

5 WAYS

TO MAKE SEXUAL ASSAULT SERVICES

More Accessible Using Assistive Technology

By Cynthia Fraser

[WCSAP: People with disabilities and people who are Deaf or hard-of-hearing experience an extremely high rate of sexual assault, and often encounter additional barriers to safety and healing. As we work to support survivors through advocacy and partnerships, it is important that we increase our knowledge of the technology used by people with disabilities or who are Deaf.]



ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY HAS TRANSFORMED THE lives of many people with disabilities. Assistive devices and services are often essential to creating an accessible work or school environment. Assistive technology has quickly become a critical component in ensuring that sexual assault programs provide accessible services for victims of sexual violence. Here are five ways sexual assault programs can increase safety and accessibility for survivors by using assistive technology:

STEP 1

Educate yourself: Learn how assistive technologies benefit individuals who are Deaf or have disabilities.

There are many types of assistive technology. It can be any device, equipment, product, item, or service that maintains or increases access; decreases or removes systemic barriers; or, supports accessibility, autonomy, and self-determination for individuals with disabilities or who are Deaf.

Some people with physical or motor disabilities might want to use mobility devices, such as wheelchairs, or computer software and equipment to facilitate communication and daily living. Voice synthesizers enable someone's computer to speak what they typed; speech recognition, point-of-gaze software, and orally controlled mouthsticks support hands-free computer access. Tiny tilt-sensitive sensors worn on the body can be used to control a computer or living environment (to turn on/off air conditioning or lights).

Some individuals with cognitive disabilities might want to use communication aids that associate simple images with phrases; these can be customized with images that help a sexual assault survivor more comfortably point out the violence

they experienced. Sexual violence survivors who have memory loss due to head or brain injuries, depression, chronic pain, amnesia, sexual abuse, or other reasons, may like to use inexpensive portable memory joggers to record audio messages when certain things happen, or to remind themselves of routine tasks.

People who are Deaf or have hearing and/or speech disabilities might reach out for support using free, confidential Telecommunication Relay Services such as: Text-to-Voice T-T-Y Relay, Voice Carry Over, Hearing Carry Over, Speech-to-Speech, Shared Non-English Language, Captioned Telephone, and Video and IP- Relay Services. Some people who are Deaf or hard-of-hearing may prefer to communicate in sign language over a high-speed cable or internet-connected Video Phone, video relay service or video remote interpreter. Others may prefer to contact your agency by typing on a T-T-Y (teletypewriter or text telephone) device connecting through their phone line. If your agency has a dedicated T-T-Y line, they can directly call your agency's T-T-Y number; if not they can reach you via a relay service. Learn more at Washington Relay Services: www.washingtonrelay.com

People who are Deaf-Blind might use Braille T-T-Y devices to reach you, with or without a relay operator. Hand-held devices that serve up emails via a refreshable Braille keyboard that moves under someone's fingertips, and screen readers that speak text aloud or convert text to Braille can increase accessibility for people who are blind or have low vision. GPS Location Orientation devices that plot routes and download maps in speech or Braille enable someone who is blind to get directions read aloud as they move. Learn more at American Foundation for the Blind AT Product database: <http://www.afb.org/prodMain.asp>

Any popular technology can be considered assistive if it increases safety and accessibility for people who: are Deaf or hard-of-hearing; are blind or have low vision; have cognitive/developmental or physical/motor disabilities; have mental or psychiatric disabilities, or multiple or invisible disabilities. Sexual assault program staff should receive regular training on popular and emerging assistive technologies so they competently understand assistive devices a survivor may use or need to acquire.

STEP 2

Discuss privacy and safety risks with survivors, including how sexual violence perpetrators can misuse assistive technologies.

If a sexual violence perpetrator has physical or remote access to an assistive device or service a survivor uses, it may be risky for the survivor to use that device to seek help. Many perpetrators monitor or intercept the victim's communications to groom, coerce or stalk. Some perpetrators break and tamper with assistive devices, or purposely hurt the victim so they can't use their assistive technology device (e.g. break a victim's fingers or hand). Perpetrators misuse communication devices, such as a T-T-Y machine or Relay services, to impersonate the victim. Abusers may tamper with internet accessibility tools and devices (such as screen readers) to limit or prevent a victim's ability to search online for resources, contact services, or communicate with others. For example, they may change computer settings to shut off sound, decrease magnification, or remove other accessibility programs.

Sexual assault programs should find safe ways to strategize with survivors about how perpetrators misuse assistive technology. For example, to decrease impersonation via Relay or T-T-Y, agencies can ask the victim to create and use a code phrase that only the victim and the advocate know. Your agency may need to help a survivor get replacement devices, and/or get law enforcement to document how the devices were tampered with or destroyed. Sexual assault program staff should receive ongoing training about risks and take steps to increase the safer use of technology in their daily work.

STEP 3

Conduct accessibility assessments of your sexual assault program. Identify barriers that keep victims from fully accessing services. Commit to immediate steps, longer term activities, and a strategic plan with the goal of eliminating barriers.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandates that sexual assault programs be accessible to people with disabilities; assistive technology is necessary to achieve this. Agencies are strongly encouraged to do a comprehensive accessibility audit and identify assistive technology that can decrease barriers. For example, door bells and fire alarms can be set to vibrate or flash lights for people who are Deaf, or to make sounds and disable lights for people with epilepsy. Agencies can install and advertise a dedicated T-T-Y line, and provide both in-person and remote video interpreter service options for survivors who are Deaf or hard-of-hearing.

If your sexual assault agency has a website, posts

information online, or, offers in person computer services, it is important to provide software or assistive devices that ensure accessibility to all clients. To ensure all assistive devices can fully access your website, your website may need to be altered so users can easily increase font size, magnify a webpage, change colors, hear text descriptions of image files, and more. You can begin testing your website accessibility using a variety of free online web accessibility checkers (e.g. <http://wave.webaim.org>) or screen readers (e.g. <http://webanywhere.cs.washington.edu>). Be sure to budget for ways to maintain and further increase website accessibility, do follow-up evaluations, and then, ask people with various disabilities to test your progress.

Technology will continue to evolve; agencies should regularly ask, identify and add assistive technology that increases options for individual survivors with disabilities.

STEP 4

Support the rights of each sexual violence survivor to access the assistive technology that best meets their needs and preferences.

Publicize the ways you have become accessible and state that your program will provide accommodations upon request. Be sure to budget for those requests, but never make assumptions about what an individual will prefer or need. For example, one victim who is blind may want you to make mp3 audio files of your brochures for her iPod, another may want to hear them using a screen reader on a computer, and another may want to read them in paper or electronic Braille.

When sexual assault survivors first contact you, they may not have the assistive technology they prefer or need. Support their right to test multiple devices, to decide which devices best meet their needs, and to access funding options to purchase the necessary devices. Many assistive technology tools and web designers cost more money than your agency or survivors can afford. This is why it is critical to partner with agencies that help people access affordable assistive technology.

STEP 5

Collaborate with disability rights organizations, Independent Living Centers, Assistive Technology agencies, and other groups to ensure you can meet the needs of people who are Deaf or have disabilities.

These organizations are critical partners in your work to ensure that survivors get access to the assistive

technology they need. They should be able to help you understand and access the available public and private loans, grants and subsidies that may defray costs for one or more devices someone needs. You should work to establish and formalize relationships with these agencies, for example through cross-training of staff and volunteers.

- **Washington Assistive Technology Act Program** (<http://wataap.org/>) serves all Washington residents seeking information about assistive technology and accessible information technology. For funding help, see <http://wataap.org/funding/index.htm>
- **Washington Access Fund** (<http://www.watf.org>) promotes access to technology and economic opportunity for individuals with disabilities. They provide rentals, loans and matched savings accounts (to low income households) for assistive technology.
- **Abused Deaf Women's Advocacy Services** (<http://www.adwas.org>) provides services to Deaf and Deaf-Blind victims of sexual assault and/or domestic violence.
- **Deaf Access Washington** (<http://www.dawash.org/>) works to ensure that Deaf and Deafblind consumers have equal and appropriate access to their communities, vocational opportunities, counseling services, education and to public and private services.
- **Washington State Independent Living Council** (<http://wasilc.org/>) promotes independent living for persons with disabilities. Centers for Independent Living (CILs) are grassroots, advocacy-driven organizations run by and for people with disabilities. All Centers provide individual and systems advocacy, information and referrals, peer support, and independent living skills training.

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