

Volume 2, Issue 3

September 2005

A publication of the
Training & Technical Assistance
Department



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Technical Assistance Bulletin

Working with People with Cognitive Disabilities

Women with cognitive disabilities are at a significantly higher risk of being victims/survivors of sexual violence than women without disabilities. Individuals with developmental disabilities are four to ten times more likely to become a crime victim. Over half of the women with cognitive disabilities who have been survivors of sexual violence have been sexually assaulted ten or more times. When crimes against people with cognitive disabilities are reported, there are lower rates of police follow-up, prosecution, and conviction.

Sometimes a person's disability can make it difficult for her or him to ask for assistance or provide information an advocate might need. There are also barriers to serving people with disabilities that have nothing to do with the individual but are due to the center's structure, resources, or training needs. In some cases, barriers are relatively easy to identify and remove, for example, installing a ramp; installing a TTY machine and training staff on its correct use; and providing victims/survivors with information in alternative formats such as large print, pictures, computer disk, audio or audio tape, or Braille.

The obstacles to serving people with disabilities are not as obvious or easily addressed. There are many kinds of disabilities, including physical, developmental, and cognitive. This technical assistance bulletin only focuses on cognitive disabilities. The information and resources herein are provided to advocates to support and strengthen their work with people with cognitive disabilities.

Things to Keep in Mind when Providing Services to Victims/Survivors with Cognitive Disabilities

Background

People with cognitive disabilities may have been teased, put down, and discriminated against because of their disability. They may worry about how people, including advocates perceive them and their disability. They may be easily influenced by other people or act impulsively. They may have been taught to comply, and thus are eager to please; they may say what they think the person of authority (i.e., the advocate) wants to hear. They may have limited, if any privacy because of their living situation, staff/family attitudes, and types of assistance they may require. Staff/family/roommates may read their mail, limit their telephone use, and listen in on telephone calls or other private conversations. They may have less awareness about healthy and unhealthy sexuality often resulting in boundary confusion. They may live anywhere in the community -- independently, with their family, in a group home, or residential facility. People with cognitive disabilities may have difficulty expressing themselves, telling date and time, understanding the concept of time, and reading and writing. They may have delayed or inappropriate response to questions.

Communication

An individual with a cognitive disability may experience a variety of difficulties when trying to speak. She/he may not have the vocabulary or life experience to describe her/his feelings, thoughts, or wishes. Also, keep in mind that the individual may have been threatened or punished in the past for speaking about sexual abuse or other forms of abuse or neglect. Their isolation may be compounded by the fact that they may not have access to a telephone or a way to receive messages from you. They may not have the privacy to speak with you candidly via the phone. They may also have difficulty physically holding and/or dialing the telephone.

If an individual has trouble speaking:

- give the person enough time to get the words out -- do not interrupt or correct the individual;
- ask the person to slow down if she/he is talking too fast;
- ask the person to draw pictures; and/or
- have the individual use dolls or other figures to demonstrate actions/feelings.

A person with a cognitive disability might not understand you because of her/his limited vocabulary, your use of complicated sentences with unfamiliar words or professional jargon, her/his emotional trauma, or cultural differences between you.

If you think a victim/survivor with a cognitive disability is having trouble understanding you:

- speak plainly and simply, not slowly or loudly;
- do not use professional or culturally biased jargon;
- do not use childish language or examples that infantilize the victim/survivor;
- do not ask leading questions;
- keep a calm demeanor and assure the victim/survivor there are no "right" or "wrong" answers;
- review complicated or difficult information;
- repeatedly ask if the victim/survivor understands or has questions;
- communicate the same information through different methods; and
- ask the individual to answer questions to demonstrate that she/he understood what you said.

Environmental and Accessibility Suggestions for Advocacy

Making one's center accessible to victims/survivors with disabilities goes beyond structural changes. Accessibility is also about shifts in philosophy, approach, and service provision. Below is a list of things advocates can do to make their services more accessible to people with cognitive disabilities.

- make the individual as physically comfortable as possible -- consider room temperature, seating, and eliminating background noise and bright lighting;
- take breaks when the victim/survivor appears tired or has trouble focusing;
- consider victim/survivor's eating and transportation schedules;
- offer a glass of water;
- offer the restroom before getting started;
- if two or more people are interviewing the victim/survivor, have only one person speak at a time, with sufficient time between questions and statements;
- face the person directly;
- speak at her/his eye level;
- show every victim/survivor respect and treat her/him with dignity;
- use people first language, referring to the person first and then the situation, condition, or disability¹;
- avoid wearing clothes with "busy" patterns or designs, large dangling earrings, and "noisy" bracelets -- it is easier for a person with intellectual disabilities to stay focused if there are minimal distractions; and
- develop your education and skills in serving people with disabilities and share that knowledge with colleagues.

Resources

Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape:	800-692-7445
Institute on Disabilities, at Temple University:	215-204-1356 (voice /TTY)
The Arc of Pennsylvania:	800-692-7258
Pennsylvania Protection and Advocacy:	800-692-7443

¹Disability Services ASAP (A Safety Awareness Program) of SafePlace, 2000