarly, while communicating through English in written notes may be an option, many Deaf survivors are not as fluent or comfortable with English as with ASL. These communication gaps can create significant problems for Deaf survivors attempting to navigate law enforcement proceedings, obtain medical help and counseling, and secure protective orders against their abusers.

Qualified ASL interpreters can help remove these communication barriers, but they are rarely available. Most service providers do not have the resources to retain interpreters on a permanent basis, even when they can make interpreters available for some crucial meetings. Further, even certified ASL interpreters may not have experience working with survivors of domestic violence. Service providers that do provide interpreters should ensure that the interpreters have received specialized training in the vocabulary of domestic and sexual violence as well as best practices in trauma-informed care and preparation for securing their own safety. Providers

Resource

VERA Institute of Justice, *Center on Victimization and Safety, Culture, Language, and Access: Key Considerations for Serving Deaf Survivors of Domestic and Sexual Violence* (Jan. 2015), available at <https://files.ctctcdn.com/aae129c3201/24a02178-dff3-47eb-a4ed-0abe5f736897.pdf>

should also screen interpreters for any pre-existing relationships with either party, which is always a possibility given the strength of many local Deaf communities.

Enhancing cultural competency

Along with language barriers, Deaf survivors often find that service providers do not understand the cultural context of violence within the Deaf community. Despite the high rates of domestic and sexual violence among Deaf individuals, mainstream domestic violence programs rarely engage in outreach in Deaf community centers, and publications about domestic violence fail to include information about the unique forms of abuse that appear in the Deaf community. In addition, most mainstream programs rely on phone-based emergency hotlines, which many Deaf survivors find difficult or impossible to navigate.

Mainstream domestic violence service providers should also be aware that the history of institutional discrimination against the Deaf community has made many Deaf individuals wary of hearing organizations. Many Deaf individuals have experienced efforts by hearing medical experts to “fix” their hearing loss and

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schools that have prioritized spoken languages over signing. Deaf survivors of domestic violence, already experiencing trauma from the abuse, may be particularly suspicious of hearing programs. Mainstream organizations should respond to this history of exclusion by taking steps to establish trust and understanding with Deaf survivors.

Collaborating with Deaf-specific services

A promising development in the provision of domestic violence services to Deaf survivors is the formation of alliances between mainstream domestic violence programs and programs providing services specifically to Deaf people. Many of these Deaf-specific programs were created by Deaf individuals who are familiar with both the language and the culture of Deaf survivors. Most are stand-alone agencies offering services to Deaf victims of crimes through methods specifically designed for that population—for example, hotlines that are accessible through text and video.

These Deaf-specific organizations can be invaluable for the Deaf survivors in their areas, but because there are only about 15 such programs in the country, many with minimal funding and staff, their reach is limited. As a result, some advocates have begun focusing on strengthening the connections between Deaf and mainstream organizations. Mainstream programs can work with members of the Deaf community to identify barriers and increase accessibility to Deaf survivors. Deaf programs may be able to connect mainstream programs with qualified interpreters and to provide specialized training for those interpreters. Members of the Deaf community could also be recruited to serve as staff or vol-

unteers, teach ASL to the existing staff, and design accommodations and publications for Deaf survivors.

Conclusion

Many domestic violence programs take pride in their ability to reach out to survivors of diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences. As part of these efforts, service providers should consider increasing their ability to communicate through ASL, performing outreach within the Deaf community, and organizing with local Deaf groups. Because individuals who are Deaf and hard of hearing live in every geographic area of the country, every domestic violence program has the opportunity to expand its reach by making itself more accessible to Deaf survivors. ■

For technical assistance or requests for trainings or materials, please contact:

Karlo Ng, kng@nhlp.org
 National Housing Law Project
 703 Market Street Ste. 2000
 San Francisco, CA 94103
 Phone: (415) 546-7000, x. 3117
www.nhlp.org/OVWgrantees

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