



Stay Safe East

Supporting disabled survivors of domestic abuse: creating accessible services

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# Stay Safe East

*The only 'by and for' specialist user-led service for disabled survivors of domestic abuse in the UK*

- Violence against women and girls, hate crime, carer abuse, other crime
- Holistic, long term and accessible advocacy for disabled survivors in London; 95% of our DV clients are women, 70% of our other clients
- All our Board, staff and volunteers are disabled people, 95% are women or non-binary
- Training, policy and change: working to make practice and national policies and strategies on violence against women and girls more inclusive of disabled survivors

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# Meeting essential practical needs: safety, shelter, support, food, income, children's safety



- Holistic advocacy on all areas of need: safety, shelter, income, social care, mental health, cultural needs, equipment etc
- Challenges to institutional discrimination in housing, criminal justice etc
- Weekly check that clients have food, heat, meds, mobile top-ups etc, and a large budget for extra phone data, emergency top-ups for gas, electric, food for those who can't use food banks, extra support for clients with No Recourse to Public Funds, help with other costs
- Maximising clients' benefits and protecting them against DWP demands; small grants applications for essential items
- Intensive support to women at risk of having their children taken into care

**Without the basic essentials, it is hard for a woman to start to move on**  
*Challenges? we support 150 survivors, there are 700,000 disabled women in London, 14 million disabled people in the UK*

# Our approach



## Our aim is to 'hold' our clients until they don't need us

- Long-term personalised support
- Time and more time ... and getting to know clients
- Safe presence and touch as part of healing -hugs, holding someone's hand (after Covid), listening, talking about trauma in ways that work for the client
- In depth knowledge of our client's access & communication needs; clients may rely on non-verbal communication to express their feelings
- Contact by phone, What's App and where possible face-to-face
- Weekly (or more if needed) safety and well-being checks to those most at risk of self-harm and suicide



✓ Tip: ... to work with (disabled) survivors, be **resourceful, knowledgeable and 'think outside the box'**

‘By and for’ services are uniquely placed to enhance the self worth of survivors and help recovery:

- Offering the words to describe our experiences on our own terms
- Holistic, and with in depth understanding of survivor needs and experiences
- Specialist risk assessment for disabled survivors
- Extensive knowledge of overcoming barriers to safety and to well-being
- Positive role models for clients seeing a diverse group of disabled women in positions of responsibility and who challenge the system
- Empowering disabled women to take control and offering them choices – independence is about taking control not doing everything ourselves
- Offering disabled women a positive identity as disabled women and that we have other proud identities

**We use our expertise to work for change to policy and practice**

**Nothing About us Without Us!**



# How we think about disability will decide how we approach domestic abuse against disabled survivors



The social model of disability:

**Disability is the social consequence of having an impairment. Society put barriers in the way of disabled people which prevent us from leading an independent life.**

**Being disabled is not the problem. Discrimination is.**

Disabled women are not 'vulnerable' per se - we are put in situations of vulnerability which give power to abusers

✓ **Tip: Take a human rights based approach, as you would for any survivor. Don't treat us as 'other' or vulnerable. Assume we have capacity – you can do things differently.**

## Context: A gendered approach to domestic abuse against disabled women

*“An important way to understand the impact of violence against disabled women is to examine the intersection of different forms of oppression-discrimination, such as disablism, racism and sexism/misogyny, ageism and homophobia which interact simultaneously and contribute to structural inequality and systemic injustice.”*

*Dr Ravi Thiara, University of Warwick*

**Domestic abuse does not happen a vacuum, but in the context of wider power structures which marginalise disabled women and at times deny our very existence.**



# Context: Violence against disabled women

- Abuse happens throughout the life course – more than 60% of Stay Safe East's female DA clients have experienced more than one form of abuse
- Abuse may be/have been physical, sexual, financial, coercive control, psychological from
  - **a partner or family member: denial of independence, controlling behaviour, financial abuse, forced marriage, greater incidence of physical and sexual abuse**
  - **paid or unpaid 'carers' – agency staff, carers, neighbours, personal assistants (not in current DA definition)**
  - **Institutions:** physical and sexual abuse, denial of human rights, expectation of compliance
  - **Rape and sexual violence** (32% of referrals to Rape Crisis England)
  - **Hate crime** on the street, by neighbours, at school or work, within relationships, online, or related to cuckooing or gang violence

*Yet... across England only 7.6% of victims referred to MARACs are identified as disabled. 22% of UK population are disabled, disabled women are **2 to 3 times more likely to be victims of domestic abuse***



# Organisational responses to disabled survivors

- Limited information aimed at disabled survivors or in accessible formats
- Disbelief - 'How could anyone abuse a disabled person?' 'She's got mental health issues, it's in her head/it's for her own good'
- Inaction by police and others, victim blaming
- A national safeguarding system which regularly fails disabled survivors
- Removal of our children
- Multiple barriers in the way of reporting to police or other services
- Lack of accessible refuges spaces or alternatives to refuges
- Very low conviction rates for rape, domestic abuse and institutional abuse against disabled women

*If I call the police, he'll end up  
dead in a police station"*



Will they put me  
in a home?



Will they take my  
baby away?



# What does an accessible service look like?

A service grounded in the social model of disability: we are not the problem, discrimination and exclusion is the problem and must be addressed

- A welcoming of and **respect for difference**
- **Time** – to listen, to support clients facing multiple barriers, to help them move towards recovery and control over their lives (6 weeks doesn't work!)
- **Flexible** services that work on the terms of the client not the provider
- **Advocacy support** for the client to tackle the barriers and obstructions in the system (housing, social care, mental health, justice etc) Communication support and information on tap – BSL, Makaton, spoken community languages
- **Accessible premises and facilities:** e.g. 'Refuge for All' standards (and information about access)
- **Disability informed and understands disability related risks**
- **Peer support** – disabled women supporting disabled women
- Disabled staff, volunteers, Board members – **Nothing About Us Without Us**

# What does an inclusive approach to domestic abuse look like?

Recognise the complexity of intersectionality – how do we address the needs of e.g women with learning disabilities from Gypsy, Roma or Traveller backgrounds?

**Commissioning services that meet the needs of disabled survivors**

Inclusion quality standards for refuges, IDVA services, counselling etc

Support to develop a network of specialist services by and for disabled survivors

Disability Equality and Domestic Abuse training for all staff in the sector

Equal access to housing, social care and other support

**Nothing about Us, Without Us** – services shaped by disabled survivors

**Thank you for listening!**

**Stay Safe East**

*(casework: London only. Training: national)*

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**Other services:**

**Sign Health** – by and for Deaf survivors

<https://signhealth.org.uk/for-professionals/domestic-abuse-service/>

**Respond** – therapeutic services for people with learning disabilities/difficulties who are survivors of abuse <https://respond.org.uk/>