

## **H.O.P.E. OF WNY - Collaborating for Services Accessible to Survivors of All Abilities**

**By Tiffany Pavone**

Many of us get into victim advocacy work to assist those who need help finding their voice or having their voice heard. The same could be said for me. For years as the Director of Operations for the Family Justice Center of Erie County I felt we were doing just that – giving a voice to domestic violence survivors and helping empower them to find their path to safety. However, it sadly came to light that despite the large number of survivors we were reaching, we were failing to reach a population that were not only the most vulnerable to violence, but also had a history of being systematically silenced. While individuals with disabilities are at a much higher risk for victimization, less than 5% of the clients we were serving were individuals with a disability. Something clearly had to change.

To start that change, the Family Justice Center of Erie County partnered with Community Services for Every1, an agency in our community with a lengthy history of working with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, to form an official collaboration funded by the Office on Violence Against Women and formally known as the H.O.P.E. of WNY (Helping Others through Protection and Empowerment). The Collaboration's mission became to improve access to domestic violence services and prevention education for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Initially the Collaboration worked on the partnering agencies' own internal capacity and improved upon safety and accessibility of the processes, procedures, prevention education, and even outreach materials.

Once our Collaboration's own internal capacity was improved, we focused on taking the lessons we learned from our own strategic planning and needs assessment and expand the impact of our work to the other domestic violence and disability providers in our community. We wanted to ensure that regardless of where a survivor enters the system for assistance – whether through a support agency, the police, the courts, etc. – that all survivors, regardless of their abilities, have the same access. We decided the best place to start was to look at the resources and tools that our community uses to support survivors on a daily basis—screening tools, safety plans, and the Danger Assessment.

We only had to take a quick review of these resources to discover that many screening tools being used did not utilize clear, plain language; safety plans did not address the unique risks that people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities face; and that the Danger Assessment was based on evidence-based questions that were also not written in a

universally accessible manner. How could our community truly help survivors if the most basic tools used to assess and plan for safety weren't universally accessible? We were continuing to leave survivors with disabilities out of the equation and keeping their voices silent.

To change this and to bring the H.O.P.E. of WNY's vision to fruition, we worked with a working group that included the partnering agencies of the Collaboration, but also other community partners, such as Catholic Charities of Buffalo, Child & Family Services, and Dr. Jaqueline Campbell of John Hopkins University who developed the Danger Assessment, to create a Safety Guide. The guide provides accessible versions and/or accessibility guides for all three of these vital tools.

While the improvement of all these resources has been a great accomplishment for our Collaboration, we are extremely proud of the work we were able to do in conjunction with Dr. Campbell. Having worked in the victim services field and, specifically domestic violence services, for over 20 years, I know how valuable the Danger Assessment is and its importance is further substantiated by the fact that all of the NYS Office of Child & Family Services licensed domestic violence providers in Erie County, New York use it as the tool for assessing the lethality of a relationship, for safety planning, and for helping survivors understand their potential danger and level of risk.

The heavy reliance on the Danger Assessment is not unique to our community, many other areas depend on the tool as well; it is available in multiple languages, has been adjusted for utilization in police reports, by medical providers, etc., but the one thing that has never been addressed was its overall accessibility. How could we be certain that we were effectively using the tool if it had never been reviewed for overall accessibility? If individuals are not fully able to understand the questions, how are we properly safety planning?

We acknowledged that the questions that comprise the Danger Assessment are evidence-based questions that were created out of years of research by Dr. Campbell and her colleagues. In acknowledging that we also acknowledge the importance of asking the questions the way they were written. But, to ensure that we are getting accurate answers to those questions, when a survivor does not seem to understand a question there should be a way to ask that same question in a plain language, less complex manner.

The Accessibility Guide for the Danger Assessment provides those questions. They are subtle changes to the same questions that uses less complex language. Some of the clarifying questions may even seem very similar to the original, but often it is just helpful to break up compound questions, ask them one at a time, and in plain language assist with both process and comprehension.

For example, the Danger Assessment asks the question “Does your abuser own a gun?” This question is straightforward, but often the word “own” may cause some confusion when an individual may have seen a gun, but not know if their abuser owns it. Understanding the crux of the question is to determine whether an abuser has access to a gun, just changing the verbiage a bit and asking, “have you ever seen a gun” or “has your abuser ever shown you a gun,” can make all the difference.

The Assessment also asks the critical question about strangulation. The term strangulation means different things to different people regardless of their abilities. Therefore, the Accessibility Guide points out the importance of letting individuals explain what exactly happened to them even if that means demonstrating what happened or by using a visual aid, which is also provided in the HOPE of WNY’s overall Safety Guide.

We created alternative language for each of the questions included in the Danger Assessment, so that any advocate conducting the assessment can do so smoothly and not take away from the important conversation they are having with the survivor to try and compose alternative questions. With the Guide advocates are prepared to provide a universally accessible Assessment for every survivor regardless of whether they have a disability.

The Accessibility Guide to the Danger Assessment, as well as the other tools our Collaboration created in our Safety Guide, was just our first step in working toward our mission of creating sustainable, equitable, and holistic change in our community. As we move forward, we are excited to take our Safety Guide, and the accessibility tools within, to as many organizations as possible so anyone working with domestic violence survivors can provide the same authentically inclusive and fully accessible services. We are also working on getting our Office on Violence Against Women approved curriculum on the intersection of domestic violence and intellectual and developmental disabilities out to first responders and law enforcement. We have trainings for service providers, for first responders, as well as an accessible training on healthy relationships.

We know we still have a lot of work to do, but the strides we have made and the progress we have seen keeps us motivated to continue to address the barriers that remain in our community. And you are welcome to share what we have already created.

*If you are interested in our Safety Guide or learning more about our trainings, please reach out to us here at the H.O.P.E. of WNY. As the Project Director, I can be reached at [tpavone@csevery1.com](mailto:tpavone@csevery1.com) or 716-883-8002.*