

How Policymakers and Practitioners Can Facilitate Disclosure and Help-Seeking

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Victims of violence (VoV) often face a variety of obstacles to disclosing their victim status, which prevent them from receiving help. Victim services programs and organizations, which are often financially supported through the [Crime Victims Fund](#), advocate for victims and connect them with necessary services. Early intervention can lead to improved outcomes for victims and the efficient use of program funds. However, VoV must first disclose their experiences for the intervention process to begin. This underscores the need for practitioners who serve VoV to be knowledgeable about barriers to disclosure, and for policymakers to support service providers that use best practices to overcome them.

Barriers to disclosure. Disclosure may be withheld deliberately, unconsciously, or involuntarily, leading to an inability to access much-needed resources.

- Victims of violence may not understand what constitutes being victimized, their rights as victims, or the legal options available to them, which can act as barriers to receiving help.
- Undocumented immigrants face a variety of barriers when seeking services, including a fear of deportation. Although the Violence against Women Act (VAWA) protects individuals from multiple forms of abuse, non-citizens may not be privy to this information. Additionally, many people rely on abusers for financial support, which prevents them from reaching out.^{1,2}
- Men may not seek help because they fear stigma related to being a male VoV.^{3,4}
- Communication barriers may also dissuade individuals from seeking help.^{5,6} Lack of fluency in English (including for those who are Deaf or hard of hearing) creates difficulties in sharing and receiving oral and written communication with service providers. In addition, expressive difficulties may impair a victim's physical capability of relaying his or her experience; this can be the result of a communicative disorder such as apraxia, aphasia, or autism spectrum disorder.
- Being physically and socially isolated are barriers to seeking help. Domestic violence rates are higher in rural areas, particularly on Native American reservations where domestic violence is experienced at a rate 50% higher than other groups.^{7,8,9}

Unique considerations regarding disclosure for minor victims of violence. The impact of violence on minors and the subsequent actions that should be taken to serve them will vary based on their ages and developmental stages. For instance, young children may lack the language or vocabulary to communicate what they see, experience, and feel. Adolescents have an increased likelihood of running away to flee violence and abuse as 1) an aversion to disclosure, 2) a result of unsuccessful attempts at disclosing, or 3) as a perceived inability to disclose. Running away might be an unfortunate precursor to recruitment into gangs, human trafficking, and drug abuse.^{10,11,12}

Alleviating barriers to disclosure. Victim services can help alleviate barriers to disclosure through their advocacy, programming, and services. Examples of these activities include:

Helping VoV navigate legal and advocacy systems and the emotionally and financially difficult VAWA petitioning process.^{13,14}

- For example, [ACCESS](#) in Michigan aims to empower survivors to “understand and participate in the criminal justice system,” which can help them advocate for themselves. Similarly, programs like [Pathways to Safety](#) provide legal advocacy services geared towards immigrants.
- Offering translation services or print and web materials in various languages also facilitates helping victims. For example, the [New Mexico Coalition against Domestic Violence](#) and the [Florida Council against Sexual Violence](#) provide such resources.

Addressing victims’ basic needs.

- “Housing First” approaches to assisting victims of violence, such as providing money for rent and assistance with moving, can help VoV become more financially independent, thus promoting help seeking by enabling them to leave abusers.¹⁵

Providing information and services that are tailored to specific populations, such as men, children and youth, and individuals with disabilities.

- **Male victims.** Programming specific to the support of male VoV can alleviate barriers like stigma. Such services can include best practices trainings for service providers, acknowledging the need to hire more male staff, and goals to educate community members and law enforcement. Such programs can also engage young men to be allies in the movement against violence and provide skills to cultivate healthy relationships. Examples of programs with these services include [California Partnership to End Domestic Violence](#) and [Men of Code](#).
- **Children and youth.** VOCA-funded programs that meet the unique needs of adolescent victims of violence are critical and effective in preventing adverse outcomes (e.g., [Family Centers](#), [YWCA Kauai](#)). [Helplines](#) funded by VOCA can provide an empowering and anonymous way for youth to disclose in safe spaces and are used by children worldwide.^{16, 17} Forensic interviews by trained practitioners (e.g., those at [Idaho Network of Children’s Advocacy Centers](#)) can help ethically elicit experiences from children and promote advocacy.
- **Victims with disabilities.** People with communicative disorders may be at heightened risk for violence, so VOCA-funded programs are essential for providing training and information to family members and service providers of these individuals (e.g., [Autism Society](#) in Maryland).

Victim services are instrumental in supporting the protection, rehabilitation, advocacy, and education of victims of violence. Disclosure is a difficult first step, but it can be facilitated through continued monetary support to these essential services.

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