



## Deaf and Hard of Hearing Survivors of Sexual Violence

### Deaf Culture

To best serve Deaf\*/Hard of Hearing (HOH) survivors, it's first important to understand individuals' cultural context. With Ohio as one of largest national Deaf communities, the mosaic of cultural identification ranges from Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, HOH, Deaf Persons of Color (DPOC), Children of Deaf Adults (CODA), and Kids of Deaf Adults (KODA). The importance in recognizing the value of intersectionality by honoring lived experiences and multiple identities lends to fundamental understanding that some individuals who are Deaf/HOH do not consider themselves to have a disability in the same way that disabilities are typically regarded (i.e. a medical condition or determination). Furthermore, some (but not all) individuals who are Deaf\*/HOH identify as being part of Deaf culture, with unique cultural identities, language (specifically American Sign Language), experiences, and customs. The use of a capital "D" with the term Deaf signifies the degree of how the individual identifies with Deaf culture, whereas the use of a lowercase "d" signifies that an individual identifies their deafness as a medical characteristic rather than a cultural identity. When serving survivors of sexual assault who are Deaf\*/HOH, it's imperative for service providers to respect and incorporate the survivor's unique perspective of their cultural identity in the customization of service provision.

For additional information about Deaf culture in America, read here: <http://www3.gallaudet.edu/clerc-center/info-to-go/deaf-culture/american-deaf-culture.html>

### Sexual Violence & Deaf Survivors

#### Prevalence

Even though not all Deaf/HOH survivors of sexual violence identify as having a disability, they are generally regarded as being disabled by researchers when determining the prevalence of sexual violence, **if and when** they are included in such research. What is known about violence against people with disabilities in general:<sup>1</sup>

- People with disabilities are more than three times as likely to experience violent crime, including rape and sexual assault, than are people without disabilities.
- Individuals with multiple disabilities experience 69% of rapes and sexual assaults against all persons with disabilities of any kind.
- Individuals with disabilities from all racial or ethnic groups are twice as likely to experience violent victimization when compared with individuals in their racial or ethnic groups that do not have disabilities.
- Children with disabilities are three times more likely to be sexually abused than children who do not have disabilities.

Regarding individuals who are Deaf/HOH specifically, it is known that such individuals are more likely than those who are not Deaf/HOH to experience sexual violence, interpersonal violence, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and child sexual abuse. An eight-year study of college students at Rochester University found that Deaf/HOH individuals were 1.5 times

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<sup>1</sup> Smith et al (2017). "How safe are Americans with disabilities?" Center on Victimization and Safety, Vera Institute of Justice; retrieved from: [https://storage.googleapis.com/vera-web-assets/downloads/Publications/how-safe-are-americans-with-disabilities/legacy\\_downloads/How-safe-are-americans-with-disabilities-web.pdf](https://storage.googleapis.com/vera-web-assets/downloads/Publications/how-safe-are-americans-with-disabilities/legacy_downloads/How-safe-are-americans-with-disabilities-web.pdf)

as likely as those who are not Deaf/HOH to be victims of relationship violence in their lifetime (including sexual harassment and sexual assault).<sup>2</sup>

One of the few studies of sexual assault among Deaf and hard-of-hearing college students, conducted in 2009 at Gallaudet University, found that 48 % said they experienced unwanted sexual contact — almost double the rate of hearing students that previous studies reported. Of the 42 individuals who sought help for sexual assault, domestic or dating violence, or stalking from DAWN (Deaf DVSA agency) on Gallaudet’s campus between January 2013 and June 2014, **almost 40 % were minorities.** (3)

### **Barriers to Reporting & Accessing Services**

Survivors who are Deaf/HOH face numerous significant barriers to reporting their assaults to law enforcement and to accessing services to support them in their recovery from sexual violence. Such barriers include:

- **Lack of understanding among service providers:** Sometimes first/secondary responders and service providers regard survivors who are Deaf/HOH as less credible or believable because of misconceptions about deafness, disabilities, and/or sexual assault. For example, sometimes responders equate deafness with intellectual disability, or they believe that Deaf/HOH individuals do not understand the difference between consensual sex versus sexual assault. These assumptions discourage survivors from coming forward and make them feel alienated, re-victimized, and adversely impacts their safety with intricate familial, personal, and professional connections within Deaf community if they do.
- **Lack of access to qualified American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters or interpretive technology:** Research indicates that Deaf women in the U.S. experience domestic and/or sexual violence at rates twice those of hearing women, yet they routinely encounter barriers when seeking help—from a phone-based 911 system to having their credibility as witnesses in court questioned. (4) ASL is how vast majority of Deaf\*/HOH individuals in the U.S. communicate based on cultural and regional influences. When service providers do not have ready access to qualified ASL interpreters and/or do not know how to access or use interpretative technology, it prevents Deaf\*/HOH survivor from being able to communicate, which is the foremost need for any survivor. Linguistic accessibility equates to empowerment, safety, and facilitates healing for survivors to re-build their lives with options.
- **Community or cultural pressures or stigma:** For Deaf\*/HOH survivor, lifeline to Deaf community provides a sense of identity, belonging, linguistic access, social opportunities, and personal and professional affiliations. Survivors who identify as being part of the Deaf community do not always feel supported by others in that community if they report a sexual assault. This is especially true if the perpetrator is also a member of the Deaf community. It is often difficult to maintain privacy surrounding the assault, and as with many different cultural groups, the Deaf community does not want their cultural or community identity to be tarnished or further ostracized by the larger hearing society. Community support is crucial for healing, safety planning, and community accountability for safer and healthier Deaf communities.
- **Lack of visibility, partnerships, and trust:** The Deaf community relies a great deal on trust of individuals, organizations, and systems who have proven themselves to be competent and trustworthy when working with

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<sup>2</sup> VAWnet, National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. “Violence in the Lives of Deaf or Hard of Hearing: Prevalence and Dynamics” special collection website; retrieved from: <http://vawnet.org/sc/prevalence-and-dynamics>  
<sup>3</sup> <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/2/12/the-hidden-victims-of-campus-sexual-assault-students-with-disabilities.html> *The hidden victims of campus sexual assault: Students with disabilities Azmat Khan Feb 12, 2015.*

<sup>4</sup> *New Initiatives Will Reduce Language Barriers to Victim Services March 3, 2016* <https://www.vera.org/newsroom/press-releases/new-initiatives-will-reduce-language-barriers-to-victim-services>

the community. If individuals and organizations have not invested in developing meaningful connections with the Deaf community, survivors who are Deaf/HOH are much less likely to come forward or seek services there.

## Best Practices for Serving Survivors who are Deaf/HOH

Victim service providers have an obligation under federal law to provide accessible services to crime victims with disabilities, which includes victims who are Deaf\*/HOH. Compliance with federal law has a direct connection to sustainability of your local, state, and federal funding to serve Ohio's Deaf communities. This obligation, however, only outlines the minimum requirements and **should never** represent any organization's full effort to be accessible and welcoming to survivors in their communities who are Deaf\*/HOH.

Specific best practice considerations for victim service providers:

- **Funding for accessibility:** programs and organizations should designate an appropriate portion of their annual operating budget to ensuring accessibility for Deaf\*/HOH survivors, including contracts with qualified ASL interpreters and the purchase, use, and maintenance of assistive technology.
- **Partnerships with Deaf/HOH individuals and organizations:** programs and organizations should actively seek to develop partnerships with the Deaf community in their service area; this includes seeking training opportunities for staff, as well as seeking individuals who are Deaf/HOH for meaningful staff, volunteer, or board positions within an organization.

OAESV is proud to partner with DeafPhoenix, a Deaf statewide anti-violence agency, **run by Deaf for Deaf**, advocating for safe and healthy Deaf communities in Ohio. Averaging 25 years of multi-disciplinary expertise, DeafPhoenix Deaf advocates with degrees, licensures, and certifications, provide culturally empowering collaborative advocacy, training/technical assistance/consultation, empowerment events, and interactive multimedia services. Their customized array of services is to support anti-violence agencies, first and secondary responders, community service organizations, key stakeholders, and Deaf community members who share our commitment to empower survivors of sexual violence in seeking safety, healing, justice, and restoration.

To learn more about DeafPhoenix, please visit: <http://www.deafphoenix.org/>

Direct contact: <http://www.deafphoenix.org/contactus/>

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**Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence / 216-658-1381 / 888-886-8388 / info@oesv.org / www.oesv.org**

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