Providing Accessible Services: Assistive Technology

Victim service providers should provide support and resources to all survivors, including those with disabilities or who require assistance in accessing services. Accessible services meet a survivor where they are, provide methods that allow survivors to communicate with the program and participate in services, and ensures that their services are open and inclusive. Assistive technology is a critical component in guaranteeing that programs provide accessible services for victims of violence.

What is Assistive Technology?

Assistive devices and services can create an accessible and inclusive environment at work, school and in victim services programs. Assistive technology is any device, equipment, product, item, or service that maintains or increases access; decreases or removes barriers to support and resources; or, provides accessibility, autonomy, and self-determination for individuals who:

- Are D/deaf or hard-of-hearing
- Have cognitive/development disabilities
- Are blind or have low vision
- Have physical/motor disabilities
- Have mental or psychiatric disabilities
- Have multiple or invisible disabilities

Assistive technology can include mobility devices, such as wheelchairs, or computer software and equipment that help facilitate communication and activities of daily living. For example, an app like Navability helps those who use wheelchairs navigate the best route. Apps such as TapTapSee identifies objects through photos for people who are blind. Voice synthesizers enable a computer to speak what is being typed, and speech recognition and point-of-gaze software supports hands-free computer access. Broadly speaking, any technology can also be considered assistive technology as long as it increases access.
Assistive Technology and Communicating with Survivors

Programs should strive to ensure competent, appropriate, safe, and secure use of technology to communicate with survivors. Here are some ideas:

- Provide alternative, accessible forms of communication for hotlines and ongoing services that meet the needs of people who are Deaf, hard-of-hearing, or have a cognitive or speech disability.

- Publicize options like a TTY line, online chat, or text messaging service alongside the regular voice hotline number.

- When using TTY, relay services, online chat, or text messaging to communicate, safety plan about message interception and device safety. Read more in our Digital Services Toolkit.

- When using video conferencing, work with a Deaf advocacy center and qualified video interpreter services.

- Check equipment regularly to ensure it is in working order.

- Make sure advocates are comfortable using assistive technology, and local disability agencies may be able to help programs learn how to use equipment.

- Programs offering digital services, online information, or access to technology such as computers and WiFi, should ensure that they are accessible to all clients and provide software or assistive devices that enable survivors to utilize them. For example, programs can design their website to allow the user to increase font size, magnify a webpage, or change colors. Read more at the Web Accessibility Initiative's Tips for Getting Started with Web Accessibility.

Program and Shelter Accessibility

Programs can use assistive technology to increase accessibility by making changes to physical spaces, policies, and practices to better accommodate survivors’ assistive technology. Below are some suggestions to get started:

- Conduct an accessibility audit of your program and continually assess and address physical and technology accessibility.
• Develop or update policies that update or enhance accessibility.

• Include accessible technology and resources in budgets and funding requests.

• Ensure that advocates know how accessible technology works and why it is important for survivors.

• Add equipment that can enhance safety and accessibility for survivors.
  
  o For example, some door bells and fire alarms can either flash lights for people who are Deaf or make sounds and disable the lights for people with epilepsy. Identify where your program can find these tools, keep a few at your program, and test them often to make sure they work properly. If you do not know where to find these devices, contact your local Independent Living Center for more information.

  o This also includes tools for accessibility on shared equipment like computers and phones, such as how to make the text larger in a web browser, how to increase the volume on a phone, and other built-in accessibility features.

• Include how survivors can have informed choices about whether to disclose a disability or medical condition within the program.

**The Misuse of Assistive Technology**

As with any technology, assistive technology can be misused. The misuse of assistive technology and devices can prevent a survivor from navigating tasks of daily living, and can pose serious safety risks for a survivor.

Advocates should have a basic understanding of how these devices might be misused and ask survivors about specific concerns and experiences they may have. Some examples of ways that abusive people might misuse assistive technology or block a survivor’s access to their assistive devices include:

• Monitoring or intercepting communications. For example, if a survivor uses a computer or phone to communicate, an abusive person may install monitoring software or use location tracking services to monitor them.
• Impersonating the survivor. An abusive person may use a survivor’s talk-to-text or a relay system to pretend to be the survivor and request a protection order or other charges be dropped.

• Breaking or tampering with assistive technology devices or physically harming the survivor so that they cannot use their assistive technology device. For example, breaking the survivor’s fingers or hand so they cannot type.

Safety Planning and Supporting Survivors

Advocates should know how to safety plan with survivors about the misuse of assistive technology. This may include:

• Help survivors identify safer or more private devices for communication.

• If impersonation is a concern, advocates and survivors can agree on code phrases that only the survivor knows to ensure that it really is the survivor.

• Help survivors find replacements or repairs for technology damaged by an abusive person.

• Include assistive technology planning when survivors are seeking services or relocating. If a survivor is not able to bring their technology with them, strategize about finding replacements.

Building Capacity to Increase Accessibility

Build relationships with disability and Deaf organizations before someone who needs an accommodation or assistive technology comes to your program. Ask them to advise you on your accessibility audit process. If a partnership already exists, work with them to improve services by increasing accessibility and decreasing barriers. To find a local disability agency working at the intersection of disability and domestic violence, visit the website, End Abuse of People with Disabilities from the Vera Institute of Justice.