

# **Best Practices**

## Responding to Crimes against People with Disabilities, Deaf Individuals and Older Adults

*A Guide for Law Enforcement  
and Service Agencies*

### **Interviewing Crime Victims with Cognitive Disabilities**

- Speak in your typical tone of voice.
- Be patient.
- Slow the pace and allow for breaks.
- You may have to explain that a crime occurred.
- Ask one question at a time.
- Ask both open-ended questions and *yes* or *no* questions.
- Let them know that it's okay to say, "I don't understand," and that if you repeat the same question, it doesn't mean they gave you the wrong answer.
- Be open to other means of communication, such as visual aids (pictures or drawings).
- Perpetrators may convince crime victims that sexual abuse is a special time. Ask what happened. If the crime victim cannot explain, ask her/him to show you.
- Ask for concrete details. Example: What did you see when you were in the car?
- If you are not sure the person understands, ask to repeat what was said in his/her own words. If the person keeps saying the same thing, suggest breaking it down, step by step.
- Offer assistance with completing forms.

### **Interviewing Crime Victims with Speech Disabilities**

- Assume that you will be able to understand each other.
- Keep your tone respectful.
- Ask how the person prefers to communicate (writing, speaking, typing, communication board, electronic device, etc.)
- Unless the person requests, do not allow a third party to speak for him/her.
- Do not rush. Offer breaks. Some people's speech may become more slurred when they are stressed or tired.
- Be honest if you do not understand.
- If you have difficulty understanding:

- *Wait*. Relax and listen to whole story in context.
- *Repeat*. Repeat back what you heard.
- *Rephrase*. Ask the person to use different words, to spell out words, or to write what she/he means.
- *Identify*. Tell the person which parts you do not understand, and ask for clarification.

### **Interviewing Crime Victims with Mental Illness**

- Keep meeting space free from distractions.
- Do not touch or crowd the crime victim.
- Avoid blocking the person's exit.
- Be direct and clear about who you are and what your role will be.
- Structure meetings. Explain what you will talk about and do and for how long.
- Let the person feel in control of the situation as much as possible.
- Do not argue with a person having hallucinations or delusions. Change subject.
- If the person seem volatile, but there is not an immediate threat to safety, back off and let the person calm down. Such outbursts do not usually last long.
- Be at ease and empathetic. Ask how you can assist. A short break or more physical space may help.
- If time or space does not decrease a serious psychiatric crisis, consider calling the person's family, mental health provider, local mental health crisis center/mobile psychology unit, if available. If unavailable, call EMS.

### **Interviewing Crime Victims with Physical Disabilities**

- Know the accessibility features of your agency.
- Do not make assumptions about the individual's abilities.
- If you offer assistance, wait until the person has specifically said how you can help.
- Do not insist on helping. Persons with disabilities are the expert about what they can or cannot do.
- Be respectful of personal space: Do not touch or move wheelchairs, crutches, or other mobility

aids without permission.

- When mobility aids are kept as part of evidence, help the victim obtain another.
- At home, it may take longer for the person to answer the phone or door bell.

The crime victim may need assistance finding other living options or personal care services, if the suspect provided that function. Call the local Center for Independent Living.

### **Interviewing Crime Victims Who are Blind**

- If the person is at home, give your name, badge number, and the dispatcher's telephone number to verify your identity.
- Identify yourself by name when you enter the room. Note when someone leaves.
- In groups, address others by name, so the crime victim can follow the conversation.
- If assistance is needed, ask how best you can help. Only assist with permission.
- Offer your elbow as you both walk.
- Walk slowly and provide details about obstacles such as steps, wet floors, low hanging objects, or open file drawers.
- Have written materials available in large print, audio cassette, Braille, and computer disk formats.
- Offer to read aloud any materials that are not available in an alternate format.
- Do not pet or distract a guide dog, which is a working animal.
- Guide dogs may need outside breaks and water. Don't separate the guide dog from the person.

### **Interviewing Deaf Crime Victims**

- Move to a private, secure, well-lit location.
- Ask the person how she/he prefers to communicate.
- Do not use people who can sign, but are not professional interpreters, except to obtain name, address, and other basic information.
- Do not allow the person with "better" communication to take over. She/he may be the abuser.
- Make sure the suspect cannot watch or "eavesdrop" on the crime victim using sign language. Perpetrators can threaten victims through sign language.

- If the person wants to communicate by writing, keep your messages short and to the point. English is a second language for many deaf people.
- If the person wants to speech- read (lip read) to communicate, speak naturally and keep your mouth free of distractions.
- Match your facial expression and body language to words.

### **Working with American Sign Language Interpreters**

- If the crime victim requests an interpreter, inform the dispatcher that a professional/certified American Sign Language interpreter is needed.
- Request separate interpreters for interviewing a victim and suspect.
- Inform through speech/gesture/writing how soon the interpreter will arrive.
- Move to well-lit location, so the person who is deaf can see the interpreter's signs.
- The interpreter's role is to facilitate communication, not to provide information or opinions about the crime.
- Speak at your normal rate.
- Maintain eye contact with and speak directly to the deaf person, not to the interpreter. Avoid saying *Tell her/him...or Ask her/him...*
- Interpreters often work in teams of two, taking turns to prevent fatigue.

### **First Response to Older Crime Victims**

- Approach older adults from the front, since they may have difficulty seeing and hearing.
- Allow extra time for older adults to process information.
- Ask how the person wishes to be addressed (i.e., Mrs. Larson or Beth).
- Provide adequate lighting and minimal distractions.
- Speak in a clear voice at your typical speed.
- Older adults may wish to be agreeable. Make sure the person can clearly understand what you are saying.
- Separate the victim and suspect for questioning, and ask the victim if a trusted person can provide more information.
- Older crime victims may not be comfortable talking about personal matters with strangers, and may fear judgment from younger professionals.

## **Statewide Resources**

Access Utah Network, 800-333-8824

### Centers for Independent Living

(SLC 800-355-2195), (Ogden 801-612-3215), (Provo 801-373-5044),  
(Logan 435-753-5353), (Price 435-637-4950), (St. George 435-673-7501)

### Statewide 24-hour Domestic Violence

LinkLine800 897-5465

### Statewide 24-hour Rape Crisis

888-421-1100

### Utah Domestic Violence Council

801-521-5544, [www.udvc.org](http://www.udvc.org)

### Utah Coalition against Sexual Assault

801-746-0404, [www.ucasa.org](http://www.ucasa.org)

### Sego Lily

888-328-5486, [www.slcad.org](http://www.slcad.org)

### Center for Persons with Disabilities

866-284-2821, [www.cpdusu.org](http://www.cpdusu.org)



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