



ADDRESSING HARASSMENT ON THE HELPLINE

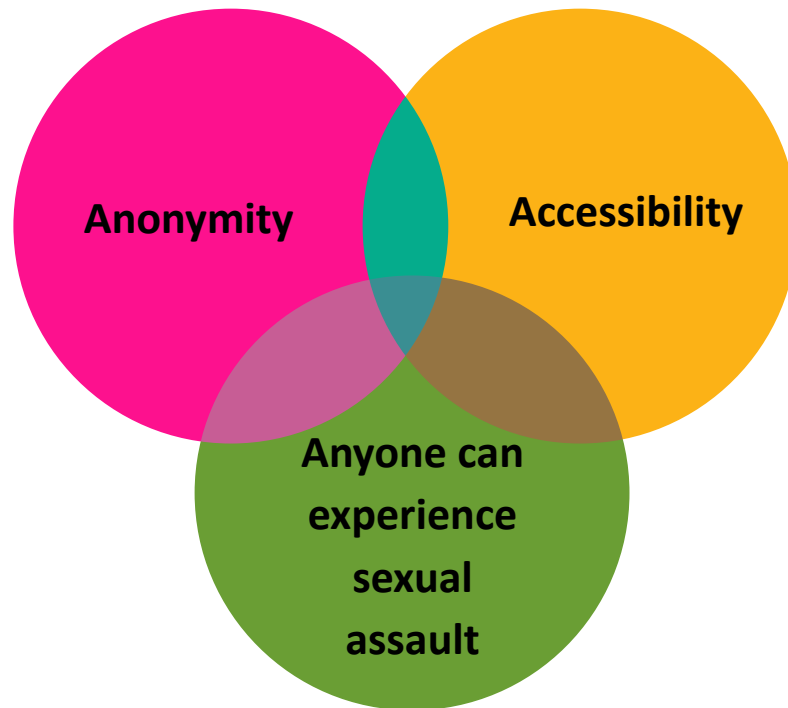
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Coalitions often reach out to ask RSP how to help advocacy programs address harassment on their helplines or social media direct messages. Helplines are one of the easiest services for sexual assault survivors to use because they are available at all hours and don't require prior planning or approval. Keeping them accessible by addressing harassment on the line is one way that sexual assault coalitions can help ensure services are available for all sexual assault survivors. This quick guide provides an overview of different technical assistance strategies coalitions can use to support helpline workers and keep sexual assault services accessible.

What is so tricky about harassment on the helpline?

Addressing harassment on the helpline is tricky because people who are harassing advocates today may have a legitimate reason to call or reach out later. People don't have to give their legal name so an advocate on the line might not have any identifying information about the person. People harassing helpline workers may be spoofing the number they're calling from, so blocking the specific phone number may not stop the problem. There may be a coordinated campaign where different people work together to make wait times extraordinarily long. People who use

the helpline to harass advocates may share a phone number with others who might need or want to call the helpline. And phone number ownership frequently changes.



What can advocates and technical assistance providers do?

Explore what advocates mean by harassment.

Specific examples of helpline harassment can help coalition TA providers support advocates who reach out. This can help coalition staff understand if what is happening truly is harassment or not. For example, many advocates work at dual domestic violence and sexual assault programs and their training may focus primarily on domestic violence callers. They may not



be as used to hearing graphic details about sexual assault and may feel uncomfortable listening to these stories.

Some examples that advocates have called helpline harassment, but may not be harassment include:

- » Angry survivors who are having a hard time getting their needs met calling to complain until somebody does something to make it right
- » Survivors calling multiple times with slightly different stories each time who may be trying to figure out what to say to access the resources they need
- » Survivors sharing graphic or explicit stories to about their sexual abuse or assault
- » Male survivors, and people with deeper voices, calling the line to find out if they were assaulted and qualify for help
- » Survivors who swear and yell, generally
- » Survivors who experience hallucinations, paranoia, or who are high on drugs
- » Survivors who breathe heavily (for medical or other reasons) but who are not calling for sexual gratification

Common examples of helpline harassment can include:

- » People targeting the hotline with misogynistic speech because they are against the program's mission to help women, or because of a political stance expressed by the program



- » People fetishizing or soliciting sex with women of color or LGBTQ people
- » People calling the line for sexual gratification

Even though some of these behaviors may not constitute harassment, if an advocate reaches out for help dealing with the discomfort these kinds of calls raise, it's still important to take the time to respond to their concerns with support and technical assistance. Additional support in the form of scheduled debriefs, further training on self-soothing and grounding activities, and mapping out choice points may be useful in these instances.

Identify the impact that harassment has on helpline workers and survivors' access to services.

Which responses will be useful or applicable in any given scenario depends on what impact the harassment has.

Potential impacts of harassment advocates may want help to address include:

- » The number and frequency of calls prohibit other survivors from connecting with advocates
- » The number and frequency of calls create long call wait times for survivors, especially in the evening when fewer people may be on-call
- » Hateful remarks that may increase trauma exposure and affect advocates' mental health

Brainstorm options for responding.



Before an advocate begins answering the helpline, some things that may be helpful to address include:

- » Training advocates on what to say if they feel they are experiencing harassment on the line (focus on what the line exists for, reiterate what support the advocate can provide on the line, ask what the caller is looking for help with).
- » Share the process for how to get help if the line is getting frequent and repeated automated calls
- » Provide guidance to helpline supervisors on how to contact the phone provider or routing service to address technical issues and ensure they have the information necessary to authorize changes to the phone service

Some things that an advocate can do **during** a phone call can include:

- » **Reflect on the nature of the call** – is the caller describing something that happened to them? Or is their focus on you as a person? What does the caller say they need?
- » **Redirect the caller's attention** - remind the caller of the helpline's purpose, ask what the caller needs, wait in silence and let the caller know you are still there if prompted.
- » **Place the caller on hold and call in a supervisor for immediate assistance** – this is one reason of many why it's important to always have a backup person scheduled to support advocates on the line.



After the call ends, some things that may be helpful for advocates and their supervisors to do include:

- » **Document the call** – this is especially important if the caller threatens violence. Documentation may include the time and date of the call, who answered the call, and general notes about the nature of the call.
- » **Debrief the call during supervision** – if the advocate’s supervisor was not the person on-call when they received the harassing call, it can be helpful to debrief the experience in supervision as well.
- » **Review options for grounding and debriefing after calls** – even if someone only calls and harasses a helpline worker once, or even if the call isn’t harassment but the advocate experienced it that way, it can be unsettling. Having debrief protocols in place and supervision for everyone who answers the 24-hour line is important for this reason. No one can predict what an advocate will experience during their shift.
 - RSP’s Building Resilience tool on Grounding and Diving into Debriefing offer examples of different techniques and tips to consider

Depending on the nature or severity of the harassment, it may be helpful to check-in again after a few days to talk about anything else related to the call and its impact.

If there is a pattern of harassment:

- » **While on a call:** Consider letting the person know you’re



hanging up and blocking the number they are calling from for a short, pre-determined amount of time if they continue to call more than X times in 24 hours.

- » **Consider staffing needs if the harassment is continuous:** Programs may want to have additional people on-call to respond to survivors and available to debrief with advocates after calls.

How the coalition can support advocates answering the line long-term

Ensure paid and volunteer advocates get training in supporting sexual assault survivors on the helpline

- » **Cover typical dynamics and needs** – sexual assault survivors may call the helpline because they need help grounding, they are disclosing their experience for the first time, they want help understanding if they were assaulted, they need more resources or resources that don't currently exist, they want to process being the parent/friend/loved one of someone who was sexually assaulted, or the assault of a loved one has triggered memories of their own assault.
- » **Remind people that survivors may have had to wait a long time to get connected to an advocate** – the survivor may be frustrated after waiting for an advocate, or the survivor may have already called a lot of other people without getting the help they want and need.
- » **Highlight that survivors may wait years before disclosing**



their assault and they may not have the same crisis-based needs as domestic violence survivors.

Support supervision and debriefing infrastructure

- » Work with program supervisors to ensure that adequate supervision is happening, especially for helpline workers
- » Provide ongoing support for supervisors on debriefing and supervision

Do a policy review with local programs

- » Review any policies, or help the program draft policies, for what to do in the case of harassment on the helpline and create a communications plan if one doesn't already exist.
- » Find out if programs have a policy in place to report and escalate awareness of credible threats. Since many sexual assault advocates work within domestic violence programs, they may have policy about this already.

Just like advocates would come alongside a survivor reaching out for help, coalitions can work alongside advocates to make sure that they have what they need to continue providing quality sexual assault healing services. RSP TA providers are also here to support coalitions as they navigate these and other issues. Please reach out to an RSP TA provider for additional support when you need it.



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