

INFORMATION ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES¹

Abuse against women with disabilities is a serious problem that health care providers, disability agencies and advocates, and domestic violence professionals must acknowledge. Available information suggests that, compared to nondisabled women, women with disabilities experience higher rates of abuse with a longer duration and a larger number of perpetrators.

- ◆ Women with disabilities experience forms of abuse that are similar to nondisabled women, including physical, sexual, financial and verbal abuse.
- ◆ Women with disabilities also face unique forms of abuse, such as neglect, refusal to provide essential care, manipulation of medications, and withholding or destruction of equipment. These forms of abuse can be life threatening by causing health deterioration or leaving women unable to get away or call for help.
- ◆ Compared to nondisabled women, women with disabilities are more vulnerable to abuse by health providers and personal assistants or caregivers, who may be family members, friends or formal providers.
- ◆ Women with disabilities often face barriers to stopping or preventing abuse, including: lack of knowledge of abuse resources, social isolation; lack of emergency back-up support needed to get away from a caregiver who is the perpetrator; fear of being institutionalized or losing their children if they acknowledge being victimized, and cognitive or physical inaccessibility of domestic violence services.
- ◆ It is critical to screen women with disabilities. This requires asking questions about all of these forms of abuse and being sensitive to the unique risks and barriers women may face in managing the problem.

For example, ask the woman if anyone has refused or neglected to help her with an important personal need, such as using the bathroom, eating or drinking. If the woman says “yes”, ask if the person is someone she depends on for care and if she has a back-up caregiver. Consider what are the potential risks involved in her situation? And how are these risks linked to the disabilities experienced by the woman?

¹ Prepared by Drs. Laurie Powers, Mary Oschwald, and Mary Ann Curry, For more information, contact Laurie Powers, Ph.D., OHSU Center on Self-Determination, (503) 232-9154, ext. 104; powersl@ohsu.edu

- ◆ Many women with disabilities are afraid that if they disclose abuse, they won't be believed or that professionals will take control rather than supporting them to deal with the abuse.

It is very important to validate that the abuse is wrong and the woman shouldn't have to live with it. Reassure the woman that you will support her to decide the best way to manage the problem. Help her identify her strengths and the resources she needs.

- ◆ Creating an office environment that is accessible and presenting positive messages about disability may make women with disabilities more comfortable about disclosing abuse.

Use appropriate language and structure the physical environment so women with disabilities can use it. For example, refer to women as "physically or cognitively disabled" rather than "handicapped, wheelchair bound or retarded". Make sure that your waiting room, restroom, exam tables and diagnostic equipment are accessible, and that your forms can be understood by women with learning or cognitive disabilities.

- ◆ Many states mandate reporting some forms of abuse against women with developmental disabilities and/or dependent adults to protective services agencies. Find out your state's mandatory reporting requirements and be sure to let women know that you are a mandatory reporter.

For example, you might say, "I am required by law to report abuse against women with disabilities to the disability agency. However, if you tell me about abuse, I'll let you know if I have to report it and invite you to be involved in any way you want."

- ◆ Find out what disability and domestic violence community resources are available for referral regarding abuse.

The independent living center, Arc, developmental disability and disability and aging agencies, or crisis line in your area may be available to assist or to provide referral information.

- ◆ Finally, there is very little information available on violence against men with disabilities, however anecdotal evidence suggests that men are also vulnerable. Consider screening men with disabilities for abuse and be sensitive to difficulties they may have with disclosure.