

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/people-with-disabilities-must-be-included-in-advocacy-against-sexual-assault>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Earlier this month, the Its On Us campaign launched its annual spring week of action, in recognition of Sexual Assault Awareness Month. As an advocate in the anti-violence against women movement, I have watched intently as college students across the country have taken up the cause, raising awareness about campus sexual assault and making it a national issue. In less than five years, they have not only increased the movements visibility, but also encouraged diversity, focusing on various racial identities, genders, and sexual orientations. Despite the demonstrated desire to be inclusive of everyone who experiences sexual violence, I haven't seen in the media, press releases, and policy proposals consideration of students with disabilities.

Last year, Al Jazeera America made a similar observation in [an article](#) highlighting that sexual violence against students with disabilities occurs even at universities dedicated to serving them. The article shares student survivors stories, which echo those we've heard from survivors across the country stories of isolation and struggles to find support on their campuses. This raises a question: if a university dedicated to providing a barrier-free education to students who are Deaf and hard of hearing is struggling to address sexual assault and barriers for survivors on their campus, how are other universities addressing the unique needs of student survivors with disabilities and Deaf survivors? The likely and unfortunate answer is that they aren't.

One in five people in the United States identifies as having a disability; 2 million are undergraduate university students nearly 11 percent of the total U.S. undergraduate population. Few national studies explore violence against people with disabilities and Deaf people; even scarcer are ones that focus on college survivors with disabilities. However, what we do know is that people with disabilities and Deaf people are [more likely to experience violent victimization](#) than those without disabilities or who are hearing. Despite having access to services related to their disability, there are often many barriers to mainstream domestic and sexual violence services. Survivors with disabilities have reported that [victim service providers](#) are often not equipped to meet their needs. Meanwhile, [disability service providers](#) are often not familiar with victim services or how to provide support to a survivor of violence. (Vera's Center for Victimization and Safety recently published [a series of guides](#) to help organizations measure their capacity to serve survivors of domestic and sexual assault with disabilities.)

The glaring gaps in services and understanding of the experience of survivors with disabilities and Deaf survivors is not the fault of the current movement. In fact, I would be cautious to place the blame at all. Addressing sexual violence against people with disabilities and Deaf people requires the bridging of the sexual violence movement with the disability rights and Deaf civil rights movements. It requires advocates of these movements to bridge their histories, languages, ideologies, and goals. Communities that have [engaged in the work](#) to improve intervention and prevention for survivors with disabilities attest that it's not easy. But it is a necessary step to creating an inclusive movement that will end sexual violence against everyone.

We are at an exciting place in the history of the movement to end violence against women. To those students who have engaged in the week of action and who are making changes on their campuses, take a moment to consider who is at the table: don't forget about students with disabilities and Deaf students. Reach out and learn about their experiences or barriers they may face in gaining access and support. Make sure that when you challenge your universities to change how they address sexual assault, those changes are for everyone, and that as you build your movement to end sexual assault on college campuses, you aren't leaving anyone behind. Merging movements is not easy, but creating one inclusive movement to end sexual violence is possible.

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