

# Safety Planning for Survivors with Disabilities

Sandra Harrell

Managing Director, Survivor Advocacy Initiatives

August 26, 2025

This project was supported by Grant No. 15JOVW-24-GK-03011-MUMU awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this program are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.



# Today we will...

- Review the importance of safety planning
- Discuss unique considerations for safety planning with survivors with disabilities
- Explore effective safety planning processes.

# Incidence and Prevalence



# About the research..

- Limited research exists
- Cannot generalize findings to all people with disabilities
- Research has documented that some people with disabilities experience increased risk of domestic and sexual violence compared to people without disabilities

# What we know...

- Women who have experienced intimate partner violence are more than twice as likely to also report a disability.
- 14% of men with disabilities reported experiencing sexual violence at some point in their lifetime compared to 4% of men without disabilities.
- 49% of people with developmental disabilities were assaulted 10 or more times.
- 20% of Deaf adults have experienced physical abuse by an intimate partner. 15% have experienced forced sex in an intimate partner relationship.

# Factors Contributing to Risk

- Isolation, segregation from the community
- Culture of compliance
- Reliance on others to assist with daily living, medical needs, transportation, and personal care
- Experience of routinely having boundaries violated
- Denied information about healthy relationships
- Inequitable balance of power in relationships, including others having control over their financial resources

# Key Considerations



# Survivors, in general, often experience

...

- Fear of retaliation and/ or retribution
- Fear that they will not be believed
- Embarrassment or shame
- Don't know about safe and supportive resources in their community
- Fear of loss of support system (friends, family, etc.)

# Dynamics Unique to People with Disabilities (Individual Level)

- Some perpetrators use tactics that expressly target people with disabilities and Deaf people
- Fear of institutionalization
- May not know what they experienced is abusive and/or criminal
- May have experienced violence throughout their lives by multiple perpetrators

# Dynamics Unique to People with Disabilities (System Level)

- Lack of confidentiality:
  - Small, close knit communities
  - Guardians
  - Mandatory reporting policies
- Loss of personal care and other services
- Lack of accessible transportation
- Lack of control over finances if a representative payee has been appointed
- Limited employment options

# Abusers

- The vast majority of abusers are known and hold positions of power or authority
- 44% of them have a relationship with the individual because of their disability.
  - Caregivers
  - Attendants
  - Drivers
- Family members
- Partners, Girlfriends, Boyfriends
- Acquaintances

# Discuss in Chat (1)

→ How could these dynamics and types of abusers impact safety planning?

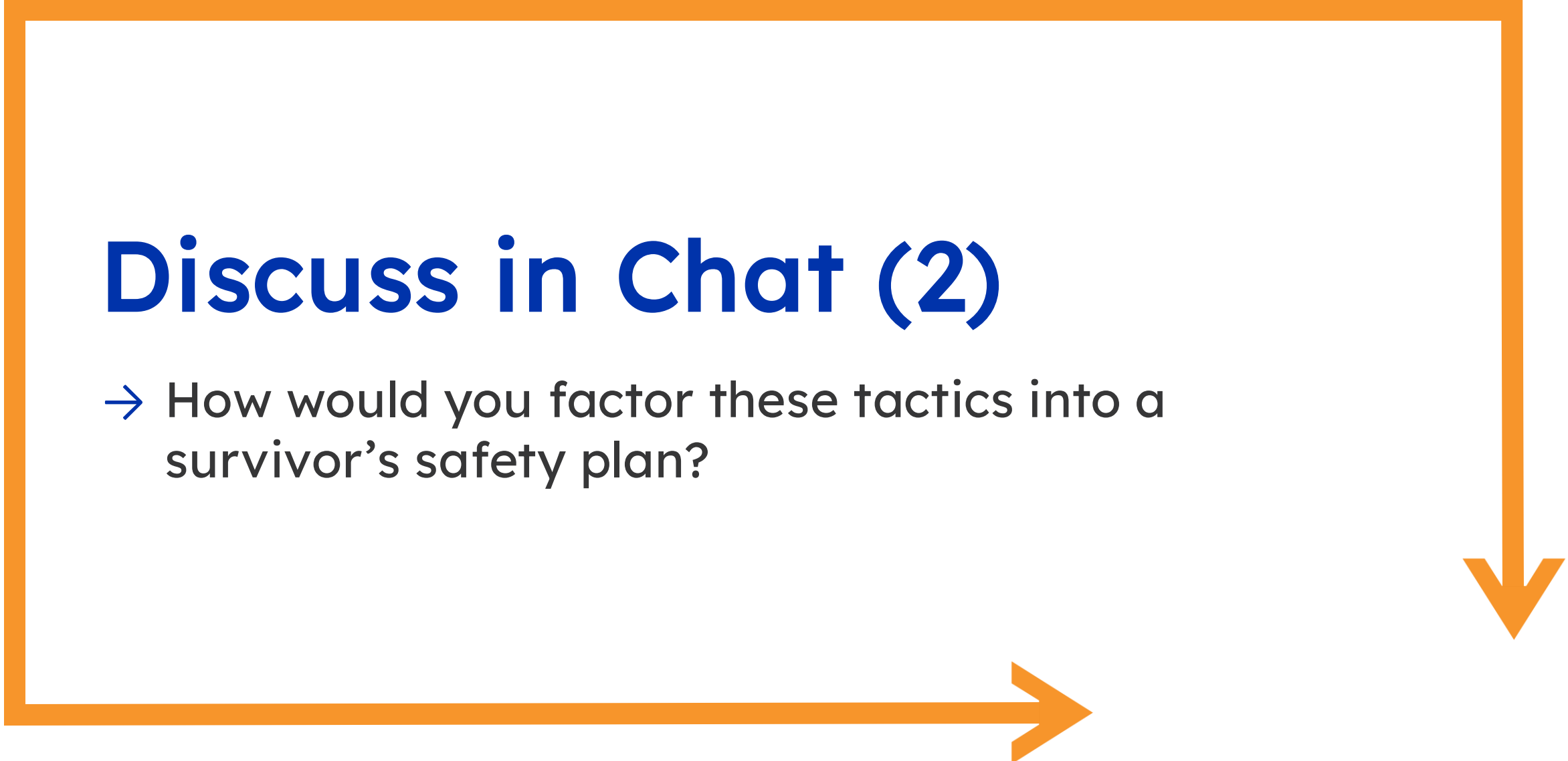


# Abuser Tactics

- Becoming a relied-upon, or primary, caregiver before beginning the abuse
- Giving the victim drugs without their knowledge, forcing them to take drugs or medication, or giving more than was prescribed
- Threatening, injuring or scaring away service animal
- Using transportation options for stalking route
- Hiding mobility devices or putting them right out of reach
- Attacking before the victim can sense what is coming
- Stealing or destroying communication or adaptive equipment so the individual can't call for help

# Discuss in Chat (2)

→ How would you factor these tactics into a survivor's safety plan?





**What is a Safety Plan?**

# A safety plan is...

- A personalized and practical plan that helps identify things a survivor can do to help reduce the risk of being hurt by an abusive person.
- An opportunity for a survivor, with the help of an advocate or other support person, to proactively think through potential risks and potential strategies before an incident happens.
- An opportunity to leverage a survivor's knowledge of the abuser's patterns and strategies the survivor has already successfully used.

# A safety plan is NOT...

- A guarantee of safety.
- Something that can be done once. It should be constantly evaluated and updated to account for changing circumstances.

# Elements of Safety Planning



# Key steps

- Establish trust
- Assess the risks
- Identify potential allies
- Identify potential barriers
- Identifying solutions
- Rehearse the plan
- Evaluate the plan
- Revise the plan as needed

# Establishing Trust

- Be sensitive to the person's experiences and be authentic in your interactions.
- Ask the person to tell you about the situation from their perspective.
- Be honest from the beginning about what you can and cannot do.
- Work with the victim's value system, don't impose your values on them

# Assessing the risk

- What is the role of the abuser in the survivor's life? Does that role involve financial benefits for the abuser?
- Has there been an escalation of abusive behavior? What is the escalation tied to?
- Does the abuser have possessive/obsessive traits?
- Has the abuse ever taken place in a public place? What were the consequences?

# Identify potential allies

- Who are the trusted support people in the survivor's life?
  - Co-workers
  - Friends
  - Self-advocate group
  - Day program staff
  - Family members
- Be sure to consider mandatory reporting requirements when identifying allies.

# Identify barriers

→ What barriers exist in each environment that the survivor may find themselves?

→ Home

→ School

→ Work

→ Community

→ Other

→ What barriers exist within the survivor to asking for help?

→ Fear of losing independence or autonomy

→ Fear of losing confidentiality?

→ Other fears?

# Identify Solutions: At Home (1)

- Make a plan of how to get away in an emergency and practice it.
- Make a code word or sign with friends, neighbors, family, and coworkers for when help is needed. Be clear with them about what a safe intervention would be.
- Obtain a second cell phone for emergency calls
- Hide a phone between the cushion and armrest of a wheelchair
- Pre-record an emergency message. Create safe words to let others know that you are unable to talk on the phone or video phone.

# Identify Solutions: At Home (2)

- Turn off location finding
  - Note for some people the location finding device may actually be the assistive technology used and turning it off may alert the abuser.
- Position monitors, including those being used for video relay, in a way that someone is unable to read or see what you are looking at
- Use headphones for programs that speak (i.e. screen readers)
- Clear internet memory
- Clear phone memory

# Identify Solutions: School, Work, and the Community

- Notify trusted people of your situation
- Provide photos of your abuser to trusted people
- Create a plan for intervention should abuser show up
- Identify alternative routes to and from school (if possible)
- Identify safe, accessible places to hide
- Create an adjusted schedule, if possible
  - The goal is to avoid predictable patterns of when survivor will be there
- Have a code word if you call in sick to alert your people that you are not safe and need help
- Ask to have phone calls screened at work

# Identify Solutions: Within Survivor

- What is the survivor most afraid of happening?
  - What information do they need to make the decision?
  - Who has the information?
  - When can the survivor access the information?
- Based on what they learn, formulate a plan

# Items to Include in Safety Planning

If planning to leave, make a list of items they will need to take with them and include in the plan how to make sure they can bring them with them:

- Clothes, toiletries
- Manual wheelchair, extra cane, crutches, walker, rolling shower chair
- Screen reader, your computer, electronic books, chargers to go with any of your electronic devices
- Medication
- Wheelchair battery charger
- Phone and phone charger
- Service animal and supplies
- Birth certificate, social security card, medication list, medication history, phone numbers of doctors.
- Specific medical supplies (bowel & bladder supplies, Hoyer lift)
- Bus pass and/or disability documentation of eligibility for related transit

# Remember

- The survivor is the expert on what safety techniques will work best for them.
- Safety planning efforts should consider how the survivor's disability impacts the safety plan.
- Safety planning efforts should consider how abusers take advantage of barriers which prevent a victim from using dv services or other services.
- Safety planning materials should be presented in clear language, with an interpreter if applicable, and materials should be available in alternate formats.
- Safety planning efforts should consider other disability resources
- Safety planning efforts should include knowledge of adaptive devices for people with disabilities and updated resource information on new technology.



**Let's Practice**

# Inez

Inez has been involved with Augustus romantically for 2 years. At the beginning of their relationship, Augustus was thoughtful and caring.

Eventually, due to Inez's support needs, Augustus encouraged Inez to let him take over as her PCA. As time went on, Inez noticed that Augustus would withhold support from her when he disapproved of something she had done.

Last night, Augustus went through Inez's social media and found back and forth between Inez and a childhood friend. In a jealous rage, Augustus broke Inez's wheelchair and smashed her phone. Inez has called her local DV program to discuss her options.

→ What safety planning considerations would you discuss with Inez? Remember to identify risks, potential allies, potential barriers and potential solutions.

# Este

Este and Peter have been friends for several years. They became friends when Este began attending a support group for people with chronic illnesses. Este has MS and her symptoms have made it increasingly difficult to work. Peter recently helped her apply for SSDI benefits. When she started receiving the benefits, Peter convinced her to allow him to apply to be her representative payee so he could help her manage her finances.

Once he was in this role, Peter began withholding money from Este. When Este confronted him, he became violent and began throwing items at her.

→ What safety planning considerations would you discuss with Este? Remember to identify risks, potential allies, potential barriers and potential solutions.

# Questions and Answers



# Resources

- [www.EndAbusePWD.org](http://www.EndAbusePWD.org)
- [www.SafeAustin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Safety-Planning-Guide-from-SAFE-Disability-Services.pdf](http://www.SafeAustin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Safety-Planning-Guide-from-SAFE-Disability-Services.pdf)
- [https://www.niwrc.org/sites/default/files/images/resource/safety\\_planning\\_pdfs.pdf](https://www.niwrc.org/sites/default/files/images/resource/safety_planning_pdfs.pdf)
- <https://www.HubbardHouse.org/safety-planning/>