

Utah Assistive Technology Program Awarded Grant to Boost Accessibility for Victim Services

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Bora Lee, director of the Utah Assistive Technology Program

Nationwide, people with disabilities experience violence at nearly four times the rate of people without disabilities. The need for services is great, but sometimes inaccessibility stands between help and the people who need it.

A three-year, \$600K project funded earlier this fall by the U.S. Department of Justice and led by Utah Assistive Technology Program (UATP) Director Bora Lee seeks to tear down accessibility barriers. It provides training and connects service providers to appropriate assistive technology devices that help people with disabilities live independently throughout the state of Utah.

UATP's partners on the grant are the National Federation for the Blind (NFB) of Utah and the Sego Lily Center for the Abused Deaf. UATP is part of the Institute for Disability Research, Policy and Practice, which is located on the USU Logan campus within the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences.

"What interested me most about this work is recognizing that survivors with disabilities can face additional barriers when trying to access victim services," Lee said. "Those barriers can involve communication, technology, physical access, or simply not knowing what accommodations and resources are available."

She added, "We are working with experts who support people who are blind or have low vision, as well as a victim service organization that specializes in serving people who

are Deaf or hard of hearing. Their expertise helps ensure that the training is grounded in real experiences."

Hildegard Koenig, an advocate who has served as a liaison between UATP, victim services, and underserved communities, explained why accessibility and training are so important. "A lot of times, we work in silos. That's when the survivors will fall in the cracks of the system."

She stressed that disability takes many forms, and it isn't always obvious. People who have experienced domestic violence may have sustained a traumatic brain injury as a result. These injuries can have lifelong effects, but they're often hidden.

Training can prepare service providers to serve victims of all abilities. They will have a better understanding of why a domestic violence victim may have trouble focusing or remembering, or why they are tired all the time. Training can help them know where to go for a portable ramp if a person with disabilities needs one. It can tell them where to find a device to facilitate communication or navigation within a shelter.

NFB-Utah Director Everette Bacon said the technology that helps overcome accessibility barriers to the blind may be unavailable at a domestic violence shelter. For example, if the abuser has been using a mobile phone to track a partner's movements, that phone may be left behind by the victim, or confiscated by the shelter. But the phone may also have an app on it that helps the victim read print.

"The centers themselves are not equipped with any type of technology to help," Bacon said. "Most of the time, blind people who go to those types of facilities for help are treated like they're very dependent on the staff. And the staff is not really understanding how to best fit the need."

Bacon hopes the grant will help service providers connect individuals with the right equipment. A secure phone or iPad, equipped with a visual interpretation service, can do a lot to help a blind client navigate a shelter and access printed material. But more than that, Bacon hopes to improve staff expectations through training offered by the grant.

Erin Kelly Watkins, executive director of the Sego Lily Center for the Abused Deaf said through an interpreter that the deaf community needs to have access for communication. Ninety percent of people who are deaf come from hearing families—sometimes with limited signing skills. Watkins said the result is often language deprivation. "Deaf people are manipulated easily because

of that lack of communication. It leads to isolation, especially for women, especially in rural areas.”

Those who are deaf may struggle to communicate that something is wrong at home. They may be left out of conversations at school about what constitutes abuse. And once they come to a shelter, they may encounter communication and daily living barriers all over again.

Assistive technology like virtual interpreters can help, but Watkins also stressed the need for live interpreters who are not affected by computer glitches or firewalls. Other technology aids could include a flashing alarm to let a deaf mother know her baby is crying, or technology that alerts a hard of hearing individual to an incoming phone call.

Training could also help staff understand the need for interpretation, and that deaf patrons may need longer to fill out forms or paperwork.

“The lasting effect I hope to see is that accessibility becomes part of everyday practice, rather than something organizations think about only when a specific need comes up,” said Lee. “We want providers to feel more confident recognizing barriers, making appropriate accommodations, and knowing when and how to connect with disability-specific experts and resources. A major strength of this work is that we are not approaching accessibility in a general or one-size-fits-all way.”