



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

April 30, 2024

Dear Colleague,

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM) and a time to renew our commitment to preventing sexual assault and supporting those who have been victimized.

This April, the [Administration for Community Living](#), the [Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health](#), and the [Administration for Children and Families](#) are issuing this informational memo about sexual violence against persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). This letter aims to raise awareness of the disparities people with I/DD experience that can put them at greater risk for sexual assault and provides guidance and resources that helps advocates and other care providers recognize sexual violence and improves services for survivors.

According to the CDC's [National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey](#), over half of women and almost a third of men have or will experience a form of unwanted sexual contact in their lifetimes. While statistics vary, a higher prevalence of sexual violence against persons with disabilities is well-documented, and an estimated [2 in 5 female victims of rape](#) are reported to have a disability at the time of assault. A recent study from the [American Journal of Preventative Medicine](#) found that women with I/DD experience approximately double the proportion of sexual violence experienced by nondisabled women, and that the prevalence of physical violence is approximately three times higher for women with cognitive disabilities and four times higher for women with multiple disabilities when compared to nondisabled women. Similarly, [men with disabilities](#) are more likely than men without disabilities to experience sexual violence in their lifetime, including attempted or completed nonconsensual sex.

The impact of sexual violence is distressing for anyone. However, because people with I/DD experience a wide range of additional disparities (e.g., health, economic, educational, social) and face barriers in accessing services and supports, including those for survivors of sexual violence, [the experience may be that much more traumatic](#).

People with I/DD may be scared to come forward about sexual violence, especially if perpetrated by a caretaker or authority figure, because it could lead to negative consequences related to accessing the care that supports their independent living. Individuals with I/DD may not be believed when they make a report or disclose sexual assault because of incorrect assumptions others made about their capabilities. Individuals with I/DD and individuals with communication disabilities may have trouble

understanding or conveying what is happening to them and may be unable to clearly communicate non-consent. People with I/DD also often do not receive any sex education and, if they do, it can be inadequate. As a result, people with I/DD may have difficulties recognizing that they are being abused, and therefore may not report it when it happens.

Survivors with I/DD may face additional challenges receiving crisis support services because many service providers lack adequate training on supporting victims with I/DD, including training on survivor-informed care. As a result, they do not have the information and knowledge needed to plan for serving a diverse population with accessibility needs. For example, rape crisis centers may not have accessible buildings or services, such as having victim advocates who can effectively support people with I/DD with different communication needs. Without proper planning and protocols in place, they may not know how to support victims with I/DD reporting abuse.

Sexual Assault Awareness Month challenges public health and human services professionals to both reflect on these barriers to care and recommits us to our obligation to send a lifeline to all who need it, including people with I/DD. HHS programs and the Department's grant recipients are often the first stops for individuals in need of assistance. HHS funded organizations include rape crisis centers, domestic violence organizations, Centers for Independent Living, Protection and Advocacy Systems, University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, State Councils on Developmental Disabilities, and Community Treatment and Service Centers, all of which provide critical resources that help victims with I/DD to lead their healthiest and fullest lives.

Building and maintaining collaborations between the federal government and national and state networks that work on these issues is critical to improving individual and population-level outcomes. We recommend that health and human services professionals improve their capacity to serve survivors with I/DD by:

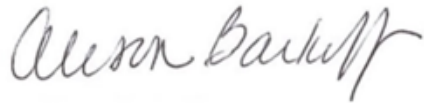
- Building relationships between domestic violence programs, sexual assault programs, tribes, culturally specific organizations and disability organizations to facilitate collaboration and training;
- Learning what works for prevention of sexual assault and domestic violence;
- Providing technical assistance to ensure programs are compliant with relevant disability laws and best practices in sexual violence response services;
- Developing advocacy and case management protocols that ensure designated staff are available to assist survivors with I/DD whenever possible;
- Developing trauma-informed facilities and services for persons with disabilities; and
- Involving survivors with lived experience in designing services to meet their needs.

We are pleased to share a list of sexual violence prevention and response resources some of which are specific to individuals with disabilities to help your organizations build these critical collaborations and learn more about this issue. We have organized these resources by recommendation in the attachment linked here.

We encourage you to utilize these resources and recommendations to start conversations within your organizations about this critical issue.

Thank you for all that you do to support victims of sexual violence and persons with I/DD not just this month, but throughout the year.

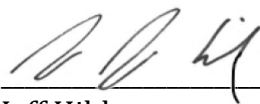
Sincerely,



Alison Barkoff
Principal Deputy Administrator
Administration for Community Living



Admiral Rachel L. Levine, M.D.
Assistant Secretary for Health
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health



Jeff Hild
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary
Administration for Children and Families

Appendix

HHS Recommendations for Improving the Capacity to Serve Survivors of Sexual Violence with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD)

Below is a list of sexual violence prevention and response resources, some of which are specific to individuals with disabilities, to help organizations build critical collaborations and learn more about this issue.

Build relationships between victim services and disability organizations to facilitate collaboration and training.

- [ACF's Federally Funded State and Territorial Domestic Violence Coalitions](#). The Office of Family Violence Prevention and Services (OFVPS) leads the agency's comprehensive approach to domestic violence prevention and administers the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA) to improve support for families experiencing violence and trauma. Links to current state and territory domestic violence coalitions are available.
- [ACL's Disability Information & Access Line \(DIAL\)](#) This website supplies a location-based list of Centers for Independent Living, Developmental Disability Councils, Protection & Advocacy Agencies (P&As), and University Centers on Disabilities. It also connects people with disabilities with local supports, like accessible transportation, housing support, disability rights and other independent living resources.
- [ACL's Protection and Advocacy Systems](#) This webpage provides an overview and list of Protection & Advocacy Agencies (P&As) that provide legal advocacy services to people with disabilities.
- [CDC's Federally Designated Sexual Assault Coalitions](#) This map supplies the list of federally funded Rape Prevention and Education programs and contacts at each organization. State and territorial sexual violence prevention coalitions are also made available.
- [CDC's VetoViolence Prevention in Practice Partnership Strategies](#) The CDC's Division of Violence Prevention developed the VetoViolence resource to outline best practices in partnership cultivation and maintenance. This resource shares stories, resources, and programmatic approaches for partnerships in violence prevention.

Learn what works for prevention of sexual assault and domestic violence.

- [CDC's Sexual Violence and Intimate Partner Violence Among People with Disabilities](#) This factsheet provides an overview of the vulnerabilities individuals with I/DD are exposed to when it comes to sexual violence. The overview provides links to a number of resources, including resources for action that outline prevention strategies and approaches.
- [CDC's Sexual Violence Prevention Resource for Action](#) This resource provides prevention strategies and approaches for sexual violence.
- [CDC's Intimate Partner Violence Prevention Resource for Action](#) This resource provides prevention strategies and approaches for Intimate Partner Violence.

Ensure programs are compliant with relevant disability laws and best practices in sexual violence services.

- [ACL's The Link Center](#) The Center provides supports to children and adults with I/DD by providing resources, training, and technical assistance for a broad audience, including direct support professionals and clinical professionals.
- [NCEA and NAPSA's Mandated Reporting of Abuse of Older Adults and Adults with Disabilities](#) This brief shares an overview of mandated reporting requirements and considerations for older adults and adults with disabilities.
- [OCR's Section 504 Fact Sheet](#) This factsheet provides an overview of Section 504, which protects individuals with disabilities from discrimination in federally funded health programs and activities.

Develop advocacy and case management protocols that ensure designated staff are available to assist survivors with I/DD.

- [NASHIA's Mental Health and Substance Use Resources](#) This link from the National Association of State Head Injury Administrators provides tips, briefs, and toolkits for clinical interventions for individuals with Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI).
- [OWH's Violence against Women with Disabilities](#) This resource provides an overview of signs of abuse that may be present in individuals with disabilities.

Develop trauma-informed facilities and services for persons with disabilities.

- [The Arc's Talk About Sexual Violence](#) This toolkit provides a list of resources including training videos, blogs, conversation guides, visual tools and reports for providers serving victims with I/DD.
- [NACDD's Special Publication on Councils on Developmental Disabilities Addressing Sexual Violence & Neglect](#) This report outlines the prevalence of abuse experienced by individuals with disabilities, risk factors for individuals with I/DD, and strategies being used by disability coalitions to prevent abuse and neglect.
- [I-CAN! Accessibility Project](#) This project has a number of resources for healthcare providers, including a sexual violence curriculum, handouts, resources, and online modules.
- [HRSA's Addressing Intimate Partner Violence and Human Trafficking in Communities](#) This resource provides an overview of resources developed by the Office of Women's Health to address intimate partner violence, including a framework for the provision of IPV care, technical assistance, and an IPV toolkit.
- [SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach](#) This manual introduces a concept of trauma and offers a framework for becoming a trauma-informed organization, system, or service sector.
- [SAMHSA's Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach](#) This practical guide provides implementation strategies for trauma care across multiple domains.

Involve survivors with lived experience and self-advocates in designing services to meet their needs.

- [ACL's Advocacy and Empowerment for Individuals, Families, and Communities](#) This resource provides an overview of ACL programs and ways in which individuals with I/DD can get involved in advocacy and become empowered in their lives.
- [ACL's Self Advocacy Resource and Technical Assistance Center \(SARTAC\)](#) This resource provides information and resources about how people with disabilities can engage in self-advocacy.

Utilize resources created for individuals with I/DD.

- [ASAN's What Do I Need to Know about Sexual Assault Guide](#) This guide provides an overview of sex, consent, and sexual assault that includes resources, pictures, and examples.
- [LifeCourse Nexus' Abuse and Prevention Resources](#) This resource provides videos and safety planning guides that help to recognize abuse and identify strategies for victims in danger.
- [Wisconsin BPDD's Let's Talk About Rights Guides](#) These guides and videos help explain the rights individuals with I/DD have and provides ideas on how to exercise and talk about these rights.
 - [Wisconsin BPDD's Know Your Rights Free from People Hurting You Video](#)