

Perspective

Sexual Abuse of Individuals with Disabilities and Adult Advocacy Centers

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INTRODUCTION

The United States Department of Justice reports that individuals with disabilities are at disproportionately higher risk for violent victimization, abuse, and neglect, and experience triple the rate of serious violent victimization (rape, aggravated assault) compared to persons without disabilities [1]. Additionally, victims with disabilities may be reluctant to report crimes due to the belief that they will be perceived as unreliable [2]. In fact, research suggests individuals with disabilities are perceived as less credible, less reliable, and less believable than individuals without disabilities [3].

An individual's risk of victimization may be increased if the offender believes they will not be able to successfully or credibly tell anyone about the crime [4]. The nature of the individual's disability may prevent them from defending themselves, escaping from the abusive situation, or reporting the abuse; this may cause potential perpetrators to believe they can "get away with it" [5]. Finally, data suggests crimes against individuals with disabilities reported to law enforcement are less likely to lead to an investigation, arrest, prosecution, or conviction [6]. For crimes that are reported involving victims with disabilities, less than 25 percent of offenders are charged and less than one in 10 are convicted [7].

When sexual and physical abuse occurs in children with or without disabilities, the United States has a systematic structure in place (Child Advocacy Centers) to respond. Child Advocacy Centers coordinate the investigation, treatment, and prosecution of child abuse cases by utilizing multidisciplinary teams of professionals involved in child protective and victim advocacy services, law enforcement and prosecution, and physical and mental health. No such systematic structure exists for adult victims. Given the high rate of crimes committed against adults with disabilities, the underreporting of these crimes, and many crime victim organizations reporting they rarely serve victims with disabilities, systemic change is needed.

To meet this need, professionals from multiple disciplines from the state of Ohio came together to develop the Adult Advocacy Centers (AACs). The AAC's vision to serve adults

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with disabilities and older Ohioans who are alleged victims or witnesses of a crime, abuse, maltreatment, or neglect. The AACs' model is an original design that includes an innovative forensic protocol that guides professionals when interviewing adult crime victims with disabilities. This protocol, Project FIND, was created with the input and expertise of numerous stakeholders and experts. Staff at the AACs are trained in Project FIND and are experts at completing forensic interviews, meeting the needs of the individual in a holistic manner, and ensuring that the individual is the focus of the investigation and treatment plan. When opened, the AACs will be the first centers in the world to provide trauma-informed services in a setting that is equipped to provide complete accessibility to all disability types by using a multi-sensory and universal design. This special issues paper will provide a more in-depth look into historical data on crime victims with disabilities, the AACs' model, and service being developed in the state of Ohio.

DISCUSSION

Criminal Justice System and Individuals with Disabilities

Many crime victims with disabilities have never participated in the criminal justice process, including those who have been repeatedly victimized [1,6]. For individuals with disabilities, significant barriers exist that limit the investigation and prosecution of these types of criminal cases. These barriers include underreporting, lack of accessible services, significant variations in responsiveness from law enforcement and prosecutors, and the physical isolation of the victim. High rates of victimization against individuals with disabilities are exacerbated by these barriers, including, but not limited to, a fear of not being viewed as credible and communication accessibility.

Barriers to Reporting a Crime

People with disabilities report that they are afraid that they will not be believed when they report abuse [8]. While fear can keep all victims of crime from reporting and accessing victim services, for individuals with disabilities, these fears may be elevated as the individual's abuser may be their provider of

service. Individuals with disabilities also face a fear of losing their independence, housing, financial support, or services [9]. These fears that victims have about not being believed and losing needed supports and services are part of the core reasons why the AACs are imperative to the disability community.

The perception of a lack of credibility can be exacerbated when an individual with a disability has difficulty with communication. Data from the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics [1] indicate that individuals with communication disorders are disproportionately criminally victimized. Communication by people with disabilities varies substantially and research indicates that individuals who are perceived to have a restricted vocabulary are more likely to be selected as victims [4,5,10]. Identifying and providing accommodations to address the needs of crime victims with disabilities is a vital component to ensuring justice.

Accessibility

Numerous systemic barriers make addressing the needs of crime victims with disabilities particularly complex. In this context, accessibility includes physical (public transportation, wheelchair accessible buildings, and adjustable lighting), communication interpreter, braille signage, assistive technology, and large font documents), and program (access to domestic violence shelters, crisis lines, and support groups for people with disabilities). Providing accessible services and supports for crime victims with disabilities requires addressing the disconnect between disability services and victim services.

Victim services were designed to address victimization and typically do not account for the diverse and unique needs of individuals with disabilities.

Adult Advocacy Centers

Although data shows that individuals with disabilities are victimized at disproportionately higher rates, there are no current systems in place that specifically address the needs of crime victims with disabilities. To understand the current state of services for crime victims with disabilities, the AACs conducted a needs assessment in 2019. This assessment was sent to multiple organizations. The assessment focused on current services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Responses to the needs assessment indicated a lack of services and supports for crime victims with disabilities. These gaps included a lack of forensic interview training, poor linkage to prosecutors, a lack of treatment protocols, and inadequate aftercare services. The 2019 needs assessment reflected national data and indicated a need for a new approach. Without purposeful collaboration, the needs of adult victims with disabilities are left unmet. The AACs' model addresses these needs and provides the foundation to create and enhance services for adult crime victims with disabilities.

Adult Advocacy Centers' Model

The AACs' model is designed to address the unmet needs of

adults with disabilities who are alleged victims or witnesses of abuse, maltreatment, or neglect. The AACs plan to build regional centers throughout Ohio and have several mobile RV units to serve individuals in remote rural areas. The AACs will work in partnership with state, regional, and community agencies to coordinate a response that promotes the safety and well-being of individuals with disabilities that have been victims of a crime. These services will include locally supported multi-disciplinary teams, forensic interviews specifically tailored to address the needs of individuals with disabilities, safety-planning, and service coordination.

CONCLUSION

The AACs operate with the belief that every crime victim deserves the fundamental right to receive justice and comprehensive victim services. The state of Ohio is committed to working towards excellence in the field of victim services, and the AACs are the embodiment of this commitment. The AACs are dedicated to providing victim services in an equal, inclusive, and accessible manner. People with disabilities have always had a voice. We are just teaching the world different ways to listen.

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