Dealing with Abuse

Like any crime victim, a person with a disability who is a victim of physical assault or other crime may feel especially powerless, vulnerable and afraid. Their disability may complicate their ability to reveal the abuse in that their abuser could very well be a caregiver or family member, or they may not even have the mental capability to recognize that they have been abused. It is up to the first response team to help them feel more comfortable.

The purpose of this guide is to provide some communication tips and resource information to first response personnel so they can best help people with disabilities who have been the victims of crime.

Setting the Stage for Good Communication

As you know, people with disabilities are people first. Cultural stereotypes of persons with disabilities need to be put aside because they will interfere with your efforts to make the victim comfortable. Victims with disabilities should be treated in an age appropriate manner and with dignity. Not all disabilities are mental, nor does a disability necessarily indicate an inability to hear. Victims with disabilities are uncomfortable with a patronizing or condescending attitude, or even unapproved assistance, but will respond well if they are asked first if there is any assistance that would make communication easier.

To conduct an effective interview, you should find out the nature of the victim’s disability first, and how that might compromise his or her ability to respond. Victims with disabilities often try to hide the abuse or they may not even be aware that they have been victimized. Many factors increase the vulnerability of this population – a medical condition, fear of authority, communication difficulties. Therefore, it is important that you prepare mentally for the interview beforehand, including the questions you need to ask.

Other specific communication tips include:

- Always remind the victim that it was not their fault.
- Get to know the communicating abilities of your victim. Ask for the victim to show you how they communicate.
- Draw on your own verbal and nonverbal skills for engaging the victim. Be aware of your own and other’s body language cues.
- Speak directly to the person with a disability instead of through a third party.
- Maintain eye contact at all times. Never talk about the person as if he/she is not there.
- Speak in a normal tone of voice unless the person is hard of hearing. (Speaking louder may or may not be more effective.)
- Be patient and thorough. It may take extra time for someone with a disability to say, do, or show you something.
- Clarify if you don’t understand. Have the person repeat him or herself. A clear concise statement with all of the facts is better than having multiple statements.
- Establish early in the interview that the victim knows what “telling the truth” means.
- If this is a victim of sexual assault, establish a clear understanding of how the individual understands sexuality. In addition, be aware of your own attitudes about sexuality and disability. A person with a disability can, and may, have a sex life.

Also, as a police officer you understand that making a victim aware of victims services is required by law. This is especially important when interacting with a victim who has a disability. Remember to discuss victim’s services with the person, and seriously consider having a victim’s advocate present during an interview.

Did You Know?

- People with disabilities are 4 times more likely to be victimized, and are more likely to be repeatedly victimized.
- Children with any kind of disability are more than twice as likely as children without disabilities to be physically abused and almost twice as likely to be sexually abused.
Emergency Resources

Network of Victim Assistance
Offers a victim advocate trained to assist with people with disabilities, crisis counseling, short term counseling, and personal empowerment training for people with disabilities.

24 Hour Hotline: 1-800-675-6900
TTY: 215-348-2963
www.novabucks.org

A Woman’s Place
Offers short-term shelter for people in domestic and family violent relationships.

24 Hour Hotline: 1-800-220-8116

Deaf-Hearing
Communication Center
Offers legal advocacy, systems advocacy, 24-hour emergency interpreter services.
610-604-0452 • 610-604-0450

Pennsylvania Client Assistance Program
CAP is an advocacy program for people with disabilities administered by the Center for Disability Law & Policy. CAP helps people who are seeking services from the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, Blindness and Visual Services, Centers for Independent Living and other programs funded under federal law.
Toll Free: 1-888-745-CDLP
Voice/TDD: 215-557-7112

The American Red Cross
Offers emergency shelter services.
Homeless Hotline: 1-800-810-4434
Lower Bucks County: 215-949-1727
Upper Bucks County: 215-348-8161

Pennsylvania Protection and Advocacy
Pennsylvania Protection and Advocacy, Inc. is a federally funded, nonprofit agency responsible for providing protection and advocacy services to people with disabilities.
Toll Free: 800-692-7443
TTY: 877-375-7139

Freedom Valley Disability Center
Offers individual and systems advocacy, referrals on housing and employment, peer counseling and independent living skills training.
1-800-427-4794

Bucks County Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation
Responsible for monitoring the services provided to people with disabilities by social service agencies in Bucks County.
215-442-0760

Bucks County Intermediate Unit #22
Offers assistance with facilitated communication.
215-348-0940

Lenape Valley Crisis Center
Offers crisis counseling for mental health consumers who are a harm to themselves or someone else in Central Bucks County.
24 Hour Counseling: 215-785-9765
215-345-5327

Pendel Mental Health Center
Provides outpatient services, partial hospitalization, residential rehabilitation services, and intensive case management to Mental Health and Mental retardation consumers.
Lower Bucks County: 215-752-1541

Penn Foundation, Inc.
Offers mental, emotional and chemical dependency services, psychiatric and family counseling, psychiatric consultation and medication management, inpatient rehabilitation, case management, residential services, and partial hospitalization.
Upper Bucks County: 215-282-6692

Emergency Food

Doylestown Area FISH
Crisis organization supplying food, lodging and transportation to those in need on a temporary basis.
24 Hour Hotline 215-348-7172

Bristol Borough
Community Action Group, Inc.
Emergency food pantry, Helping Hand Pantry to help Philadelphia Suburban Water Co.’s clients with water bills.
215-785-3296

Bucks County Housing Group
Offers emergency shelter for families at four locations; bridge and transitional housing; permanent rental housing at 3 locations. Additionally, they have an emergency food pantry.
215-598-3566

Penridge FISH Organization, Inc.
Provides food, paper and soap products, used clothing. Helps with rent, utility bills, fuel oil and overnight housing.
215-257-7616 • 215-536-0420

Financial Services

Bucks County Assistance Office
Provides financial assistance, nursing home assistance, medical assistance, food stamps, energy assistance, information and referral for social services.
Bristol: 215-781-3300
Warminster: 215-443-3200

Bucks Montgomery
Center for Human Services
Emergency food assistance and case management services are provided for housing, financial and employment related problems.
215-323-9935