

# Collaboration Charter

## Intersections

***Coming Together at the Crossroads to Better  
Serve Sexual Assault Survivors with Disabilities***



**INTERSECTIONS:** Coming Together at the Crossroads Between Disabilities and Sexual Assault to Better Serve Sexual Assault Survivors with Disabilities is being supported by grant no. 2009-FW-AX-K006 "Education, Training and Enhanced Services to End Violence Against and Abuse of Women with Disabilities Grant Program" awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice.

#### **Section 4: VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS**

The following shared values and assumptions will guide our work together. As the underpinning of our collaboration, we are committed to the following values and assumptions. We will strive to exemplify these values in our work with sexual assault survivors with disabilities and in our interactions with each other. The following values and assumptions are in alphabetical order, although all are of equal importance to us.

##### **VALUES**

**Accessibility.** We believe that people with disabilities who have been sexually assaulted deserve dynamic and responsive services that are physically, emotionally, culturally, and financially accessible and appropriate to their individual needs.

**Advocacy.** We believe in honoring the voice and experience of sexual assault survivors with disabilities and confronting the systems of oppression that encourage sexual violence, particularly as they affect people with disabilities. We will work to influence positive outcomes for these clients interacting with institutions or systems outside of their personal control by improving service deliveries.

**Choice.** We believe that all individuals have the ability within themselves to make an informed choice that will best meet their needs, while recognizing that many individuals with disabilities rely on the support and advocacy of others. We recognize the unique safety implications for people with disabilities who are most vulnerable to abuse and will respect an individual's choice while working toward the safety of the individual.

**Collaboration.** We value the synergy that is created when working together. Therefore, we agree to work in collaboration, bringing the full strength of each of our organizations in order to create a durable relationship that, first and foremost, meets the needs of sexual assault survivors with disabilities. We understand this will involve a deep commitment of time, energy, and resources in our efforts to create sustainable change in how we address sexual assault among people with disabilities.

**Continuing Education.** Sexual assault survivors with disabilities deserve support from staff and volunteers of our organizations who are educated and informed. As a result, it is critical to increase knowledge and skills of MESA and Imagine! staff and volunteers so that they can create welcoming, comfortable, and trauma-informed environments for sexual assault survivors with disabilities.

**Cultural Awareness.** We are committed to understanding our own biases and prejudices, especially as they are related to working with sexual assault survivors with disabilities, and believe that we can continually increase our awareness of differing experiences. We seek to understand our own privilege, internalized oppression, and experiences as oppressor and oppressed. We will demonstrate a willingness and commitment to challenge each other and to better ourselves in order to better serve our collaborative mission.

**Disability-Aware.** This collaboration recognizes that each individual, regardless of ability level, has unique interactions with their environments, including the impact of sexual assault and one's needs for healing in its aftermath. In order to provide competent, disability-aware services, we will challenge ourselves and those in our organizations to become fluent in understanding and responding to the unique needs and challenges faced by sexual assault survivors with disabilities. Specifically, we will challenge ourselves to understand potential complications that may exist for individuals with disabilities, such as accessibility, methods of communicating, and working with families and care providers, among others, in a way that creates feelings of safety and comfort.

**Inclusiveness.** We recognize and affirm that our differences enrich our lives. We will show respect for each other, our clients, and our professional contacts regardless of ability, gender identity, race, religion, ethnicity, appearance, culture, age, sexual orientation, class, or sex.

**Innovation.** We embrace new and creative strategies for providing safe, caring and competent services for sexual assault survivors with disabilities.

**Integrity.** It is important that our actions be consistent with our stated beliefs. We choose to use non-violent language in our interactions with each other and with our clients. We avoid using language and actions that perpetuate violence or biases towards others.

**Non-violence.** We oppose sexual violence in all of its forms. This includes sexual assault, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, incest, molestation, unwanted sexual touching, unwanted exposure to sexual materials, sexual exploitation, sexual trafficking, sexual exhibitionism, and sexual solicitation or other technology-based sex crimes. It is unacceptable for those involved with this collaboration to engage in violence or oppression.

**Person-first language.** We believe that people should be recognized, first and foremost, as individuals and should not be defined by their disability. We believe in using language that is appropriate and respectful of survivors with disabilities. We will use person-first language when talking to and about people with disabilities.

**Respect.** We are dedicated to serving all populations in a way that listens to and respects the backgrounds and personal differences that have shaped the experiences of each individual survivor. We will act respectfully, compassionately, and with unconditional positive regard toward one another, sexual assault survivors with disabilities, and anyone who may accompany or advocate for a survivor with a disability.

**Safety.** We believe that survivors with disabilities have a right to feel emotionally and physically safe when seeking services related to sexual assault. This includes recognizing the unique safety implications for people with disabilities while acting in a way that also respects their choices.

**Sexual Expression.** We value the individuality and rights of all people, and acknowledge that people with disabilities are sexual beings who have a right to seek and engage in self-stimulating and consensual, sexual behavior.

**Social Justice.** We believe in the concepts of human rights and equality of opportunity for all members of our society. We commit to working toward a socially just world through this collaboration by creating systems that will deliver fully accessible, responsive, appropriate, and safe services for survivors of sexual assault with disabilities in our community.

**Trauma-informed.** We believe in responding to sexual assault survivors with disabilities in a way that meets each person's individual needs and addresses the impact of traumatic events such as sexual assault. This includes creating a climate in which our clients feel safe, comfortable, and in control of what is happening on their behalf. We will work to ensure that sexual assault survivors with disabilities receive services and support in a caring manner by embedding this principle within the system changes we are embarking on. For the purpose of our collaboration, "trauma informed" is the lens through which we make decisions and allow our work to be approached and informed.

## **ASSUMPTIONS**

- Sexual violence is an epidemic crime that is fueled by ignorance, silence, shame, and oppression. While people from all backgrounds suffer from sexual abuse, people with disabilities are particularly targeted and silenced due to perpetrators' use of unique tactics to exploit their vulnerabilities (such as denying them access to resources, tampering with medications, restricting their use to adaptive equipment, and taking advantage of their need for assistance with intimate care).
- Sexual violence is never the fault of the victim. We do not blame survivors in any way for their victimization. We challenge all forms of societal victim-blaming as it silences survivors and promotes rape-supportive attitudes and actions.
- Sexual violence affects people all along the gender continuum.
- Our clients are the experts of their own experiences.
- Sexual assault survivors with disabilities face increased obstacles to receiving adequate support and care.
- Sexual assault survivors with disabilities deserve support, assistance, advocacy and education that are appropriate to their needs and can help them and their families make informed choices. It is the survivor's choice as to who can best help them make decisions following a disclosure or discovery of sexual abuse.

- Historically, those within the disability community have been faced with discrimination and segregation when attempting to integrate into the broader community. In response, programs and other systems of support for people with disabilities have developed *within* the disability community itself. This has created a culture where people with disabilities, as well as community members, look to and rely on disability organizations to meet the vast majority of their needs, resulting in a more closed system. This reliance on disability organizations continues, even though community agencies such as rape crisis centers could offer specialized help for survivors of sexual assault.
- In their current form, sexual assault organizations are designed to serve women of the dominant culture and have not created systems that are accessible or responsive to marginalized populations, including people with disabilities.
- Sexual assault organizations and disability organizations want to provide the best services possible to meet the needs of individuals seeking services. Disability organizations want to best serve survivors of sexual assault; sexual assault organizations want to best serve clients with disabilities. As a result, previous and current decisions and actions made to support clients at both types of organizations have been made with the best intentions.