



Resource Sharing Project

Rural Training & Technical Assistance

Eight Step Advocacy Plan for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Survivors of Sexual Assault

A Guide for Rural Dual/Multi-Service Advocates

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Those living in rural communities already know the positives—a shared sense of community, large open landscapes, lower cost of living—but rural living can also be accompanied by a sense of isolation. This isolation is compounded when an individual is Deaf or hard of hearing. An estimated 48 million Americans have experienced some degree of hearing loss (Lin, Niparko, & Ferrucci, 2011). Approximately 77% of



Deaf individuals are born into hearing families and 72.1% of those families do not sign (Gallaudet, 2013) which further compounds isolation.

Deaf or hard of hearing individuals experience greater rates of sexual violence than hearing individuals. Recent data indicates that Deaf and hard of hearing individuals are 1.5 times more likely to be victims of relationship violence, sexual harassment, sexual assault, psychological abuse and physical abuse, in their lifetimes (Anderson & Leigh, 2011).

This guide is intended for rural sexual assault advocates searching for concrete information on how to work with Deaf and hard of hearing sexual assault survivors. Deaf survivors of sexual assault face numerous obstacles, such as isolation, stereotyping, and lack of anonymity in accessing all kinds of services in rural communities. The steps in this guide will direct you towards providing Deaf sexual assault survivors with trauma-informed and culturally appropriate services, assist you in identifying accommodations in services and changes in technology, and encourage you to reach out to Deaf sexual assault survivors in your community.

1. Learn About Deaf Culture

To effectively and appropriately communicate with Deaf sexual assault survivors it is necessary to understand Deaf Culture. The term “*deaf*” refers to an individual who has experienced profound hearing loss. However when the “d” is capitalized it denotes individuals who are members of the Deaf community and who participate in Deaf culture. *Deaf culture* is defined as a celebration of the shared community, customs, values, history, and language of being Deaf. Deaf

individuals do not think of themselves as handicapped, disabled, or having lost the ability to hear, but instead having gained Deafness. Some individuals who culturally identify as Deaf have some ability to hear. Some have *cochlear implants*, which are a surgically implanted electronic device which, in combination with rehabilitation, can partially restore hearing in individuals who have severe hearing loss.



Deaf and hard of hearing individuals are 1.5 times more likely to be victims of sexual assault in their lifetimes...

Other individuals may identify as *hard of hearing*, meaning they have experienced some degree of hearing loss, most often over the course of a lifetime, but may not consider themselves Deaf.

For even more information on values and behavior norms in the Deaf community read Vera Institute of Justice's *Culture Language, and Access: Key Considerations for Sexual Violence*.

It is best practice to respect how survivors define their abilities and culture. In rural areas, where the Deaf population is smaller, it may be less likely that individuals have formed a Deaf community and identify as culturally Deaf. However, with increased access to the internet, Deaf individuals have been able to form communities online and explore together their history and cultural identity.

Much of Deaf culture is centered on American Sign Language (ASL), however not all individuals who identify as Deaf know or use ASL. When Deaf individuals grow up in a hearing household, they are not always provided access to learning ASL and instead learn to communicate in other ways. ASL is a visual language made up of hand and arm movements around the upper body. Instead of using vocal inflection and volume to express emotion, ASL utilizes speed and energy of arm and hand movements as well as animated facial expressions. For example, if a Deaf survivor were agitated they would have an intense facial expression and their hand and arm movements would speed up. It is important to understand that ASL is not a word-for-word translation of English, but instead a complete and separate language with different word orders and grammar than English. For Deaf survivors, as with all survivors who do not speak English, it is best to provide services in their native language or use an interpreter. For more information about Deaf culture, [click here](#) or visit the resource page at the end of this publication.

A child of a Deaf adult (CoDA) is a term used to refer to individuals who are hearing and raised in a Deaf household. Children or siblings of Deaf people often

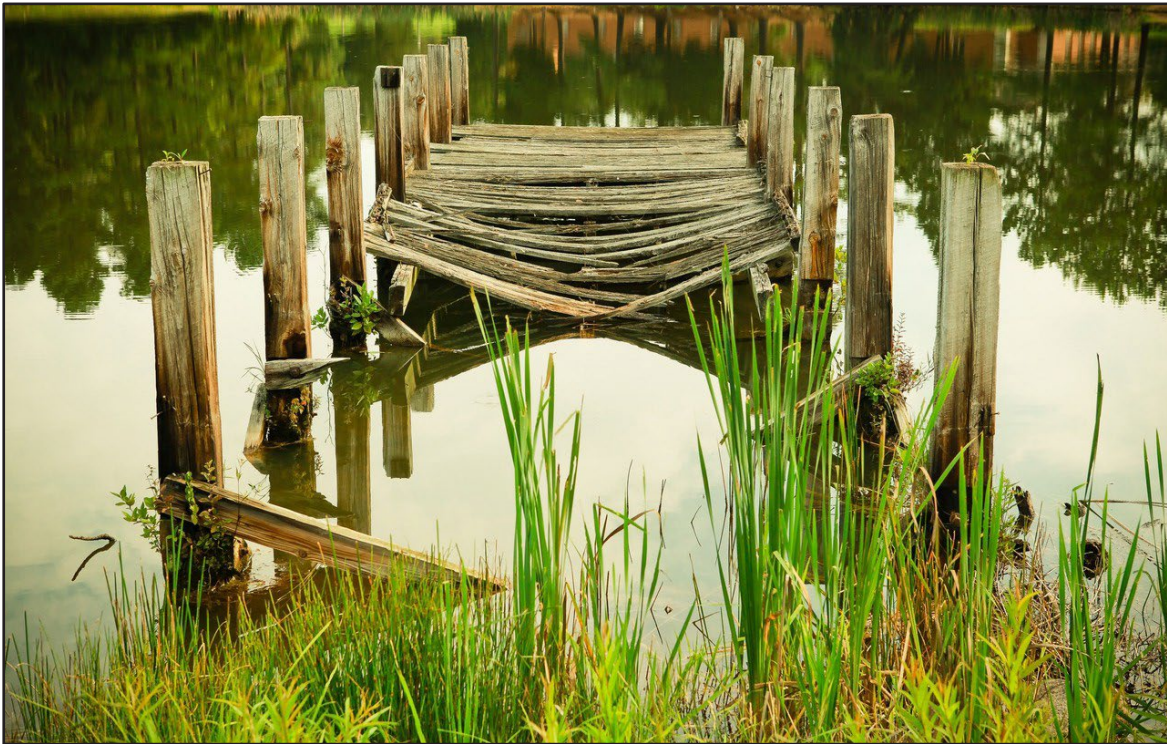
have a unique understanding of Deaf culture but are not trained interpreters. It is never appropriate to ask a family member to interpret for a survivor. Friends and family members are too close to the situation to be relied upon as objective and accurate interpreters.

Historically the Deaf community has faced a number of barriers in seeking common and necessary community services. A barrier that is often faced is *audism*, which is discrimination based on a person's ability to hear. As rural advocates, our outreach and services should attempt to limit audism and to heal the trauma that has already been experienced at the hands of others in the hearing world. For more information about audism, [click here](#) or visit the resource page.

2. Collaborate with Deaf Specific Victim Service Providers

The first step in assisting Deaf and hard of hearing sexual assault survivors in our communities is to identify Deaf-specific service providers, such as Deaf clubs and social service agencies that focus on Deaf issues, who can assist our agencies in expanding our knowledge of Deaf culture and local resources. We can work together with such agencies to provide good services to survivors. While they are able to assist in providing training to your agency or other types of assistance to the survivor, your agency provides them a strong foundational training on sexual violence, trauma, and healthy sexuality. Any Deaf-specific organization should also be able to assist your agency in recruiting Deaf individuals to serve as board members, volunteers, and staff members.

Across the country, there are some Deaf- specific domestic violence/sexual assault advocacy programs. For a list of Deaf victim service providers, [click here](#) or visit the resource page. If one of these service providers is in your community or state, the best practice for supporting Deaf sexual assault survivors is to collaborate with the Deaf-specific sexual assault program.



There are several other ways that Deaf- specific sexual assault programs could collaborate with rural mainstream programs in being well-prepared for serving Deaf sexual assault survivors. They can provide training and technical assistance to direct service staff members and leadership about Deaf culture, communication, and accommodations. Deaf- specific victim service providers may also be able to assist your center in many ways:

- choosing appropriate communication technologies
- assessing accessibility of all services
- finding, screening, and training interpreters
- planning and conducting outreach to the Deaf community
- explaining Deaf culture to community systems such as DHS or law enforcement
- creating videos of Deaf advocates interpreting documents

Contact the program closest to you to find out more about how they may be able to help your agency and how you can support them in return.

The Deaf community within any rural community is very small, and thus everyone usually knows everyone. Some Deaf survivors may prefer to get services from a Deaf-specific advocacy program that is in a different part of the state, simply to have more privacy and confidentiality. You may want to talk to the nearest Deaf-specific advocacy program to ask how large their service area is and whether they can provide any services outside of their area.

We can partner with Deaf-specific advocates when we provide direct services. Working with a Deaf advocate allows the survivor access to someone who can speak freely about sexual abuse, communicate directly in their chosen language, and who understands the cultural context. When mainstream sexual assault agencies work together with Deaf specific victim service providers, it shows survivors that they have a team behind them to help facilitate healing.

3. Seek Out New Technology

Deaf individuals use technology on a daily basis to communicate with friends, family, coworkers, and many others in the community, including service providers. The next step in making our services more accessible to Deaf sexual violence survivors is to familiarize ourselves with the technology that makes communication feasible. One of the most common ways Deaf individuals communicate is through a video phone. A video phone is a telephone with a video display that makes it possible for one or more individuals to communicate using ASL or another visual language. This is an important option for communication since many Deaf individuals use ASL as their primary or only language. A video phone can be used to call another video phone or to call a Video Relay Service (VRS). VRS is a communication service in which a third party operator signs over a video phone to the Deaf person and is able to speak to the hearing person. When a survivor accesses your agency hotline using a VRS the operator will sign in real time so there will be no lag time when communicating. For more information about Video Relay Services, [click here](#) or visit the resource page.

Another type of relay service we may encounter is a Telephone Relay Service (TRS). TRS utilizes a third party operator to assist in communication for individuals who have hearing or speech disabilities. Typically, the operator reads text communications from the Deaf individual and then speaks on behalf of the sender. It is important to note that TRS is not an interpretation service; instead, operators simply relay messages over the phone line. When a survivor accesses your agency hotline using TRS the operator will need to read the text prior to relay the message so there will be a small lag time when communicating. For

more information about Telephone Relay Services, [click here](#) or visit the resource page.

When a Deaf individual utilizes a TRS, they may be using a Text Telephone (TTY), which is also sometimes referred to as a Telecommunication Device for the Deaf (TDD).

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TTY's are often used in conjunction with a TRS but are also able to connect with other TTY machines, such as one in an advocate's office, to send messages back and forth. A TTY connects to a telephone line and has a keyboard with a screen for the user to type and read messages from the sender. With the emergence of VRS and TRS technology, the TTY is no longer the most widely used technology in the Deaf community. It is also important to note that it does require either the survivor to know English or the advocate to know written ASL. However, for some survivors, especially those in rural areas where the internet is not always easily accessible, this may be the only form of communication available. Thus, it is important to have this technology in our agencies and be knowledgeable about how to utilize it.

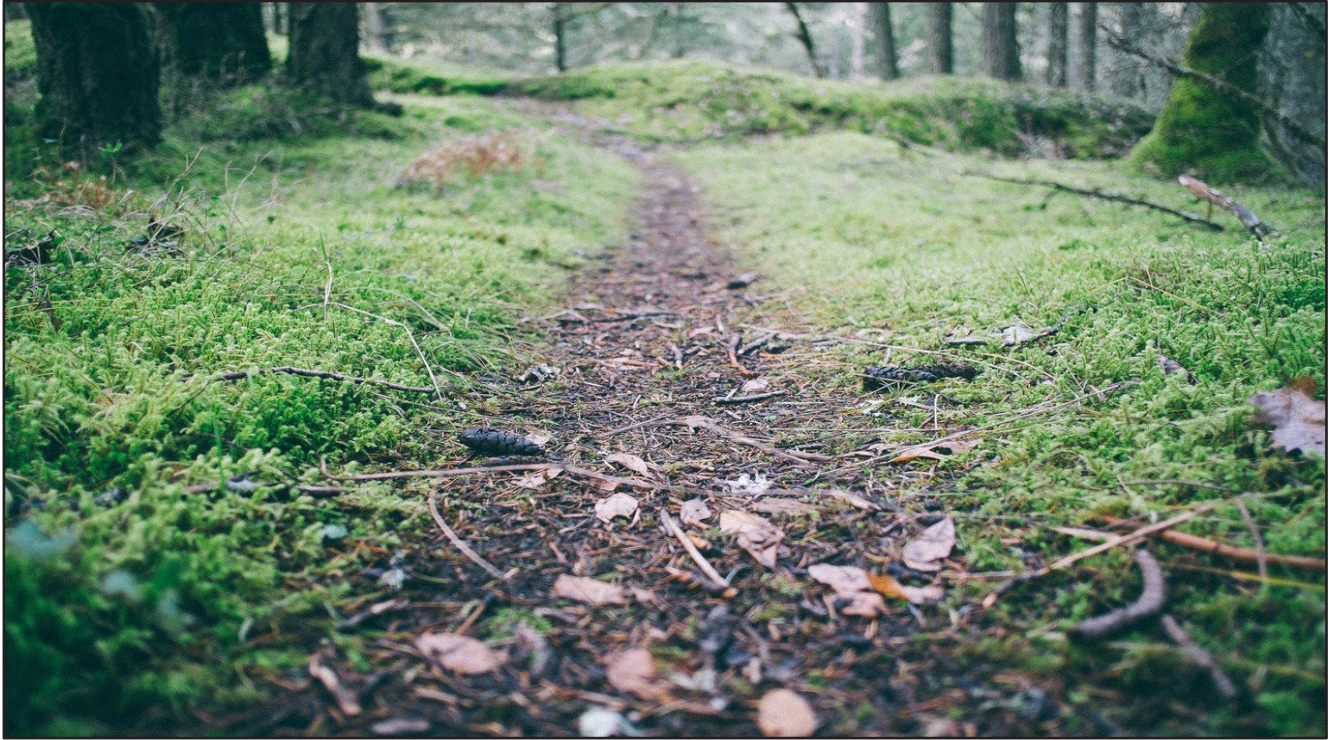
This device does require an open landline and should be made available at all times for Deaf survivors to access the hotline or business line. More information about how to use a TTY can be found by [clicking here](#), or by visiting the resource page.

It is essential to build a line in the budget to be able to purchase these technologies and pay for interpretation services in order to serve all sexual assault survivors in rural communities. After purchasing the technology, we must provide an initial training for all staff members and volunteers, and schedule refresher trainings periodically. Partnering with a Deaf-specific community service provider, such as an interpretation service, can help staff become more familiar with the technologies through testing the systems or doing practice calls.

4. Find Interpreters

Providing services in a survivor's native language supports their healing and promotes full communication. For many in the Deaf community, the only form of communication with a hearing individual is not speech reading or writing in English but using an interpreter. For this reason, we should always utilize an interpreter unless and until the survivor says otherwise.

The first step in finding qualified interpreters is asking the Deaf survivor we are serving for their suggestions or preferred interpreters. It may also be helpful to ask about interpreters they have not liked working with as well. There are few interpreters in rural communities, and it's likely the survivor has met many, if not all, of them.



When searching for qualified interpreters in your area, keep in mind that some interpreters specialize in a particular kind of interpretation so it is important to ask them about specialty when first hiring an interpreter. If an interpreter indicates they are not the most appropriate interpreter for that survivor or situation, ask if they have a recommendation for a more qualified interpreter.

In your search for interpreters, you may come across uncertified interpreters; however, it is best practice to hire certified interpreters. Certified interpreters receive training on a variety of topics including Deaf and hearing culture, boundaries and professional ethics, confidentiality, code of professional conduct, and HIPAA. Certified interpreters are neutral parties that are held to high standards of confidentiality so survivors can feel more comfortable divulging traumatic experiences. Certified interpreters specialize in different types of interpretation. For more information on certified interpreters, [click here](#) or visit the [resource page](#).

A Certified Sign Language Interpreter is a hearing individual who has been specially licensed and trained to facilitate communication between those who use sign language and those who do not. Sign Language Interpreters are qualified to use fingerspelling, spelling out each word using individual letters, and ASL to communicate. There are several kinds of sign language interpreters that we may need to hire when working with Deaf sexual assault survivors.

For Deaf or hard of hearing individuals who do not use ASL, an Oral Interpreter is often the kind of interpreter they need. Certified Oral Interpreters are specially

licensed and trained to articulate speech silently, sometimes through the use of body language or gestures.

The least common, but sometimes most helpful, interpreter is a Deaf Interpreter. A Certified Deaf Interpreter is a Deaf individual who has been specially licensed and trained to provide interpreting and translation services in ASL and other visual communication forms. A Deaf Interpreter is able to provide the context of linguistic, cultural, and life experiences that provide for a more nuanced understanding. Deaf Interpreters are often used in tandem with hearing interpreters.

For other specific needs, there are even more types of interpreters, so asking the survivor which kind of interpreter they need or if they have a certain interpreter they prefer is always best. As with services to any sexual assault survivor, it is always best practice to communicate in their chosen or preferred language. For more information on finding interpreters, [click here](#) or visit the [resource page](#).

Prior to hiring an interpreter, find out if they have received any training about trauma and sexual assault. As we are building relationships with the Deaf community and doing outreach, we can offer to train interpreters on dynamics of sexual violence, effects of trauma, specific lingo or acronyms agencies use when speaking with survivors (such as SART), and provide more information about the different settings in which they may be interpreting, such as medical exams or support groups. Training interpretation services on these topics will

also help to maintain the relationships we have forged with interpreters by providing them an outlet to discuss possible triggering information and self-care.

“ When arranging for an interpreter, be as clear as you can about the interpretation needs of the survivor.

If you are unfamiliar with hiring and working with visual language interpreters, a few basic tips may help. It may be helpful to meet with the interpreter before your advocacy appointment with the survivor to explain any medical and legal terms or acronyms. Show the interpreter any written documents that will be part of your conversation so they can familiarize themselves with the materials that will be discussed.

When arranging for an interpreter, be as clear as you can about the interpretation needs of the survivor. For example, letting the interpreter know that the survivor is Deaf Blind—meaning they have experienced some degree of both hearing and vision loss—lets the interpreter know that the survivor will touch their hands as they sign. Providing this kind of information ahead of time will be appreciated by the interpretation service and will strengthen your advocacy services to the survivor.

Always inform the interpreter if the appointment may take several hours as they will need to bring a second interpreter. Generally if an appointment will be

longer than an hour and a half it is necessary to ask for a second interpreter. In rural areas where it is difficult to even find one qualified interpreter it may be possible to simply schedule breaks every hour and a half. For more information on how to use an interpreter, [click here](#) or visit the resource page.

It is imperative to build a line in the budget to pay for interpretation services in order to serve all sexual assault survivors in rural communities. Many grant sources, such as the Office on Violence against Women, allow or encourage programs to include interpretation in their budget. Building this essential service into our budgets makes survivors feel that we truly care about their communication needs and further builds trust.



When creating welcoming spaces, our agencies should consider physical accessibility for all sexual assault survivors, including Deaf survivors.

5. Provide Outreach

Now that our agencies are knowledgeable about Deaf culture and have the capacity to serve Deaf sexual violence survivors, we can do intentional outreach to the Deaf community. For Deaf sexual violence survivors, often the first barrier to seeking services is learning that our advocacy services exist and are open, welcome, and accessible to all survivors. We can help overcome this barrier by doing outreach specifically to the Deaf community: individuals who are Deaf,

their social support systems, and other service providers. In rural areas where the Deaf community may be difficult to find, it is especially helpful to partner with a Deaf-specific service provider, such as an interpretation service, for cross training about Deaf culture, communication, and sexual assault. Partnerships like this show a commitment to providing culturally relevant and affirming services to the Deaf community in your rural area as well as provide an opportunity to build a relationship with a trusted service provider in the Deaf community.

In creating outreach materials, list the ways your agency is able to communicate with sexual assault survivors who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Note that the agency will provide an interpreter free of charge and include your TTY or video phone number so survivors know how to access the hotline and services.

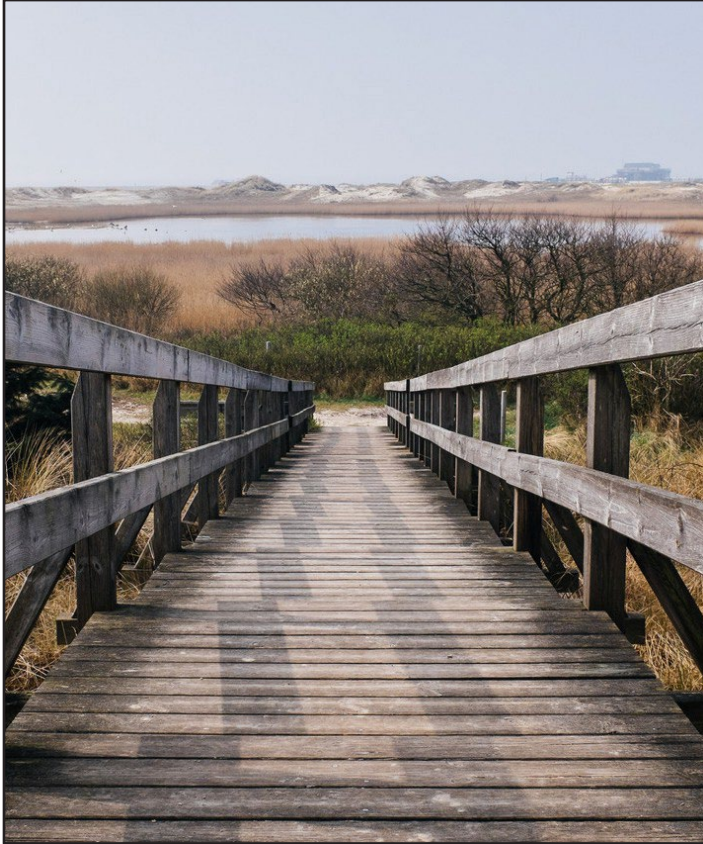
Another crucial component in providing outreach to the Deaf community is providing education about healthy sexuality, sexual violence, and victims' rights in ASL. There is a considerable gap in information that Deaf or hard of hearing individuals receive about sexuality, sex, and sexual violence. Hearing individuals receive information about sex and sexuality from many different sources including television, movies, and school. Many of these opportunities are not as easily available to Deaf individuals and it is not uncommon for Deaf individuals to not know the English or ASL word for "rape," "sexual assault," or "sexuality." Sexual assault advocacy programs can position themselves as a valuable resource to a rural community by providing information about sexual violence to all community members, including those in the Deaf community.

6. Create a Welcoming Space

When creating welcoming spaces, our agencies should consider physical accessibility for all sexual assault survivors, including Deaf survivors. Office spaces should not be so dim that the individual has a difficult time seeing your face, but also avoid seating the individual so that they need to look into bright lighting to see you (for example, you should not sit in front of a window). It can also be helpful to meet in a space with few visual distractions, such as other people walking in and out of the room or a television. Being approximately three feet apart is an optimal amount of space to be able to view any hand or arm movements as well as to be able to speech read. Individuals who use hearing devices often hear better out of one ear than the other so it is good practice to speak towards the ear with the hearing device when meeting individually, attending court proceedings, or participating in support group. An individual who is hard of hearing may require some of the same or similar accommodations as someone who identifies as Deaf, such as an interpreter, or very few accommodations, such as a portable amplifier during a support group. It is important to ask the individual what accommodations they need in order to communicate best.

Many advocacy programs, especially dual/ multi-service advocacy agencies with shelters, have audio intercom systems at the front door that would not be easily accessible by Deaf individuals. Having easy physical access to the building is an important way to assure sexual violence survivors that they are welcome. For comfort and safety reasons, it is necessary to have fire alarms and doorknockers

that have flashing lights for Deaf individuals to be made aware of their surroundings.



Providing televisions that have closed captioning, a visual baby cry signaler, and a flashing alarm clock are some of the other ways that programs can increase accessibility for Deaf survivors in shelter spaces.

7. Practice New Ways of Sharing Information

There are several factors that go into communicating including eye contact, body language and facial expression, physical contact, and social connection. ASL, as a visual language, relies heavily on eye contact to convey interest and understanding. Deaf survivors may make intense eye contact that some might

perceive as staring, but this simply means the survivor is listening. When someone looks away or doesn't engage in eye contact, it can be perceived as being uninterested and is considered rude. Deaf individuals listen with their eyes, so when completing tasks such as filling out paperwork or showing parts of an evidence collection kit, it is best to give the survivor time to look at the form or object and only begin speaking once you have made eye contact. The survivor may nod during a conversation but this should not be taken as a sign of agreement or comprehension but simply as being engaged in the conversation. Best practice would be to ask the survivor if they understood or to ask a direct question.

Advocates know that tone of voice, body language, and other nonverbal communications are important to conveying our nonjudgmental support. With Deaf and hard of hearing survivors, nonverbal communication is of even greater importance. Communication through ASL or other visual methods relies heavily on facial expression and body language, which often makes Deaf individuals very adept at reading mood and feeling.

““ When communicating through an interpreter, talk with the Deaf survivor as we would with any other survivor.

When conversing with a Deaf sexual assault survivor we should be aware of our own nonverbal communication, such as crossing our arms or making eye contact.

Physical contact during conversations is common for Deaf individuals. It is normally appropriate to tap a shoulder to get someone's attention. However, knocking on the table, stomping on the floor, waving from an appropriate distance, or flickering the light may be more appropriate with survivors because they do not involve touching. A Deaf sexual assault survivor may hug in greeting or as a way to say goodbye, touch to get your attention, or touch as a way to show affection or trust. It is important for advocates to always respect physical boundaries and ask the survivor what form of physical contact they prefer.

Deaf culture emphasizes collectivism and unity, making the bonds in the community particularly strong. It is not unusual for Deaf survivors to come to appointments with friends or members of their family. For this reason it is important to offer services to significant others as well as outreach and education to the entire community. While it's important to respect and engage all the support people a survivor has, it is also important to discuss the consequences to confidentiality of having a support person present during communications with an advocate. Placing a strong value in community means that individuals, once they have included us in their support system, may offer us great affection and lengthy greetings and goodbyes.

When communicating through an interpreter, talk with the Deaf survivor as we would with any other survivor. While the survivor is speaking it may be tempting

to look at the interpreter, but it is important to maintain eye contact with the survivor. Deaf individuals are frequently silenced by the hearing world so it becomes even more important to demonstrate compassion and understanding. The interpreter's task is to provide a voice to the survivor and to communicate all sounds that a hearing survivor might hear. This process takes time so always allow plenty of time when scheduling an appointment.

As you build a relationship with the survivor, you may have questions about Deafness or Deaf culture. If these arise, make sure to ask the question to the survivor and not to the interpreter. In some situations, it may be unavoidable to ask the interpreter a question, so it is best to ask the survivor's permission first. Often Deaf individuals are talked over or talked about and not given the respect of being spoken to directly. We show respect and practice trauma-informed care by always speaking directly to the survivor. We also practice the trauma-informed principles of supporting choice and empowering survivors by asking the survivor for feedback about your communication, including how they feel about the interpreter. It would not be appropriate to use the same interpreter to ask for this feedback.

8. Communicate with Survivors!

There are many different ways that Deaf individuals communicate and therefore it is necessary to ask about preferences when we begin working with someone. Asking a survivor their preferred communication method shows the survivor that we respect them, we understand the diversity of needs of the Deaf community,

and are committed to more accurate communication for everyone. Deaf survivors may prefer to use an interpreter (with ASL or signed English), write back and forth, or lip-read.

Some Deaf sexual assault survivors may be comfortable using their voice to communicate aloud, however many are not. This preference should be respected although it may require some effort to understand a Deaf accent. If you are unsure if you understood the survivor correctly, make sure to clarify before moving on. The longer you work with a survivor the more easily the two of you will be able to communicate and understand each other.

Other Deaf survivors may prefer to simply write back and forth. This can only be done effectively when the survivor is fluent in English and this is their preferred method of communication. The survivor may prefer paper and a pen, a white board, using a computer keyboard to type emails or instant messages, or a combination of several methods.

It is often assumed that lip-reading or speech reading is the easiest form of communication for Deaf individuals. Some Deaf individuals do prefer this form of communication but it is quite difficult and takes a lot of concentration even under ideal conditions. If a survivor chooses speech reading as their preferred method of communication, make sure to speak at a normal rate, do not block or cover your mouth, and provide a private space with proper light and few visual distractions. When Deaf individuals prefer to speech read that should be respected, but never expected.

The methods we use will vary based on the service—a survivor may be comfortable lip-reading and speaking in individual appointments but will need an interpreter to fully participate in support group. As we provide medical and legal advocacy, we can also check in with survivors about what communication methods they would like to request from systems professionals. While it is not the advocate’s role to arrange communication for other professionals, it is our role to help survivors. We may need to assist the survivor in requesting an interpreter during a medical exam, gently remind other service providers to speak directly to the survivor, or just check in occasionally about their communication needs.

Diversity is what makes our rural communities vibrant, exciting, and sometimes challenging. Providing high-quality comprehensive sexual assault services means serving the entire array of survivors in our rural communities. Deaf and hard of hearing sexual violence survivors live in our rural communities and are being affected by sexual violence in disproportionate numbers. In order to assist Deaf sexual assault survivors the best we can, we need to acknowledge the barriers they face in seeking services, make appropriate accommodations in services to help overcome these barriers, and work in together with Deaf-specific victim service providers. Supporting the diverse array of survivors in our rural communities is a task that promotes healing and positively impacts our whole community.

References

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Gallaudet Research Institution. (2013). Regional and National Summary Report of Data from the 2011-12 Annual Survey of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children and Youth. Retrieved from:
http://research.gallaudet.edu/Demographics/2012_National_Summary.pdf

Lin, F R., Niparko, J. K., & Ferrucci, L. (2011). Hearing Loss Prevalence in the United States. *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 171 (20), 1851-1853.

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Resources

Justice for Deaf

Victims

<https://www.facebook.com/JDVNC>

National Association of the
Deaf www.nad.org

Important Deaf Women in History

www.vawnet.org/summary.php?doc_id=1986&find_type=web_sum_TT

Interacting with Deaf Individuals Tip
Sheet

www.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/DeafAtoZ.pdf

When Deaf and Hearing Meet Workbook

www.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/WhenDeafHearingMeet.pdf

Unique Issues Faced by Deaf Victims of Sexual Assault

www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/jr000257f.pdf

Violence in the Lives of Deaf and
Hard of Hearing

www.vawnet.org/special-collections/Deaf.php

Budgeting for Accommodations

www.vera.org/pubs/accessible-events-disabilities-deaf-budgeting-access-tip-sheet

List of Deaf Victim Service Providers

www.vawnet.org/special-collections/Deaf.php#1000

Information on Video

Relay Services

www.fcc.gov/guides/video-relay-services

Telephone Relay Services

www.fcc.gov/guides/telecommunications-relay-service-trs

Information about TTY's

www2.illinois.gov/idhhc/Documents/IDHHC%20Publications/tty.pdf

Information on Deaf Culture

www.deafculture.com/definitions

Resources (cont.)

Audism

libguides.gallaudet.edu/content.php?pid=114455&sid=989379

Code of Ethics for Certified
Interpreters

www.rid.org/ethics/code-of-professional-conduct

A Source for Certified Interpreters

myaccount.rid.org/Public/Search/Interpreter.aspx

Tips on Working with an Interpreter

www.eatoninterpreting.com/resources/tips-for-using-sign-language-interpreters



The Resource Sharing Project (RSP) was created to help state sexual assault coalitions across the country access the resources they need in order to develop and thrive as they work to support survivors and end sexual assault. For more information, visit www.resource-sharingproject.org.