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Providing Gender-Based Violence Services to Disabled Women in the U.S.

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Recommendations for Providing Gender-Based Violence Services to Disabled Women in the U.S.

People with disabilities are at a heightened risk of gender-based violence (GBV) compared to people without disabilities. **In the United States, the estimated rate of violence against people with disabilities by an intimate partner or relative is approximately 5 times higher than the rate for people without disabilities.**¹ The rate of intimate partner violence for non-white disabled people or LGBTQ+ disabled people may be even higher.²

With women with disabilities accounting for 30.6% of women in the U.S.—or 40 million people—ensuring disability inclusion in GBV services is essential to meeting the needs of people experiencing disproportionately high rates of GBV.³ This fact sheet offers concrete recommendations for service providers to dismantle barriers and meet the needs of disabled clients. These recommendations offer good practices for providers, even if the federal legal requirements around inclusion and accessibility change.

Legal Requirements for Accessibility

There are several federal laws that address inclusion and accessibility. These laws provide GBV service providers in the U.S. with a baseline standard to ensure disabled people can access services without discrimination. Individual states may also have state laws that provide similar protection against disability discrimination. These state protections are all the more important as federal protections for inclusion and accessibility have come under legal attack.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) – Title III:

- **Who does it cover?** Title III of the ADA is a federal law that requires that goods and services offered to the public—~~public~~—including those offered by businesses and nonprofit organizations like GBV providers—are accessible for people with disabilities.⁴
- **What does it require?** The ADA requires GBV service providers to ensure equal access to services through reasonable accommodations,⁵ auxiliary aids to ensure effective communication,⁶ and physically accessible facilities.⁷ These services must be provided at no cost to the client.⁸
- **Are there exceptions?** These modifications and services are required unless it would “fundamentally alter” the nature of the services or create an undue burden.⁹ But these are a high threshold to reach!

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504):

- **Who does it cover?** Section 504 is a federal law that protects eligible individuals from discrimination based on their disability and applies to all organizations receiving federal funds (directly or indirectly).¹⁰
- **What does it require?** Similarly to the ADA, it requires that federal funding recipients, including GBV service providers, ensure the accessibility of their programs.¹¹ This can be done through reasonable accommodations, effective communication, and physical access. Each federal agency has their own set of 504 regulations for their programs¹² so it is important for service providers to ensure that accessibility measures align with these specific requirements.

Fair Housing Act (FHA):

- **Who does it cover?** GBV service providers that offer housing services should be aware of federal laws that promote equal housing opportunity and prohibit discrimination against individuals with disabilities like the FHA.¹³
- **Are GBV shelters considered housing?** The FHA applies to GBV shelters¹⁴ that qualify as “dwellings” under the FHA, defined broadly as “any building...designed or intended for occupancy as, a residence by one or more families.”¹⁵
- **What does it require?** FHA requires housing providers to make reasonable accommodations in rules, policies, practices, or services, when necessary for the disabled person have an equal opportunity to use and enjoy the dwelling.¹⁶ Housing providers must also allow people with disabilities to make reasonable changes to a housing unit that will “afford them the full enjoyment of the premises.”¹⁷

Practice Recommendations

There are many ways that GBV providers can incorporate accessible practices into their services and facilities.



Accessible Outreach



Communication Accommodations



Physical Accessibility

Accessible Outreach

- **Website Design and Social Media:** In today's digital age, GBV service providers should have accessible websites and social media accounts. Use screen-reader-compatible formatting¹⁸ and plain language (below a 5th-grade reading level), including for any forms on your website. List available services and disability accommodations available on your website.
- **Avoid reliance on color or images alone for critical information:** Use alt text for images that is fully compatible with screen readers and ensure sufficient color contrast between text and background colors for people with low vision.¹⁹
- **Keyboard Navigation:** Ensure users can fully navigate websites with a keyboard instead of a mouse, as some clients with disabilities may rely on assistive technologies that use keyboard commands.²⁰
- **Captions & Transcripts:** Provide synchronized captions for videos and transcripts for audio content.²¹



Good Practice

The New York City Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence has a [5-year accessibility plan available](#) on the website and the [directory of service providers](#) lists if that facility is wheelchair accessible.

Communication Accommodations

- **Interpreters and Auxiliary Services:** Qualified sign language interpreters who are prepared to work effectively in sensitive situations must be provided for deaf or hard-of-hearing survivors, free of charge to the survivor.²² Ensure that contracts for commonly requested accommodations, like sign language interpreters or captioners, are already established at your organization so you are prepared for time-sensitive requests. Train staff on policies to provide these services or other assistive technologies, like pocket talkers and Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) machines.
- **Written Materials:** Provide written materials using plain language and provide alternate formats (Braille, large print). Written materials in plain language can benefit a wide range of clients, such as non-native English speakers.
- **Extended Appointment Time:** Some clients, like individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities, may benefit from extended appointment times to process given information and make informed decisions.



Good Practice

[SAFE](#) in Austin, Texas has staff members who are fluent in ASL and part of the Deaf community to serve clients who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

Physical Accessibility

- **Access from Parking/Public Transit:** People with disabilities are more likely to utilize public transportation or rely on transportation from others.²³ Therefore, GBV service providers should ensure that areas leading their facilities are equipped with ramps, curb cuts, and accessible parking.²⁴
- **Service Facilities:** Make sure that pathways through all common spaces like intake areas, counseling rooms, or waiting areas are clear from barriers with floor space for a wheelchair to navigate and turn.²⁵ Ensure accessible entryways, with a 32" minimum clear opening width with the door open 90 degrees.²⁶ Restrooms should be large enough to fit mobility devices with sinks or fixtures within reach.²⁷
- **GBV Shelter Housing Units That Meet FHA Requirements:** Provide accessible unit options for disabled clients where shelters and other housing are among the services offered.



Good Practice

[The Freedom House](#) in New York City operates the first fully accessible domestic violence shelter in the U.S. with features like accessible private bathrooms and beds low to the ground for wheelchair users.

Programmatic Policies for Accessibility

- **Providing Reasonable Accommodations:** The possibilities for accommodations are vast, and the best approach is to ask patients what they need at the first point of contact. This should be done in a simple, concrete, and nonjudgmental manner. For example, GBV shelter policies that require chores or shared space rules for kitchens may need to be adapted for individuals with disabilities or people whose medication requires refrigeration.²⁸
- **Inclusive Definitions of Abuse:** Expand definitions of physical abuse to include actions like withholding mobility aids or medications and expand definitions of domestic abusers to include non-family caregivers like personal aids.
- **Budgeting:** Allocate funds for accessibility-related expenses, such as interpreters or facility modifications.²⁹
- **Support Networks:** Allow support persons (e.g., guardians or caretakers) to participate in programming when appropriate, while screening for potential abuse.
- **Staff Training:** Train all staff in disability inclusion and accessibility policies. Include screenings for reasonable accommodations during the intake process so staff are prepared to meet a disabled survivor's needs from the outset.
- **Community Partnerships:** Collaborate with local disability organizations, such as state protection and advocacy organizations or independent living centers, for guidance and to spread awareness of available GBV services for disabled survivors.

Partners

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