

# *The* **Unheard Voice**

**A Handbook  
on Violence Against  
Women with Disabilities**



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## Introduction

Women with disabilities are at higher risk than other women for abuse and violence. Women with disabilities are abused 3 to 10 times more often than peers without disabilities and are forced to endure abuse longer and in more ways by more abusers than women without disabilities.

Although any woman with a disability has the potential to be abused, in some types of disability the risk is increased. Women at increased risk for abuse include older women with disabilities and adults and children with developmental, cognitive, and sensory (vision and hearing) disabilities; women with disabilities from other cultural, ethnic



backgrounds; women of color; women from disadvantaged backgrounds; women who are isolated because of age or limited mobility; and women who are dependent on others for assistance.

Abusers can be family members (parents, siblings, and children), partners, hired caregivers, personal assistants, healthcare providers, or

strangers. Abusers can be anyone from any race, educational level, cultural or religious background, socioeconomic level, gender, sexual orientation, occupational group, and any city or state.

## A. What is abuse for women with disabilities?

Abuse is an effort by one person to exert control over another. It is more likely to occur when there is inequity in a relationship or a difference in the ability of one person to control or influence another person. Having a disability often puts a woman at a disadvantage in a relationship and less able to resist the efforts of another person to control

her or force her to do something against her will. Any woman who lacks power or perceives that she lacks power is at risk for abuse.

**There are many types of abuse. Some examples are:**

- ✓ Physical abuse (hitting, beating, slapping, or biting)
- ✓ Verbal abuse (criticizing, belittling, blaming, shouting)
- ✓ Emotional abuse (isolating her from others, demeaning or ridiculing)
- ✓ Sexual abuse (forcing a woman to have sex against her will, rape, exploiting her sexually, inappropriate touching)

- ✓ Financial (stealing her money, insurance, other resources such as property, belongings)
- ✓ Withholding access (to family members, health care, medicines, friends or coworkers)
- ✓ Removing/destroying assistive devices
- ✓ Keeping her from getting food or water, bathing, using the toilet, or caring for herself
- ✓ Isolating her and preventing access to community and services
- ✓ Exploiting the woman's power of attorney; making decisions that affect her against her will



- ✓ Forging her name to documents without her knowledge or against her will
- ✓ Intimidating or coercing her
- ✓ Controlling her reproductive decisions
- ✓ Failing to provide contracted services (neglect, fraud, cheating her)
- ✓ Preventing a woman from communicating (limiting her access to phone, TTY, language board or electronic speaking device or computer)
- ✓ Because of fear of serious harm and loss of resources
- ✓ Because they may not know how to respond to abuse and violence
- ✓ Because they rely on others for transportation, care, health insurance, and/or housing
- ✓ Because they fear loss of custody of their children
- ✓ Because they fear deportation or arrest due to immigration status
- ✓ Because they fear being rejected by their family, community, cultural or religious group

**B. Why do women with disabilities who are being abused stay in abusive relationships or situations?**

## C. What are the barriers to help among women with disabilities that are being abused?

- ✓ Difficulty in obtaining help may make it hard for women with disabilities to escape and protect themselves from abuse
- ✓ Lack of knowledge about disability issues among those who provide domestic violence and sexual assault services
- ✓ Lack of knowledge about abuse among those who provide disability services
- ✓ Lack of accessible shelters and accessible services



- ✓ Lack of resources (financial or housing)
- ✓ The type and degree of disability causes a woman with cognitive, psychiatric, mobility or multiple disabilities to rely on others for such things as finances, transportation, communication, and daily living activities; the more severe the disability the greater the risk

- ✓ Communicating in a different language, (i.e., Spanish, American Sign Language)
- ✓ Cultural, religious, ethnic backgrounds that do not allow for women with disabilities to publicly report/seek help about an abusive situation
- ✓ Lack of “safety net” for immigrant women with disabilities

## D. What does abuse do to women with disabilities?

- ✓ Causes fear, emotional distress and isolation
- ✓ Puts women and their children at risk (i.e. custody and child support)

- ✓ Causes other disabilities (both physical and mental health)
- ✓ Leads to greater poverty
- ✓ May lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- ✓ Imposes risk of physical injury, harm, and death

## E. What can women with disabilities do to help themselves?

- ✓ Leave the abuse situation or environment
- ✓ Educate oneself
- ✓ Learn more about abuse (what is it, etc.)

- ✓ Take proactive steps to empower oneself
- ✓ Reach out to women's shelters, other women, religious communities (church, synagogue, temple, or mission)
- ✓ Identify possible abuse
- ✓ Learn about available resources and services
- ✓ Join a support /counseling group for abused women
- ✓ Offer support to other women who are being abused

## Assessing Abuse- Are You Being Abused?

1. Within the last year, have you been hit, slapped, kicked, pushed, shoved or

otherwise physically hurt by someone?

2. Within the last year, has anyone forced you to have sexual activities?
3. Within the last year, has anyone prevented you from using a wheelchair, cane, respiratory, or other assistive devices?
4. Within the last year, has anyone you depend on refused to help you with an important personal need, such as taking your medicine, getting to the bathroom, getting out of bed, bathing, getting dressed, or getting food or drink?

5. Within the last year, have you been threatened, intimidated, coerced, or manipulated to do things that made you fearful and/or do things you did not wish to do?
6. Within the last year, were you humiliated or shamed, called names, overly criticized, or otherwise belittled?
7. Within the last year has anyone done anything to make you fearful?

If you said “yes” to any of these questions, you are being abused and should ask about available support and resources and a safety plan.



## Know Your Rights

### A. Basic Rights

- 📌 You have the right to live an independent, active, and full life
- 📌 You have the right to live without violence or abuse
- 📌 You have the right to have safe and healthy relationships with persons of your choice
- 📌 You have the right to your own sexual identity, sexual orientation, and gender identify

- 📌 You have the right to quality physical and mental health care
- 📌 You have the right to access transportation resources
- 📌 You have the right to develop and relate to others as sexual beings
- 📌 You have the right to privacy
- 📌 You have the right to marry, and decide whom to marry
- 📌 You have the right to have children or not
- 📌 You have the right to legal representation and full protection of your legal rights
- 📌 You have the right to make or participate in decisions that affect your own life, determine your own



future and make personal life choices

- 📌 You have the right to have access to community services
- 📌 You have the right to birth control
- 📌 You have the right to determine who signs all documents that relate to you, including financial documents

- 📌 You have the right to say “No” to anything that makes you feel uncomfortable and to have that right respected

## B. Relationship Rights

**These rights are part of a healthy relationship:**

- ✓ You have the right to be respected
- ✓ You have the right to be treated and spoken to like an adult
- ✓ You have the right to be treated in a caring way
- ✓ You have the right to be treated as a valuable person

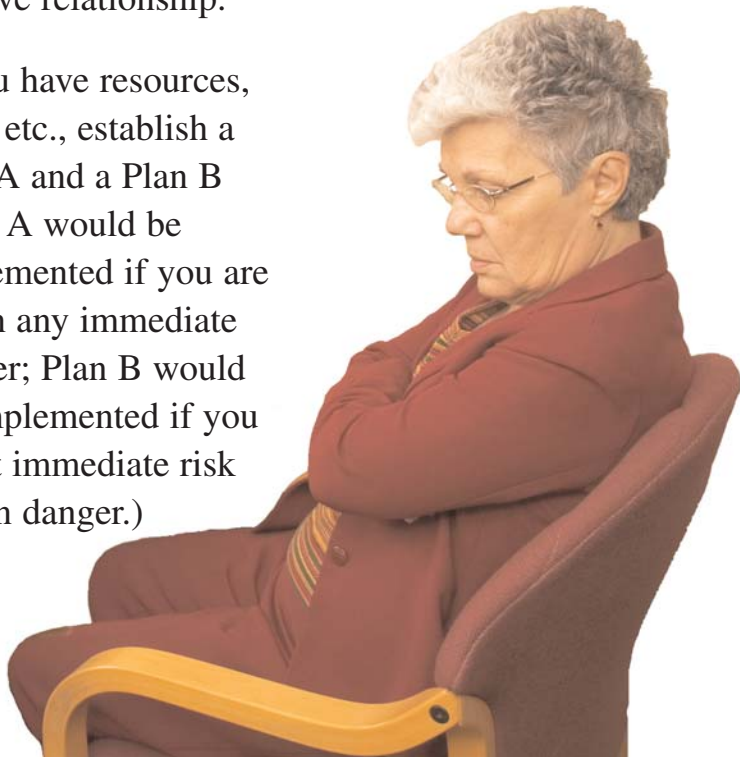
- ✓ You have the right to have a personal assistant or caregiver who doesn’t hurt your feelings and doesn’t hurt your body.

## IV. Safety Planning for Women with Disabilities

The most dangerous time is when a woman tries to leave the abuser. It is very important for women living with domestic violence to think about safety and to be prepared in advance for danger. The longer domestic violence goes on, the more dangerous it becomes. ***Remember, more than 4,000 women a year are killed by their abusers!*** The safety-planning checklist will help you plan a safer escape from the abuser.

## A. Safety Plan

- ✓ Your safety is of the highest priority. Save yourself if you are in danger. Your life is more important than anything else.
- ✓ Identify a trusted person (or persons) who can help you develop a plan and ultimately leave an abusive relationship.
- ✓ If you have resources, time, etc., establish a Plan A and a Plan B (Plan A would be implemented if you are not in any immediate danger; Plan B would be implemented if you are at immediate risk and in danger.)



- ✓ If time permits, utilize friends, the emergency department, shelter, police, and house of worship (church, synagogue, temple, mosque or mission).
- ✓ If you are thinking about leaving, do not let your abuser know of your plan to escape. Be careful not to leave clues regarding your

destination (i.e. long distance phone bills or other literature about domestic violence services).

- ✓ Change your payee - (if you have one) on your SSI/SSDI benefit to someone you trust other than the batterer. You (or a caseworker from a domestic violence shelter, disability service agency or Adult Protective Services) will need to contact the Social Security Administration (1-800-772-1213) to change the payee name.
- ✓ Open a checking account in your name only. Have your benefit checks direct deposited into that account. A savings account will generate

traceable documents to the Internal Revenue Service. If possible, try to set aside as much money as you can. If you have joint accounts with your spouse or partner, try to take all of your money out and put it in your own account. It may seem sneaky or it may even be risky to you, but it may mean your survival. If possible, bank statements should be accessible online so no statements are mailed to your home.

- ✓ Plan for assistance with personal care tasks. Be prepared to receive this assistance from someone else besides the batterer. Ask several friends, family members or faith community

members for help if possible so that one person is not over-taxed.

- ✓ If you receive Medicaid/Medicare and are low income, you may be entitled to personal care assistance services from the NJ Department of Human Services. Some home health care agencies have rates based on income. Contact a caseworker or an intake worker and let them know about your service needs. If at



first she/he does not respond or assist, call again and ask for a status report or for an explanation about why services have not been initiated. If they still do not respond, ask to speak to their supervisor.

**Medicaid**  
**800-356-1561 (V/TDD)**

**Medicare**  
**800-633-4227 (V)**  
**877-486-2048 (TDD)**

- ✓ Get a post office box in your own name and hide the key or give it to a trusted friend or relative.
- ✓ Assess your own resources. Figure out if you have people (i.e., friends, family, church or synagogue members of your

church, synagogue, temple, mosque or mission) who would be able to let you stay with them or lend you some money to make the transition.

- ✓ Make sure if you drive an adapted vehicle that the adaptations are in good repair and the vehicle itself is in reasonable, working order. Have your vehicle checked often in case the abuser has tampered with it in any way. Never leave your vehicle with less than half tank of gas. This is so that if you need to leave in a hurry, you have a reasonable amount of gas available.
- ✓ If you live in a major metropolitan area, consider applying for

special or paratransit services. A doctor or caseworker can certify your disability if you have seen them for services before. This may be done by mail.

- ✓ Call the battered women's shelter in your area (or the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) 1.800.792.8339 (TTY) to discuss safety planning. Let them know what your needs are and that you have a disability. Inquire about accessibility. Be aware that shelters are often full. More than likely, the shelter is not turning you away because of your disability. Ask to be put on the waiting list and check back with them daily to inquire

about their status. Remember, safety planning is very, very important at this stage of the process. Stay in touch with your local hotline. Ask them for help to strategize with safety planning. A woman is much more likely to be killed upon leaving a relationship than at any other time.

- ✓ Keep the battered women's shelter or domestic violence or other crisis hotline telephone number with you. Better yet, memorize it! Keep some extra change with you for phone calls. Most shelter hotlines will take collect calls.
- ✓ Call and talk with other disability related service providers and

disability rights organizations listed in the phone book (i.e., support groups, County Offices on Disabilities, independent living centers, etc.) and ask for assistance with locating accessible or other support services.

- ✓ Call Adult Protective Services (APS) and report the abuse. Let them know if your health and safety are at stake. Ask APS what the process will be for investigation and services. APS will send a social worker to investigate your situation. If you are living in a service provider residence (i.e. group home), a report will be sent to the service provider responsible for your

living arrangements (i.e. Division of Developmental Disabilities). If you live in your own home/apartment, APS will send a social worker to investigate (and a police officer at your request) APS will interview you, others (neighbors, other members of the household) and ALL alleged abusers. APS will file a report with their office to determine how to assist you. If you decide to press charges against your abuser and you fear retaliation, a report is made with your police department so they are aware of the abusive situation. APS will assist in relocating you to a shelter, or home of a family/friend which

is deemed safe and accessible. If this is not an option APS will attempt to set up other temporary emergency services. Phone: 1-800-792-8820

- ✓ When you leave, write a note to the abuser that says you went to a doctor's appointment or another place that will not make the abuser suspicious. This will give you a head start.
- ✓ If you use a credit card after leaving, make sure that the bill will not be sent to the residence where the abuser lives or has access.
- ✓ If possible, use a phone card as the card's central number should appear on caller

ID to avoid tracing the call. Make a practice call using a card.

- ✓ Get a civil protection order that tells the abuser that they must stay away from you and your children.
- ✓ You may need emergency legal services to protect your children, especially if they have visitation rights. You can ask for supervised visits so the visits will be watched by a trusted person in a safe place.
- ✓ If using the Internet for resources, double delete your history so it cannot be traced.
- ✓ If possible, keep on your person at all times (only wear pants with pockets) an extra

car key, money or credit card, cell phone, driver's license, disability identification and social security cards, and all medical cards.

- ✓ **REMEMBER -** Leaving an abusive relationship is a process for people with disabilities--just like it is for people without disabilities. For individuals with disabilities, this process can be longer because of all the logistics. Leaving an abusive relationship is one of the bravest, most frightening experiences a person can go through. Being abused is not your fault and neither is having a disability.

## **B. What to Take with You When You Leave-Checklist**

If you can, pack these items in advance and leave them at the home of a trusted friend or relative.

### ◆ **Identification**

- ◇ Driver's license or state I.D. card
- ◇ Your birth certificate, along with and your children's certificates (or other family member's)
- ◇ Social Security Card
- ◇ Proof of disability (Social Security award letter, doctor's note, etc.; disability identification card from DMV or state agency)
- ◇ Food stamps
- ◇ Insurance, Medicaid, Medicare and/or clinic card
- ◇ Money, credit cards and/or ATM card

- ◇ Bank books, account information and checkbooks
- ◇ If applicable, information on stocks (including stock certificates), bonds and individual retirement account(s), mortgage, etc.

### ◆ **Legal Papers**

- ◇ Lease or house payment information/ deed to the house (even if you do not plan to live there)
- ◇ Car registration and car insurance papers/ documents
- ◇ Health and life insurance papers/ documents
- ◇ Living Will Directive
- ◇ Children's school records and vaccinations records
- ◇ Work permits (green card, VISA)
- ◇ Passport

- ✧ Divorce papers/ documents
- ✧ Child custody papers
- ✧ Protective or restraining order
- ◆ **Other Important Disability-Related Items**
- ✧ Adaptive equipment (wheelchair, shower bench, crutches, communicative devices, etc.)
- ✧ Medications, prescriptions and doctor's orders
- ✧ Urological supplies
- ✧ Service animal and needed supplies for their care
- ✧ Names and phone numbers of home health agencies, caseworkers and disability service providers to assist in coordinating services for you
- ✧ Phone numbers of friends or past

attendants who might be willing to help with personal care tasks during the transition period and also provide you with some emotional support

- ✧ Fixed route bus pass, Mobility ID card or Special Transit ID card
- ✧ Medical records and doctor's phone numbers.

◆ **Miscellaneous Items**

- ✧ House, care and office keys
- ✧ Small objects to sell
- ✧ Jewelry
- ✧ Address book
- ✧ Pictures of you, your children, grandchildren and the abuser, and evidence of physical abuse
- ✧ Children's small, favorite toys
- ✧ Toiletries and diapers

- ✧ Cellular phone programmed to 911 (these can often be obtained for free through Adult Protective Services or a local domestic violence program)
- ✧ Program your cellular phone with ICE ("in case of emergency")
- ✧ A few changes of clothes for you and your child(ren)
- ✧ Obtain a 911 phone from the American Automobile Association for use in emergencies

**C. Getting Immediate Help!**

**What to do in an emergency:**

- ✓ **Call 9-1-1.** No special number is needed for TTY.

- ✓ If there is no answer, **do not hang up;** waiting is best.
- ✓ If you can't get to the phone, yell and make noise. The neighbors may call 9-1-1 for you.
- ✓ Try to keep calm. When the police arrive, show them any bruises or other injuries you may have, and things that the abuser has broken or damaged.
- ✓ Ask the police to write up a police report.
- ✓ Talk to the police in a place where the abuser can't hear you or see you sign.
- ✓ At any time, **call a domestic violence shelter in your area.** They will be able to tell you where to get help with legal issues,

and how to be safe. You can often find their phone number in the front pages of the phone book.

- ✓ Call a friend, call a neighbor, or call a co-worker to inform the person of your situation. It is important to try and stay in touch with your circle of friends and loved ones so they can help you in case of crisis.
- ✓ Hide or escape?
  - ☐ Escape to a safe place such as domestic violence shelter that has a secret location so the abuser can't find you. Some people prefer to stay with friends or family, but they can be found there.

- ☐ Figure out which rooms in your home are the safest.
- ☐ Teach your children a safe place to run if they feel unsafe.
- ☐ Avoid being trapped in a room without a way to escape.
- ☐ Avoid knives, sharp corners, or things that can burn you.

- ✓ Use the safety plan checklist to guide you when calling police during a crisis or escaping the abuser.

## **D. Breaking the Cycle of Abuse**

You have the power to break the cycle of abuse with your abuser.

**REMEMBER: YOU HAVE THE SAME RIGHTS AS NON-**

## **DISABLED PEOPLE. THIS ABUSE IS NOT YOUR FAULT.**

- ✓ Contact a support group in your area. Call the Self-Help Clearing House at 1-800-367-6274 or at [www.njgroups.org](http://www.njgroups.org) to find a group in your area. If there is no support group in your area, the Self-Help Clearing House can help you establish a group
- ✓ Call the NJ Division on Women hotline - 1-800-572-SAFE (7233)/ TTY:1-800-792-8339
- ✓ Access long-term therapy services.

- ✓ Call the following organizations for counseling and support.
  - ☐ Independent Living Centers
  - ☐ Mental Health Clinics
  - ☐ YWCA's
  - ☐ Disability Service Organizations
  - ☐ Jewish Family Services
  - ☐ Hospitals
  - ☐ Catholic Charities
  - ☐ Domestic Violence Shelters
  - ☐ County Offices for the Disabled



# V

## Resources

- ✍ Adult Protective Services: 800-792-8820\*
- ✍ Battered Lesbian Helpline: 800-224-0211\*
- ✍ Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired: 973-648-3333, TTY: 973-648-4559
- ✍ Community Health Law Project: 888-838-3180, TTD: 973-275-1721
- ✍ County Offices for the Disabled: 201-336-6500, TTY: 201-336-6505
- ✍ Independent Living Centers: See NJ Statewide Independent Living Council
- ✍ Legal Services of NJ: 732-572-9100\*
- ✍ Local Domestic Violence Shelter Hotline: 800-572-SAFE (7233), TTY: 888-252-SAFE (7233)
- ✍ NJ Coalition Against Sexual Assault State Hotline: 800-601-7200\*
- ✍ NJ Coalition for Battered Women State Office: 609-584-8107, TTY: 609-584-0027
- ✍ NJ Coalition on Women and Disabilities, Inc.: 733-323-8600\*
- ✍ NJ Division of Deaf and Hard of Hearing: Voice / TTY: 800-792-8339
- ✍ NJ Division of Disability Services: 800-285-3036, TDD: 609-292-1210
- ✍ NJ Division of Developmental Disabilities: 800-832-9173, TTY: 800-792-8339
- ✍ NJ Division of Youth and Family Services: 800-331-3937\*
- ✍ NJ Division of Youth & Family Services Hotline: 877-652-2873, TTY: 800-835-5510

\*TDD/TTY not available

- ✍ NJ Office of Civil Rights-Newark: 973-648-6262, TTY: 973-648-4678
- ✍ NJ Office of Civil Rights-Trenton: 609-984-3100, TTY: 609-292-1785
- ✍ NJ Protection & Advocacy: 800-922-7233, TTD: 609-633-7106
- ✍ NJ State Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-572-SAFE (7233), TTY: 888-252-SAFE (7233)
- ✍ NJ Statewide Independent Living Council: 877-917-4500, TDD: 609-581-4550
- ✍ Office of Ombudsman for Institutionalized Elderly: 877-582-6995\*
- ✍ Office on Prevention of Violence Against Women: 609-292-8840, TTY: 609-777-0799
- ✍ Rachael Coalition: 973-740-1233 ext. 203\*
- ✍ United Way Help/Homeless Hotline (Central Jersey): 211 / TTY: 888-908-4636

\*TDD/TTY not available

# VI

## References

- ✍ Stop the Violence, Break the Silence - A Training Guide (2003) C.M. Hughes, MPA, Edited by W.H. Abramson, LMSW, SafePlace, Austin, TX
- ✍ Handbook for Shelters Serving Deaf Women and Their Children, 2nd Edition, Abused Deaf Women's Advocacy Services, Seattle, WA
- ✍ Intimate & Caregiver Violence Against Women with Disabilities (July, 2000)-Patricia Erwin, MA, University of California