



Using an Intersectional Lens for Promoting Access and Inclusion

In working with “underserved populations,” people may belong to more than one historically oppressed or marginalized group, and experience multiple social inequities. Every group has members with disabilities. This resource developed for grantees funded by the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) [Grants for Outreach and Services to Underserved Populations Program](#) is intended to promote intersectional thinking and provide insight as to practices and approaches by which people with multiple social identities living with a disability can be included equally in services aimed at supporting survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. While the practices and approaches described here focus on people with disabilities, many are applicable to other identities as well.

Practices and Approaches that Promote Access and Inclusion

Recognizing and Addressing Trauma

Authoritative research on abuse of people with disabilities is scarce, however, the limited data suggests that people with disabilities are abused at alarming rates. According to the 2009-2015 [National Crime Victimization Survey](#) people with disabilities experience violent victimization—including rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault—at rates three times higher than people without disabilities.¹ In 2018, a National Public Radio (NPR) [investigation](#) found that people with intellectual disabilities are raped at a rate seven times higher than those without disabilities.² The [American Psychological Association](#) indicates that

¹ Harrell, E. (2017). *Crime Against Persons With Disabilities, 2009-2015 - Statistical Tables*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs Bureau of Justice Statistics.

² Shapiro, A., McEvers, K., & Shapiro, J. (2018, January 8). Abused And Betrayed. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/series/575502633/abused-and-betrayed>

women with disabilities have a 40 percent greater chance of domestic violence than women without disabilities.³

Due to this high prevalence of sexual assault and domestic violence against people with disabilities, it is critical that we provide trauma-informed practices. [Trauma-informed practices](#) recognize the prevalence and impact of trauma and work to support healing and prevent retraumatization.⁴

“Responding from a place of trauma is normal if you’ve been traumatized, but I didn’t want to stay there. We all need self-love and self-care. Teach that. Self-love after trauma is difficult. I could not love myself until I realized that there was nothing I did that caused my assaults.”

- Woman with disabilities

Trauma-informed practices include actions that are inclusive and empowering within our daily interactions, environments, services and supports. The mantra, “Nothing About Us Without Us” can be used to help guide your work with all marginalized community members. Make sure that the people most affected by your work are actively included in shaping their services. For example, people with disabilities helped inform this resource and some of their words are quoted throughout the document.

“Include me in stuff that concerns me.”

-Person with developmental disability and mental illnesses

Many people with multiple intersections, including people with disabilities, have trauma histories. Opportunities for healing are created when service providers are trauma-informed, shifting focus from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What’s happened to you?” When you focus your intention and

³ American Psychological Association. (n.d.). Abuse of Women With Disabilities. Abuse of Women With Disabilities. Washington, DC.

⁴ Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative Enhancing Sexual Assault Services. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/2015-01/nsvrc_publications_sadi-newsletter-winter-2015.pdf

approach on understanding the person's unique life experiences, a window to recovery is opened.

Supporting Equity in Accessing Services

Although people with disabilities have not historically been granted their rights as equal citizens, they do have the same rights as every other person. Some people with disabilities may need specific supports to exercise their rights (such as easy to understand language, extra time to process information, pictures to aid communication, etc.) in order to assist them in exercising their rights. Some adults with disabilities have had their rights restricted through a legal court process in which a legal guardian is appointed. These laws and procedures vary by [state](#).⁵

Adults with guardians can still make many decisions. Having a guardian does not diminish the need for having a voice, making choices, being heard, and being treated with respect. People with legal guardians can make decisions about preferred food, activities, clothing, work, dreams, friendships and love. Survivors with disabilities have the same rights to access victim services as everyone else.

Practicing Disability Humility / Intersectional Humility

There are many kinds of disabilities including physical, sensory, learning, developmental, intellectual, psychiatric, and others. Some disabilities are easily observed, and some are invisible. Visible and invisible disabilities intersect with the individual's other social identities. You probably know if a member of your community uses a wheelchair, but you may not know that a member experiences mental illnesses, has chemical sensitivities or a mild learning disability. Knowing someone's specific diagnosis is not important. The disability label does not tell you much about the person and what they need to heal from sexual assault and domestic violence. Therefore, disability humility is an important approach to consider and practice.

⁵ Morgan, W. K. (2012). Guardian Laws by State. Retrieved from jennyhatchjusticeproject.org/50_state_review

Disability humility is a model based on the idea that professionals do not need extensive training prior to working with people with disabilities. Disability humility requires a commitment on the part of the professional to equally share power with people who have disabilities. In this approach, the person with a disability is the expert on themselves; they know what works for them and what doesn't. The professional is open, flexible, creative, and respects each person's life experience and expertise and treats each person with dignity and respect. Questions such as, "How can I best support you?" "What makes you feel safe?" "What do you want to happen?" and "What is helpful?" are examples of this approach as they seek the person's expertise.

"Disability humility makes for a welcoming environment."
-Woman with physical disabilities

The professional's role is to listen, observe, reflect, and empathize while trying to understand this one person's experience and choices. This practice is not specific to people with disabilities, but rather includes people of all social identities. Successfully supporting survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence requires the inclusion of all social identities and intersections, emphasizing the expertise and power of each individual in their own healing.

Creating Welcoming Environments through Universal Design

[Universal design](#) is a proactive approach to accessibility that considers as many people's needs as possible.⁶ This approach requires being mindful about inclusion so that all people can participate safely, successfully, comfortably, and equally. When planning, it is important to consider all possible intersections including age, size, disability, Deaf/Hard of Hearing, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and culture. As you think about different perspectives, you can create safety and access within all environments, communication, learning, and physical space.

⁶ DisABILITY Series - Universal Design. (2014, September 15). Retrieved from <https://www.disability-benefits-help.org/blog/disability-series-universal-design>

Some examples of universal design focused on access by people with disabilities include:

- An entrance where everyone is greeted warmly and the waiting area has open space for people who use mobility devices and a variety of seating options (e.g., sizes, with and without arms).
- Physical access to building, restrooms, meeting rooms, hallways, and all spaces.
- Conference spaces with different kinds of chairs, spaces for people who use wheelchairs, space between sections for easy mobility between tables/chairs.
- Print materials in easy to understand language, with plain fonts, in large print, with pictures, gender-neutral language, and contrast between the background and the words.
- When providing food/drink be sure to include drinking straws and straws that bend, a variety of food textures, and unobtrusive supports to assist people in buffet lines, opening beverages, etc.

Many times, universal design eliminates the need for a person to request an accommodation. People who regularly cannot easily access spaces, information, and communication feel very welcome when these things are naturally available. It might be possible to have an accessibility review completed by a [Center for Independent Living \(CIL\)](#) in your area.⁷ There are also OVW-funded national technical assistance resources available to grantees for measuring and improving their capacity to serve survivors with disabilities.

“Accommodations are person-specific. Universal Design is to include as many people as possible in our everyday practices. We want to go beyond the minimum and really meet people’s needs.”

-Person with multiple learning disabilities

⁷ Centers for Independent Living. (2019, September 9). Retrieved from <https://acl.gov/programs/aging-and-disability-networks/centers-independent-living>

Ensuring Access and Accommodations for Each and Every One

The [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (ADA) ensures that people with disabilities are not discriminated against in accessing public services.⁸ Survivors with disabilities should have equal access to facilities, programs, services, and activities. In order to make this happen, some people will need accommodations. Some accommodations are free or low cost, such as using easy to understand language, providing a large print document or relocation to an accessible meeting space. Other accommodations are more costly, such as an [American Sign Language](#) Interpreter, modification of a bathroom to meet accessibility standards or [Communication Access Realtime Translation](#) (CART) services.^{9,10} [Public Accommodations](#) must be provided unless it fundamentally alters the nature of your programs or services or causes undue hardship.¹¹

The recommended approach to ensuring access and accommodations to people with disabilities, as well as other people, is as follows:

1. **Check your assumptions.** Do you have any assumptions about the person's disability and/or their need for or type of accommodations? If so, put these ideas aside and focus on what the person tells you they need.
2. **Ask about accommodations.** Find out from everyone who seeks services if they need any accommodations or supports in order to participate fully.
3. **Have the conversation.** Have a discussion with the person to really understand what they need and how it can best be provided. It is okay to talk with people about their disability/disabilities and their needs if the purpose is to understand how you can best work with them.

⁸ The Current ADA Regulations, The Current ADA Regulations (2010). Retrieved from https://www.ada.gov/2010_regs.htm

⁹ American Sign Language. (2019, May 8). Retrieved from <https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/american-sign-language>

¹⁰ Communication Access Realtime Translation. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.nad.org/resources/technology/captioning-for-access/communication-access-realtime-translation/>

¹¹ Federal ADA Regulations and Standards. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://adata.org/ada-law-regulations-and-design-standards>

4. **Recognize that the person is the expert on what they need.**
Listen closely, ask questions, and then listen some more. Provide the services and accommodations as designed by the person.
5. **Ask about accommodations.** Ask the person if they need any accommodations or supports in order to fully access and receive services.
6. **Follow-up to see if the accommodations/supports provided are working.** There may need to be a revision or a different approach. Only the person will know what works for them. Check in with them from time to time.

When this approach is used, everybody benefits. Not only will you learn about the person and their needs, that person will feel more welcome and included. The idea is to normalize conversations about safety and supports (including accommodations for needed services). By doing so, we improve services for *everyone*.

“Accommodations are best when they are not a big deal.”
-Person with multiple disabilities

Be a Partner in Healing

As community service providers who focus on underserved populations, it is important to recognize that the people you work with may have multiple social identities. Every Underserved Program grantee works with people with disabilities. Be intentional about accepting differences. Create spaces and services that acknowledge and celebrate each survivor’s unique experiences, including the impact of social identities/intersections. Everyone plays a role in creating access and safety. Be mindful and proactive. Look for signs of discomfort. Have conversations about safety and access with people you work with and with your colleagues. Only when the survivor can access services and feel emotionally and physically safe, will they be able to begin a process of recovery.

Everyone can play a role in healing. Learn more about [trauma-informed practices](#).¹² Practice being present with people without making any assumptions. When you work with someone, see their intersections and hold hope for their healing. Each social identity is a layer of the person to consider and address within the context of sexual assault. As one survivor poignantly stated, “I am Black, Lesbian, Disabled, and I was raped. Who is going to help me?” This survivor knew that all of her identities mattered and that those intersections made it harder for her to receive the support she needed.

When you have an intersectional lens, you can partner with people so they receive the support and services they desire and deserve.

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Want to learn more on this topic and find ways to connect to additional resources? We are here to help! Please contact the ALSO Underserved TA team at [@underservedtaproject](mailto:underservedtaproject) or your ALSO Point-of-Contact for assistance on this topic or any other topic in support of your Underserved project.

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¹² Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative Enhancing Sexual Assault Services. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/2015-01/nsvrc_publications_sadi-newsletter-winter-2015.pdf

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