

Easy Read

Federal Domestic Violence Assistance: HHS Should Assess Accessibility-Related Technical Assistance for Local Centers

November 2024 | GAO-25-107806



U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

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Introduction



This is an **Easy Read** version of a report we wrote. **Easy Read** is a way that some groups have made their written information easier to understand. This can include shorter sentences or simpler language.

In this document, certain words and phrases are in **bold**. We explain what these words and phrases mean in more detail after they have been used.



Some words are [blue and underlined](#). These are links that will go to GAO reports and other helpful information.

Why is GAO creating this document?



We created this Easy Read version to make our work more accessible to everyone, including certain people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This document is one way we are working for full inclusion of people with disabilities.

You can see the [full report](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-106366) on our website (<https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-106366>)



To prepare the full report, we collected information several ways. We

- looked at national survey data,
- talked to groups that help people who have experienced domestic violence,
- talked to groups that help people with disabilities,
- talked to local domestic violence centers,
- talked to federal and state officials,
- reviewed articles about domestic violence and disability, and
- reviewed the work of **agencies**.

Agencies are federal government offices.

For more information on our approach, see the [full report](#).

GAO and Congress



What is GAO?

The Government Accountability Office, or GAO, is part of the legislative branch of the United States government. We are an independent agency that works for Congress. We help keep Congress informed about how agencies are working. If we find ways agencies can work better, we can make **recommendations**.

Recommendations are ideas of changes agencies should make to improve their activities.

What was GAO asked to do by Congress?



Congress asked us to look at how many people with disabilities may experience domestic violence and if federal services for survivors of domestic violence are accessible to people with disabilities.

What is domestic violence?



Domestic violence is where one individual in a relationship uses abusive behavior to gain power over the other. This abusive behavior can be sexual, physical, or emotional.

We call individuals who have been in abusive relationships **survivors of domestic violence**.



What is the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services?

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is an agency that works to support the health and well-being of Americans.

What is the family violence prevention program?



The family violence prevention program funds safe housing and support for survivors of domestic violence and those who depend on them. The family violence prevention program is run by HHS. HHS gives states, state coalitions, and national resource centers family violence prevention program money to help respond to, prevent, and raise awareness about domestic violence.

What are local domestic violence centers?



Local domestic violence centers help survivors and their children by providing safe housing and support like food and clothing. We refer to these centers as **local centers** in this report. These local centers receive money from the family violence prevention program and other sources to help with costs.

What are national resource centers?



National resource centers give local centers and other organizations training and support to help prevent and respond to domestic violence. National resource centers receive money from HHS through the family violence prevention program.



What are state coalitions?

State coalitions help state agencies and local domestic violence centers within the state. State coalitions receive money from the family violence prevention program and work to establish state policies for helping survivors of domestic violence. They also give training and support to local centers and programs that support survivors.

What is section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973?

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prevents any program that receives federal money from excluding people with disabilities. This includes federally funded domestic violence local centers and services.

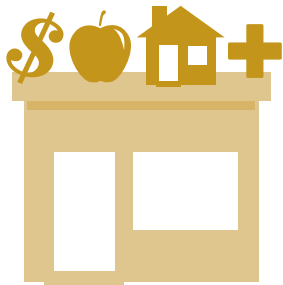
What is in This Report

This report looks at three things:



1. How common is reported domestic violence among people with disabilities?

2. What steps have local domestic violence centers taken to help survivors with disabilities access their services and what challenges do they have doing so?



3. How does HHS help ensure people with disabilities have access to domestic violence services?

Domestic Violence Among People with Disabilities

In this section, we will answer the question “How common is reported domestic violence among people with disabilities?”

How did GAO calculate how many people with disabilities reported experiencing domestic violence?

We used two national surveys:



1) The Department of Justice (DOJ) Bureau of Justice Statistics National Crime Victimization Survey



2) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey

• See data in [full report](#).

These surveys are based on a national sample and ask participants if they have a disability and have experienced domestic violence. Because of the survey sampling, our reported numbers are estimates.

Do people with disabilities experience a higher rate of domestic violence than people without disabilities?



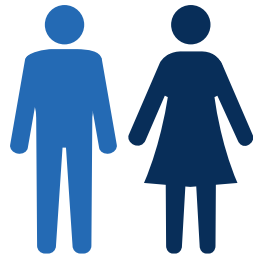
People with disabilities reported experiencing domestic violence about five times the rate of people without disabilities.

Do people with some types of disabilities experience a higher rate of domestic violence than others?



People with cognitive disabilities experienced a higher rate of domestic violence (21.7 instances per 1,000 people) compared to those with other disability types (ranging from 5.1 to 11.1 instances per 1,000 people).

Do women with disabilities experience higher rates of domestic violence?



Women with disabilities reported experiencing domestic violence about 3 times the rate of men with disabilities.

Do people with disabilities of a certain racial or ethnic group experience higher rates of domestic violence than other groups?



People with disabilities who identified as having more than one race reported experiencing domestic violence at higher rates than other racial and ethnic groups.

Local Center Accessibility



In this section, we will answer the question “What steps have local domestic violence centers taken to help survivors with disabilities use their services and what challenges do they have doing so?”

How did GAO find out how local centers are helping survivors with disabilities and challenges they have doing so?



We talked with state officials and organizations that help survivors of domestic violence. We asked them about challenges people with disabilities may have using domestic violence services. We also toured 12 local centers and asked how they help survivors with disabilities and what challenges they have doing so.

How do local centers inform people with disabilities about their services?

Some local centers said they inform people with disabilities about services by:



- writing informational materials in easy-to-understand language;

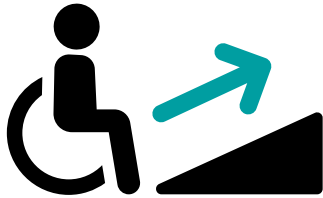


- promoting available services at health fairs, conferences, trainings, and other events; and



- using disability groups to inform people with disabilities about domestic violence and the help local centers offer.

How do local centers find out if a survivor has a disability?



Some local centers try to find out if a survivor has a disability as soon as they sign up for services. Centers ask survivors several times if they have a disability so they can provide any needed support, such as a sign language interpreter or a wheelchair ramp.

What are some local centers doing to make their services more accessible?

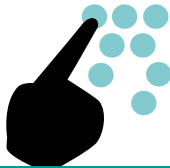
All local centers we spoke to made **physical changes** to help people with disabilities access and use their spaces. Examples included:



- adding ramps and widening doorways to make spaces accessible to people in wheelchairs,



- installing alarm systems and doorbells with flashing lights for deaf or hard of hearing survivors, and



- installing braille safety signs for survivors with little or no vision.

Local Center Accessibility

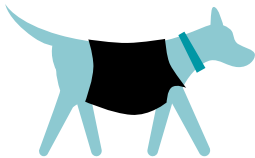
Some local centers also made changes to services to help survivors with disabilities. Examples included:



- using sign language for survivors who are deaf,



- providing screen reader software for blind survivors, and



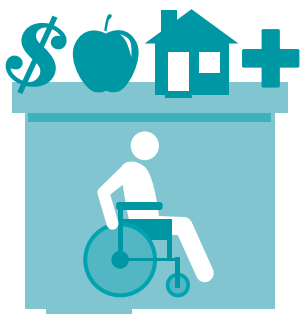
- allowing service animals for blind survivors and pets for emotional support.

Do survivors with disabilities participate in local center programs?

Local centers said that a low number of people with disabilities participate in their programs. Officials believe this may be because:



- **People with disabilities may not be aware of available services.** Some centers said working with groups that help people with disabilities could help raise awareness about available services.



- **Centers may not know if a survivor has a disability.** When seeking help at a local center some survivors may not be comfortable saying they have a disability. Also, some survivors may not know they have a disability.

Are local centers always able to help survivors with disabilities?



In some cases, people with disabilities may experience abuse by a caregiver outside of their family or intimate relationship and therefore may not qualify for domestic violence services. These individuals may be referred to social services but may still be at risk for abuse.

What challenges do local centers have making their services accessible?



Some centers told us that they still needed to update spaces or hire staff to make services more accessible for people with disabilities. Examples included needing to add handrails in hallways or needing to hire staff with mental health training to meet the high demand for mental health services.

HHS's Role in Ensuring Accessibility

In this section, we answer the question “How does HHS help ensure people with disabilities have access to domestic violence services?”

How did GAO find out about how HHS monitors and supports efforts to make domestic violence services accessible to people with disabilities?



We looked at HHS documents and spoke to officials about how HHS monitors and supports efforts to make domestic violence services accessible to people with disabilities. In addition, we surveyed 20 national resource centers and asked about their training and support efforts. We also spoke with local centers and asked what they thought about available training and support.

How does HHS monitor the performance of family violence prevention programs?

HHS uses a few tools to monitor national resource centers and state programs.

These monitoring tools include:



- performance reports,
- on-site and virtual visits, and
- progress check-ins.

These tools give HHS some idea of how well family violence prevention programs are working.



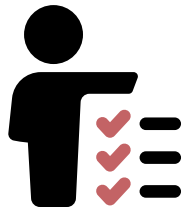
Do these monitoring tools focus on accessibility?

HHS monitoring tools partially check for accessibility. Without thoroughly asking questions about accessibility, HHS may not know if survivors with disabilities have problems when accessing services.

Without identifying accessibility problem areas, HHS may not be able to provide appropriate support for survivors with disabilities or the centers and programs that help them. HHS told us that it plans to rewrite some of its tools to include more information about helping people with disabilities.

What kinds of training and support does HHS give to states and local domestic violence centers?

HHS uses national resource centers to help states and local centers in their efforts to help survivors and prevent domestic violence. Most national resource centers provide support and training on how to make services accessible to people with disabilities. For example, national resource centers may help local centers serve survivors with disabilities by:



- making tip sheets about how to work with survivors with different disabilities such as how to help people who are deaf and hard of hearing,



- helping survivors with getting or keeping public benefits, and



- sharing helpful strategies such as buying wheelchair accessible beds for centers.

What challenges do local centers have getting the training and support they need to help survivors with disabilities?

Local centers may not be getting the training and support they need to help survivors with various disabilities.



Officials at local centers said they would like more training and support on accessibility issues, such as how to work with survivors with various disabilities, how to identify and treat mental health illnesses, and how to work with disability groups. While national resource centers are providing some support and training, it is not clear if local centers know about it or if it is meeting their needs.

GAO's Recommendation



We are making the following recommendation to HHS: The Secretary of HHS should make sure that the agency regularly reviews the training it supports to see if it is helping local domestic violence centers as they seek to make their services more accessible to people with disabilities.

We provided a draft of this report to HHS and DOJ for review and comment.

HHS agreed with our recommendation and noted steps it plans to take to address the recommendation.

GAO's Commitment to People with Disabilities



In line with GAO's core values, we work for full inclusion of people with disabilities. We show our commitment to the disability community through accessibility efforts for our employees and the public who read our reports.



Additionally, GAO has provided Congress with analysis of accessibility and disability issues in several areas, including veterans with disabilities, health care access, voting, disability benefits, equal employment opportunity, and more.

Appendix

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Sources for Images

This appendix contains source information for images in this product.

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