

# **SAFETY PLANNING: A GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES**

Published by the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (NCALL), a project of the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WCADV)

*The Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WCADV) is a statewide membership organization of domestic abuse programs, formerly battered women, and other individuals who have joined together to speak with one voice against domestic abuse. As a statewide resource center on domestic violence, we offer such services as:*

- Training and technical assistance to domestic abuse programs;
- A quarterly newsletter;
- Forums for the involvement of battered women;
- Networking and support for programs for battered women and for professionals in related fields;
- Training for professional in legal, medical, social service, child welfare, housing, education, and mental health fields and for employers throughout Wisconsin;
- Technical legal assistance for attorneys, legal advocates, prosecutors and public defenders and limited funds for victims to acquire direct legal assistance.

**The National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (NCALL)** is a project of WCADV. NCALL's mission is: to eliminate abuse of older adults and people with disabilities by family members and caregivers by challenging beliefs, policies, practices and systems that allow abuse to occur; and to improve safety, services and support to victims through advocacy and education.

NCALL has instituted a national speaker's bureau to provide training and consultation throughout the nation on abuse in later life. The project provides and is creating printed and other materials on the issues of abuse against the aging and individuals with disabilities. Staff are also available to provide technical assistance on issues related to abuse in later life.

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**Domestic violence is widespread in the United States.** National and state-wide surveys taken over a fifteen year period indicate that between four and six million women a year are physically assaulted by an intimate male partner (current or former spouse or boyfriend) (Feurerstein, 1997). Although all women are at risk for being battered, those women who are elderly, who have physical, developmental, and/or cognitive disabilities, may be at even greater risk. Only recently have domestic violence practitioners turned their attention to the needs of victims who, for a variety of circumstances, have not received existing domestic violence services.

According to a 1994 study conducted by Dr. Richard Sobsey, women with physical disabilities are more likely than other women to be victims of domestic violence (Sobsey, 1994). Further, the abuse is often more severe, resulting in more chronic injuries. The Colorado Department of Health estimates that 85 percent of women with disabilities are battered compared to 25 to 50 percent of the general population (Safe Place-Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Survival Center, 1998). Although most studies have focused on women with disabilities, some recent studies have shown that men with disabilities experience a similar high rate of abuse.

This safety plan is designed to help adults with physical disabilities who have been or may be abused by an intimate partner, spouse, adult child, other family member, personal assistant, or caregiver. This safety plan can also be useful for people with mental, cognitive, developmental disabilities, and those who have hidden disabilities. The brochure includes sections on: planning for an explosive incident; safety during an explosive incident; safety in your home; safety when preparing to leave; safety in public settings; and safety with a restraining order. It is important to realize that the suggestions listed here will not apply to everyone's circumstances. Please view this as a guide to help prepare your own individualized safety plan. You can seek assistance from a domestic violence advocate or a trusted person. Please take extra precaution when weapons are in the home.

## **CONTENTS**

**Planning for an Explosive Incident**

**Safety During an Explosive Incident**

**Safety When Preparing to Leave**

**Safety in Your Home**

**Safety with a Restraining Order**

**Safety in Public Settings**

**Your Safety & Emotional Health**

**Consider Taking the Following Items if You Leave:**

**Important Telephone Numbers:**

**References:**

## PLANNING FOR AN EXPLOSIVE INCIDENT

- ◆ **Set-up alternative personal assistance if needed.** Call ahead and talk with a caseworker, independent living center, or disability organization to identify emergency personal attendant (PA)/caregivers if you foresee the need to leave or have an abusive PA/caregiver removed. Contact a trustworthy friend or family member to arrange a transition period PA/caregiver.
- ◆ **Practice how to get out of your home safely if possible.** Visualize your escape route and means of escaping. Identify the best doors, elevator, or stairwell. If you are unable to exit, try to position yourself where shouting may attract attention (keep windows partially open, or move near to a wall attached to another apartment or building).
- ◆ **Have ready** spare medication, medical supplies and adaptive equipment, money, change or a telephone card, extra set of keys, and clothes for you and your children/grandchildren. Keep these items in one place so they can be obtained if you have to leave quickly. Seek the help of a safe person if you need assistance.
- ◆ **Plan ahead for where you will go, if you have to leave.** You or a safe individual/agency can contact a domestic violence shelter to discuss whether their facility is accessible. Ask the following: Are PA/caregiver services available? Can PA/caregiver accompany person? Are there rules that require someone seeking shelter to be dropped off at alternate location and if there is an exception for a person with a disability? If the shelter it is not accessible, or you do not wish to use a shelter, locate an alternative safe haven option.
- ◆ **Ask a neighbor, or someone who has regular contact to call the police** if they hear a disturbance or have not seen you for a period of time. Also, have other individuals you regularly visit (doctor, PA/caregiver, caseworker) contact police or adult protective services if you miss appointments (if this will not place you in further danger). Consider other individuals such as delivery people, postal workers and van drivers who can also contact police if behavior or routine changes.
- ◆ **Devise a code word or signal** to use with your children, grandchildren, PA/caregiver, friends, doctor, and others to communicate you need the police.

## SAFETY DURING AN EXPLOSIVE INCIDENT

- ◆ **Plan out actions and safety precautions during a non-explosive period.**
- ◆ If you can see an argument coming, (often you can not), **try to go to a room or area that has an accessible exit.** Do not go to a bathroom (near hard surfaces), a kitchen (knives) or any room with weapons. If you have mobility limitations, see if you can have your PA/caregiver move you to a safer room. If your PA/caregiver is your abuser, make an excuse for the move unless it would only further escalate the situation.
- ◆ Try to **stay in a room with a telephone** so you can call 911, the police, a friend or a neighbor. Keep a cordless or cellular telephone with you if possible. You may be able to tuck it by your side, in your wheelchair, walker or scooter. Turn the ringer off so your abuser does not become aware of the telephone. Program 911 and other safety numbers into the speed dial for easier use. If you have difficulty with verbal communication, use a cordless telephone where a call to 911 can be traced and assistance will normally be sent regardless of verbal communication. Consider a medical alert device, which can be worn at all times without suspicion, and used to call for help.
- ◆ If you need personal assistance with tasks and your PA/caregiver is your abuser, try to **have assistance done early in the day** when, you are as mobile and alert as possible in case of an emergency. Make sure to keep mobility and other necessary aids nearby. If the PA/caregiver is your abuser, try not to have them perform personal tasks (like bathing, toileting, dressing, transferring, etc.) at times when the PA/caregiver is agitated or has been drinking. You are at greater risk of physical injury during those times.
- ◆ If weapons are in the home, **inform law enforcement, adult protective services or your caseworker.**
- ◆ **Use your instinct and judgment.** If a situation is very dangerous and you are unable to escape or have your abuser removed, consider any action that might calm things down. Try to give yourself time to assess what action you can take or assistance you can get to keep safe.
- ◆ Always remember – **YOU DO NOT DESERVE TO BE THREATENED OR HIT!**

## SAFETY WHEN PREPARING TO LEAVE

- ◆ **Open a saving account** in your own name to establish or increase your independence. If you receive Social Security (SSI/SSDI) benefit checks, have them directly deposited in that account. It can take a couple months for the direct deposit change, so plan ahead if possible. Be prepared to intercept confirmation letter that Social Security will send.
- ◆ **Open a post office box** where you can receive mail unknown to your abuser. Find a trusted friend, family member, PA/caregiver, or caseworker that can assist in getting items from the post office box if needed.
- ◆ **If you have a payee** for your SSI/SSDI benefits and the payee is your abuser, contact the Social Security Administration to change your payee. You may be able to get assistance through a caseworker, domestic violence shelter, disabilities organization or adult protective services. Again, caution is important because loss of financial control may be perceived as threatening to the abuser and the violence may escalate.
- ◆ **Leave or have someone assist you in leaving** money, extra keys, copies of important documents (birth certificate, marriage license, Social Security award letter, etc.), and extra clothes with someone you trust so you can leave quickly.
- ◆ **Bring any medications**, prescriptions, glasses, hearing aids, or other assistive devices you need. When appropriate, plan how a service animal can accompany you. Keep all these items together in one place so they are easily available.
- ◆ **Determine who** you can stay with temporarily, and who can lend you money. Contact your caseworker, independent living center and/or, county/tribal aging unit to identify emergency or other financial benefits you may be entitled to after leaving your abuser.
- ◆ See “Planning for an Explosive Incident” (page 2) if you need personal assistance. Try to build a **network of friends, family members, and faith community members** who can provide assistance during your transition. You must plan ahead for PA/caregiver services as needed so they are available at the time of leaving. The more prepared the new PA/caregiver is for the emergency situation, the more likely they will be able to provide good and safe care.
- ◆ **Keep the domestic abuse program number close at hand**, written down where abuser will not find it or give to a safe individual to contact for you. Keep some change or a telephone calling card with you at all times for emergency telephone calls. Consider programming the domestic violence shelter number into a cellular telephone. Find out if the shelter is physically accessible for you, and if not, search for other safe emergency housing. Remember to ask about whether PA/caregiver service is available at the shelter or if your PA/caregiver will be able to come to the shelter to assist you. For those with hearing impairments, contact or have someone safe contact the shelter, prior to an emergency, to check if the shelter has a TTY or other safe means of communication.

- ◆ **Plan for transportation to leave an abusive situation or seek support.** Make sure your vehicle and any adaptations are in working order. Keep the gas tank at least half full so you always have enough gas if you need to leave in a hurry. Most transportation services require 24-hour notice so you will have to plan your leaving in advance. Use care to keep your abuser from learning your plans. If you use special transportation services, give the transit company the name of a place you regularly go but not the address of where you really want to go, so your abuser will not get suspicious. If you are not currently using special transportation services and are eligible, consider applying.
  
- ◆ **Review your safety plan** as often as possible in order to plan the safest way to leave. Keep safe friends, family and others who can assist you in leaving informed.

**REMEMBER – LEAVING CAN BE THE MOST DANGEROUS TIME.**



## **SAFETY IN YOUR HOME**

(if your abuser does not live with you)

- ◆ **Have the locks changed** on your doors as soon as possible. Buy additional locks, safety devices, and/or security system to secure your windows and doors (keep closed and locked at all times even when expecting visitors). Consider installing or increasing outside lighting. A locksmith or your landlord can help install extra security devices. You may be able to receive financial assistance through victim assistance programs.
- ◆ If you have young children, grandchildren, or other dependents living with you, **devise a safety plan** for when you are not with them. Inform their school, day care, etc., about who has permission to pick them up and who does not.
- ◆ **Inform neighbors, landlord, and other individuals you regularly see** (postal workers, delivery people, and van drivers) that your abuser no longer lives with you. Ask them to call the police if they see your abuser near you, your home or your work.
- ◆ Find friends, family members, faith community members, PA/caregivers, postal workers, delivery people, van drivers or others that can **check on you regularly**.
- ◆ **Change your telephone number and e-mail address** and have the new number unlisted and unpublished. You may be able to get financial assistance through victim assistance.
- ◆ **Screen telephones calls** by either an answering machine, caller identification, or assistance of another. Keep a record of harassing or threatening telephone calls and e-mail messages by your abuser.
- ◆ **Inform the police** of the domestic violence situation and your special needs if your abuser attempts to harass or assault you. Have a written note or other means of communicating (number to call) that will let police know about history and extent of abuse if verbal communication is difficult or not possible.
- ◆ You, your friends, neighbors and others who are regularly in your neighborhood can **watch for stalking behavior from your abuser**. Keep a log of when, where and who saw your abuser near you.

## SAFETY WITH A RESTRAINING ORDER

- ◆ **For information on obtaining a protection/restraining order** contact or have someone contact a local domestic violence program/shelter or your local clerk of court.
- ◆ If you obtain a protection/restraining order ask the court to order your **abuser to stay at least 500 feet away from you** at all times.
- ◆ **Keep your protection/restraining order with you at all times.** When you change your purse, wallet, wheelchair or scooter pack, this should be the first thing you place in it. If you lose or damage your protection/restraining order, you should get another authenticated copy for a small fee from the county or tribal clerk of court office. Keep extra copies of your protection/restraining order where you can find them in case your abuser takes your copy.
- ◆ If you have a **valid protection/restraining order issued by another state or tribe**, it is enforceable where you now live. **The Full Faith and Credit federal and state law requires all states and Indian tribes to enforce “valid” protection/restraining orders issued by another state or Indian tribe.** This means a protection/restraining order issued in one jurisdiction must be enforced by all other jurisdictions. Even if a person would not be eligible for a protection/restraining order in the new state or Indian land, the new state or tribe must still enforce the valid protection/restraining order from another state or Indian land as it is originally written.

**A person with an out-of-state or other Indian tribal protection/restraining order should contact a domestic violence agency in their current state or Indian tribe to find out if there are any special procedures for interstate enforcement.** Police officers should enforce out-of-state or other Indian tribe protection/restraining orders if they contain both parties' names and have not yet expired. Police officers are often concerned about liability for false arrest in enforcing out-of-state or other Indian tribe protection/restraining orders without contacting the court. Yet, officers should also be aware that they may face liability for failure to arrest.

- ◆ **Call or have someone contact the police** if your abuser violates the conditions of the restraining order. Document with the police every violation.
- ◆ **Think of alternative ways to keep safe** in case the police do not respond right away.
- ◆ **Wait somewhere away from abuser** for police to arrive.
- ◆ **Inform** (family, friends, neighbors, supervisor, human resource department, trusted co-workers, PAs/caregivers, and caseworkers) that you have a restraining order in effect and identify your abuser. You may wish to give some of these people a copy of the protection/restraining order.

## **SAFETY IN PUBLIC SETTINGS**

(At school, on the job or at social, recreational or volunteer activities)

- ◆ **Decide who you will inform of your situation.** This could include your school, office or building security (provide a picture of your abuser if possible).
- ◆ Use an answering machine or another person to **screen your telephone calls.**
- ◆ **Devise a safety plan for when you are out in public.** Have someone escort you to your car, bus, taxi or other transportation. If possible, use a variety of routes to go home. Specialized vans routes are usually fixed so be prepared to work with the driver or others to plan for safety. Contact someone to let them know when you will arrive at your destination so they can check on your safe arrival. Think about what you would do if something happened while going to your destination.
- ◆ **Carry a cellular telephone programmed with 911.** 911 cannot trace the location of cellular telephones. If you can not communicate your location, have someone assist you if possible.
- ◆ Ask your **workplace to discuss safety planning** with you and put a plan into place.
- ◆ If you obtain a restraining order, ask the court to **order your abuser to not come to your workplace or school and to order your abuser to stay at least 500 feet away from you at all times.**
- ◆ Carry your restraining order with you and **give a copy to trustworthy people at your job, school or volunteer sites.**
- ◆ **Become familiar with the entrance and exits from any public building you frequent** so you know how to escape if necessary.

## YOUR SAFETY & EMOTIONAL HEALTH

- ◆ If you are thinking of returning to or staying in a potentially abusive situation, **discuss an alternative plan** with someone you trust.
- ◆ **If you have to communicate or be with your abuser**, arrange to do so in a way that makes you feel safest, whether by telephone, writing a letter, e-mail or in the company of a third person. If you choose to see your abuser, protect yourself by doing so with a third party.
- ◆ **Have positive thoughts about yourself** and be assertive with others about your needs. Independent living centers, support groups and therapy can be helpful in building positive self-esteem and assertiveness skills.
- ◆ **Take care of your physical needs:** ask for assistance when needed.
- ◆ **Read or listen** to books, articles, music or poems that give you strength. The public library, independent living centers, and/or domestic violence programs may have these materials available in alternative forms.
- ◆ **Decide who you can call to talk freely and openly with**, and who can give you the support you need. Consider contacting a domestic violence hotline or having someone contact a domestic violence hotline to strategize accessible support programs. Independent living centers and domestic violence shelters can work together to be more accommodating to safety and disability issues.
- ◆ Plan to **attend a womens' or victims' support group** for at least two weeks to gain support from others and learn more about yourself and your relationship. If a support group is physically inaccessible, ask for accommodations to be made. Also, work with your local independent living center to find supportive and knowledgeable counseling resources.

## **CONSIDER TAKING THE FOLLOWING ITEMS IF YOU LEAVE:**

**If you cannot take these items, have a copy of each paper item in your escape bag. However, remember that no item is more valuable than your safety.**

### **Documentation**

- ◆ Restraining or protection orders
- ◆ Driver's license or state I.D. card
- ◆ Birth certificates for you and your family members.
- ◆ Documents such as Social Security card, Social Security award letter, proof of disability, work permit, green card, passport
- ◆ Divorce and custody papers
- ◆ Lease, rental agreement, and/or house deed
- ◆ Car registration/car insurance papers
- ◆ Fixed route bus pass, mobility ID card, or special transit ID card

### **Financial**

- ◆ Money, bank books, checkbooks, credit cards, ATM cards and mortgage payment book.
- ◆ Food stamps/AFDC Card

### **Medical**

- ◆ Insurance papers, Medicaid, Medical Assistance, clinic card, medical records, doctors orders and prescriptions
- ◆ Adaptive equipment (service animals, wheelchairs, shower bench, crutches, communication device, etc.)
- ◆ Medications, urological supplies, glasses, hearing aids, assistive devices needed for you and your children, grandchildren and dependents

### **General Items**

- ◆ Keys – house/car/office

- ◆ Personal items such as an address book, pictures (you, your children/grandchildren and your abuser), jewelry and items of sentimental value for you and your children/grandchildren
- ◆ Supplies for service animals
- ◆ Small, favorite toy of children/grandchildren who are leaving with you
- ◆ Toiletries/diapers
- ◆ Names and numbers of home health agencies, caseworkers and other disability service providers to assist in coordinating services for you
- ◆ Phone numbers of friends or past PAs/caregivers who might be willing to help with personal care task during transitional period, and provide you with emotional support

**IMPORTANT TELEPHONE NUMBERS:**

For information about domestic abuse services outside your community, call the following numbers:

**National Domestic Violence Hotline** at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or 1-800-787-3234 (TTY).

For information on Full Faith and Credit:

**Full Faith and Credit Project of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence** at 1-800-903-0111

For other information specific to abuse against individuals with disabilities contact:

**National Council on Independent Living** at 1-703-525-3406, 1-703-525-4153 (TTY)

**Personal Safety Awareness Center** at 1-512-385-5181, 1-512-482-0691 (TTY)

(Personal Safety for Individuals with Disabilities)

**National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life** at 1-608-255-0539

Local Numbers:

Police \_\_\_\_\_

Domestic Abuse Program \_\_\_\_\_

Adult Protective Services \_\_\_\_\_

Independent Living Center \_\_\_\_\_

Aging Unit (Tribal or County) \_\_\_\_\_  
(if 60 or 65 – depending on state eligibility guidelines)

Health Care Provider \_\_\_\_\_

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