



## Resource Sharing Project

### Rural Training & Technical Assistance

### **Finding the Path Forward: Exploring Employment Advocacy**

For survivors of sexual violence many areas of their lives will be impacted by the violence they endured. There may be consequences to physical health, mental health, romantic and familial relationships, and even employment. Sexual abuse undermines self-confidence, concentration, and energy, all of which are needed to bring your best self to work. For survivors who experienced sexual harassment or assault while at their place of employment these consequences can more directly relate to employment concerns.

The sexual assault does not need to have taken place at work or be perpetrated by a coworker for employment to be impacted. Sexual assault survivors may struggle to gain or maintain employment due to post traumatic stress disorder symptoms, court appointments, or triggers in the workspace interfering with their ability to complete tasks or attend work. The National Violence Against Women Survey found that 1 in 5 female rape survivors and 1 in 10 male rape survivors missed work because of the assault (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006).

Another study indicates that the sexual assault doesn't need to have been recent to impact the survivor's employment. Childhood sexual abuse increases the chances of diminished work performance and an excessive number of days absent from work. (Anda et al., 2004). In addition to PTSD symptoms, adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse may experience long term health consequences to the abuse which may impact employment.

Employment advocacy is a specific form of advocacy which addresses the employment needs of sexual assault survivors. This form of advocacy can be helpful for survivors who are interested in exploring accommodations or adjustments to their current employment or workload, new employment opportunities, conversations with employers about victimization and its impact on employment, and pursuing action against an employer

## **The Advocate's Role**

The advocate's role in employment advocacy is one of exploration, support, and creativity. Our role is to collaborate with the survivor to discuss and discover the path forward. The advocacy we provide starts with deep conversations with the survivor to explore the challenges of the current employment situation, the realities of their life, and hopes for the future. As you and the survivor discuss and consider the steps they would like to take be aware that this is the most important service you can provide. Providing information about what they can legally ask for from an employer in your state/territory/tribe is an important and necessary step to inform the decisions they make. Holding space for the survivor to explore their feelings and sharing relevant options is invaluable support. In our rush to fix discomfort, it is easy to forget the importance of this work. It may be helpful to pause and reflect on the work you've done together so far before moving into action.



In addition to providing information and space to deliberate, our role as advocates is to offer options moving forward. Some options include:

- Assisting the survivor in determining what changes they need from their current employment and helping them decide how they want to ask for those changes.
- Conducting role-play conversations with the survivor so they can practice asking for the changes they need, responding to an annual review or an anticipated conversation with an employer, or interview.
- Offering the 24-hour crisis and support line for the survivor to access after a hard conversation with an employer or a triggering experience at work.

- Providing support, information, and referrals for survivors seeking action against their employer for sexual harassment or wrongful termination.
- Advocating with the employer on behalf of the survivor (with their expressed consent and a waiver of confidentiality) by providing education about sexual violence and the short and long term symptoms of trauma.
- Providing referrals to community supports that can assist the survivor in maintaining or obtaining employment, such as an organization that can provide clothing for interviews or job training centers.

### **Adjustments to Schedule or Workload**

For many sexual assault survivors, a simple change in schedule or workload can help them successfully maintain employment. In some circumstances the survivor may decide to inform the employer of the assault, but it is possible to ask for adjustments without disclosing their sexual abuse history. Explore with the survivor if this is necessary and help brainstorm ways to have the conversation while leaving out the assault, if that is the survivor's preference. The adjustments will be influenced by the trauma experienced and the specific triggers of the survivor. Below are some of the adjustments sexual assault survivors may benefit from:

- Changes to or flexibility in a work schedule to accommodate therapy, advocacy appointments, court appointments, or specific forms of self-care
- Change the work schedule to only days or only nights
- Make changes to an on-call schedule
- Work part time for a period of time
- Put a project or task on the backburner temporarily or give the project or task to another employee
- Put work travel on hold or make adjustments to work travel
- Be exempt from company-wide meetings or one-on-one supervision
- Be assigned a new supervisor
- Transfer to a different position or department within the company or organization or transfer to a different store in the franchise

## **Rearrange or Change Workspace**

Some sexual assault survivors will find that changes to the workspace environment will alleviate anxieties around work. Some changes are simple enough that the survivor will be able to implement themselves, other changes will require some coordination with the company or organization. Below are some of the changes sexual assault survivors may benefit from:

- Change the layout of a cubicle or office space so as to not have their back to the door
- Move cubicles or to an office space in a less busy or more trafficked part of the building
- Work from home permanently or temporarily
- Ask for a parking space closer to the door
- Work in the “back” of the store or not with customers
- Be allowed to listen to headphones or other solutions to cut down on noise triggers
- Make changes to smells that may be triggering such as using different cleaning products
- Have a coworker or security guard escort between the parking area/entrance and workspace



## **Search for Employment**

For some survivors, adjustments in schedule and changes in workspace won't be helpful or aren't possible. Other survivors find our services only after they have already lost their job because of how the trauma impacted their life. In these cases our advocacy can be focused on helping the survivor find employment. Below are some ways to help sexual assault survivors search and obtain new employment:

- Proactively build relationships with and educate employers in your rural community about sexual violence
- Maintain updated referral lists of programs that offer skill-building or job-training classes such as computer classes
- Coordinate with local colleges and technical schools that offer advanced job training
- Assist survivors in preparing for job interviews
- Conduct role-play conversations with survivors to practice explaining past employment experiences or possible negative work references

## **Pursue Action Against the Employer or Employee**

For survivors who have experienced sexual assault or harassment while at work, pursuing action against the employer or an employee is an option. Pursuing legal action could also be in response to wrongful termination or improper discipline as retaliation for reporting the assault or harassment. Below are some ways to help sexual assault survivors pursue action against their employer or a fellow employee:

- Assist survivors in reviewing and navigating workplace employment policies
- Share referrals for local attorneys and legal assistance
- Conduct role-play conversations with survivors to explore how to share experiences of sexual assault or harassment with employers and HR departments
- Explore pursuing criminal and civil action, including a no contact order





*This publication was prepared by Leah Green, RSP Rural TA Specialist, with input from many Rural Grantees. For more information, contact [leah@iowacasa.org](mailto:leah@iowacasa.org) or visit [www.resourcesharingproject.org/rural-training-and-technical-assistance](http://www.resourcesharingproject.org/rural-training-and-technical-assistance).*

### **References**

- Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (2006). Extent, nature, and consequence of rape victimization: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey (NCJ 210346). Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/210346.pdf>
- Anda, R. F., Fleisher, V. I., Felitti, V. J., Edwards, V. J., Whitfield, C. L., Dube, S. R., & Williamson, D. F. (2004). Childhood abuse, household dysfunction, and indicators of impaired worker performance in adulthood. *The Permanente Journal*, 8(1), 30-38. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4690705/>

*This project was supported by Grant No. 2015-TA-AX-K018 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.*