

From the Front of the Room

An Advocate's Guide to Help Prepare Survivors for Public Speaking

Developed by



National Resource Center
on Domestic Violence

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Introduction

Including the voices and real life experiences of survivors is crucial to our work to end intimate partner violence and abuse in later life¹ at the local, state and national level. Hearing directly from survivors about their experiences and the impact of domestic violence on their lives can inspire and energize others to act, as well as help reduce or remove barriers faced by survivors and their children. For survivors interested in sharing their story, public speaking can connect them in important ways to the larger domestic violence intervention and prevention efforts in their community and across the country. Opportunities for survivors to share their stories may include:

- Presenting to community groups at public awareness events
- Speaking before state and local government in support of legislation to enhance protections for victims of domestic violence
- Participating in magazine, television or newspaper interviews (anonymously if desired)
- Joining candlelight vigils, marches, rallies, or speaking at a memorial event for victims
- Being part of a domestic violence program's fund raising event
- Talking with a program's Board of Directors or agreeing to have their story included in the annual report of a local, state or national domestic violence organization
- Speaking at life skills development groups, parenting classes, asset building workshops or other types of empowerment groups for survivors
- Providing encouragement during a victim's support group
- Being featured as a keynote speaker at a conference or Domestic Violence Awareness Month event

¹ Domestic or Sexual Abuse in Later Life is abuse perpetrated on victims who are 50 years and older by someone with whom they have an ongoing relationship where there is an expectation of trust such as an intimate partner, adult child, other family member or a caregiver.

For the purposes of this publication, the term “**Survivor Speaker**” will be used to refer to any survivor of domestic violence, adult exposed to domestic violence as a child, a victim of elder abuse or neglect, or a surviving family member of domestic violence homicide victims who wish to speak out and share how domestic violence has impacted their lives, family, and community. Survivor speakers can be female or male, adults of any age, of any race or ethnicity, from any faith or religious tradition, and diverse in a myriad of other ways.

NOTE: This Guide often refers to victim/survivors as women victimized by male partners or ex-partners, since women disproportionately represent domestic violence victims. However, men abused by female partners and men and women abused in same-sex relationships also have important stories to tell and deserve both opportunities and support as public speakers.

Purpose

From the Front of the Room (Guide) provides a basic overview of the issues that face survivors who desire to speak publicly about their experiences with intimate partner violence. It provides guidance for both the survivor speaker and victim advocates seeking to maximize the survivor's physical and emotional safety and ensure the overall success of the speaking engagement. The Guide is organized into two parts: one designed for victim advocates helping to prepare survivors for public speaking and one designed for survivors of domestic violence as they explore the journey of sharing their story with the public. The Guide for victim advocates is organized into the following four (4) sections:

- Tips for Survivor Speakers
- Tips for Advocates
- Considerations for Specific Populations
- Survivor Speaker's Safety Planning Guide

We encourage victim advocates to read through the Tips for Survivors to help understand issues that may arise for them as they consider telling their story publicly. This section is also available as a companion piece that may be handed out to survivors with whom you are working.

While every situation is different, the guidelines, considerations, and ideas that follow can help ensure the public speaking opportunity is as safe and informative as possible. The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRC DV) welcomes any feedback readers have to enhance the guidance and resources provided here.

“

I can remember watching fascinated as our mother talked with her mother, sisters, and women friends. The intimacy and intensity of their speech—the satisfaction they received from talking to one another, the pleasure, the joy. It was in this world of woman speech, loud talk, angry words, women with tongues quick and sharp, tender sweet tongues, touching our world with their words, that I made speech my birthright—and the right to voice, to authorship, a privilege I would not be denied.”

bell hooks, *Talking Back* (1989)

Tips for Survivor Speakers

As a survivor, are you considering if, how, and when to share your story with the public? Do you wonder what it would be like to step into the role of a public speaker? This section includes frequently asked questions and tangible steps that can help you make some of these decisions and develop a plan for sharing your story if you decide to do so.

Am I ready to start telling my story?

There are several considerations that can inform a Survivor Speaker's decision to tell her story publicly. Issues related to safety, physical and emotional well-being, and the overall impact on others of sharing a personal story all deserve attention. Questions such as, is it safe to share my story publicly? Do I really want to share my story or am I feeling that I SHOULD? Who could help me figure this out? These are some of the points we encourage you to consider as you decide whether or not to share your experiences with others in a public forum. Sorting through these questions can be challenging. However, victim advocates, other survivor speakers, and often family and friends can help inform your decision. Keep in mind that while others could provide you with support during this process, it is ultimately your personal decision to take this step.

How might telling my story impact my safety and well-being, my children and others I care about?

Impact on your emotional well-being

Speaking about traumatic events that you have experienced may produce strong emotional and physical reactions for you. While many survivors feel strong and empowered after telling their story, some survivor speakers also describe being exhausted and emotionally spent after public speaking events. Some have had flashbacks and nightmares or experience depression in the hours and days after sharing their story. Some have also experienced physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomachaches after presentations. Others have noted how helpful it was to have someone supportive at the presentation or later in the day when they

returned home. Some survivors prefer to clear their schedule before and/or after the event to allow adequate time for processing and reflection. Others plan self-care activities such as being with family and friends, spending quiet time, or going for a walk.

Impact on children: respecting your children's boundaries

Depending on their ages, your children may or may not be aware of many of the details of the abuse you experienced. As you contemplate whether or not to tell your story publicly, consider how your children might feel about you bringing this information out into the public arena. Even if they do know the details, hearing about the events again may be embarrassing or upsetting to them. If the person who abused you is also their parent, ask the children how they feel about you sharing that story with strangers. Usually, there are aspects of your story that can be shared even if you leave out specific details that your children wish to keep private.

Ongoing risks from the person who abused you

Remember that the person who abused you, or his/her friends and family, may hear about your presentation. As you think about whether you are ready to become a survivor speaker, consider whether it is safe for you to do so. Some survivors who have publicly shared their stories were stalked or threatened by their former partner even though the relationship had ended years ago. Some abusers have threatened to sue organizations that have asked the victim of their abuse to speak. If you have any concerns about current or future safety risks, explore these with an advocate and review the guidance in this guide.

NOTE: There may also be a potential impact on family members, friends, co-workers, and community in general of telling your story. Think about some possible scenarios as you are preparing and "walk through them." For example, your family and/or friends may be surprised to learn about your abuse, or upset that you never told them about it. They may feel that you should not be telling "family secrets." The victim advocate working with you would be an important source of support while assisting you with this process.

TIP If you have a pending legal case, such as child custody or divorce proceedings that involve the person who abused you, be mindful of how information that you might share as a survivor speaker could be used as evidence.



We recommend that survivors with an open court case not share their story publicly – the unintended consequences for you or your children could be too great.

Visualize a Positive Outcome

As you consider whether to become a survivor speaker, take time to visualize a speaking event unfolding in the way you want it to and the ways that it might make you feel strong and grounded. Remember all of the ways that you have been creative and resilient in your journey of survival, and imagine how inspired you and others will feel after you finish sharing your story. Many survivors have made use of a personal, encouraging mantra, a passage from a faith-based text, or motto as a form of positive self-talk throughout the day and prior to the event.

Another way to help you decide if you are ready to become a survivor speaker is to practice telling your story to a friend or trusted person who may not know too much about your survivor story. As you are telling your story, pay attention to any physical sensations that you may experience like muscle tension in the neck or headaches, pay attention to any emotional experiences you may have (e.g., sadness or anxiety). After you are done practicing, check in internally to see how the experience was for you. Pay attention to any feelings you may have afterwards or if you experience any flashbacks or nightmares. If it felt too overwhelming or intense then this can help you decide whether or not you'd like to become a survivor speaker at this time.

² The majority of domestic violence and sexual assault programs require specific training before someone is able to become a volunteer for their organization.

I am ready to share my story. What's the first step?

Domestic violence victim advocates play a crucial role in empowering survivors who are exploring the possibility of becoming public speakers. Building a relationship with advocates in the community has benefits on many levels:

Networking Opportunities

Most local programs have a variety of volunteer opportunities² that assist survivors in making connections with victim advocates and other survivors. Some have social action groups or caucuses of survivors who meet regularly, lead community awareness activities or act as a speaker's bureau for the agency. This might be a good place to find opportunities to talk with other survivors about their public speaking experiences. When community agencies are seeking information about domestic violence speakers for events, they are likely to contact the local domestic violence program for recommendations.

Assistance and Support

For most survivor speakers, preparing and giving a public presentation will trigger strong emotions, and complex memories about the person who abused them, whether it be their former partner, a partner with whom they are still in contact, an adult child, an adult caregiver, or their parent if they are an adult speaking out about the abuse they were exposed to as a child. Victim advocates can provide support in preparing your presentation and can help in processing the range of feelings that might arise for you.

Gaining Perspective

The local domestic violence program will have a wealth of information on domestic violence, its impact on families and communities, and current intervention and prevention efforts within your community, state, territory or tribe. Volunteering with

³ See note at 2.

the program can help you place your own individual experiences within a broader context of domestic violence as a public health and public safety issue. There may be opportunities to connect your story to a specific project, legislative effort, or event that is being planned in the community.

If you do not know how to contact the domestic violence program in your community, the state domestic violence coalition can help you. A complete list of contact information for all domestic and sexual violence coalitions across the United States and its Territories can be found at <http://www.vawnet.org/links/state-coalitions.php>. Some state coalitions coordinate a Speaker's Bureau and this might be a good way to find opportunities to talk with other survivors about their experiences as survivor speakers.

How do I prepare to tell my story?

Remember: It is your story

Tell about your experience with intimate partner violence – what happened and how it affected you and the people you care about. Perhaps you can describe how the violence and abuse affected your daily life and the factors that influenced the choices you made. If you are still in contact with the person who abused you, it may be helpful for the audience to hear about those dynamics and understand your motivation for remaining in contact. Share as much or as little as you feel comfortable. The audience wants to hear your story.

As you choose what to say, think about who helped you. What did they say or do that made a difference to you? What created obstacles for you? Find a way to describe how things could have been improved in the way others responded to you, without blaming or accusing the audience.

Don't feel that you need to include statistics, unless you are asked to do so. It is always appropriate to defer to or refer your audience to the local domestic violence program or state coalition for information that you do not feel prepared to

address. If, however, you would like to be able to provide some statistics or general information about the local domestic violence program's service levels, talk with the program to obtain this data. Be sure to periodically obtain updated information.

Outline what you want to say

You will likely have much more material than may be necessary for one presentation. Think about the most powerful experiences you have had, situations that represent a point of learning for you (possibly an "aha moment"), and details that might speak specifically to the audience you will be addressing. Too much information may cause an overload for the audience or they could become lost in the story.

You may want to prepare an outline of a full presentation, including all that you think you may be comfortable sharing. You can use the outline to prioritize what aspects of your story you will want to share for different types of events. For example, a 30-45 minute address to open a conference will look very different than a 10-12 minute presentation as part of a panel during a workshop.

As mentioned above, it would be useful for you to practice your presentation; this can be in its entirety or only parts of it. Practicing will help you see if any intense emotions or physical reactions may come up for you. During the practice, you can take time to plan how you will cope with intense emotions (e.g., taking long deep breaths or holding onto something that is soothing while you speak). Also, practicing will help you feel more confident for the "real" presentation.

NOTE: If you share custody of your children with the person who abused you, be mindful of saying anything that could be used against you in a future court action. Once something is stated publicly, or quoted in the newspaper or on television, it might be introduced in court proceedings. As you think of what you want to include, consider "is it safe for me to say this?" Depending upon how likely it is for the person who abused you to hear about your role as survivor speaker, and any fears you may have in this area, it may be helpful to have your comments reviewed by a legal advocate from a domestic violence program.

It is generally better not to publicly identify the abuser or describe the abuser in a way that makes him/her easily identifiable unless that person has been convicted of domestic violence or a court has issued a protection order or other finding that the abuser committed violence against you. For example, if the abuser is the chief surgeon at the local hospital, it is better not to reference that position, because some people in the community could quickly identify them. If the abuser has not been found to have committed abuse by a court of law, and you name them publicly, an abuser might accuse you of libel or slander or claim intentional emotional harm. Again, it can be very helpful to have your comments reviewed by a legal advocate or attorney to be sure you are not exposed to retaliatory actions by the abuser who is still a threat to you.

HELPFUL CONTENT THAT EDUCATES LISTENERS

“What didn’t help in my healing? It didn’t help when people looked away and pretended that the abuse wasn’t happening. One of my most painful memories was when my husband was beating me in front of some of his friends and they didn’t do anything to help. They just sat there in my living room watching some game on TV while my husband assaulted me. That was an extreme example, but there were others. My family and friends knew what was going on, but they didn’t ever say anything to me like, ‘You don’t deserve this.’”⁴

“What helped me most? The battered women’s program helped me build up my self-esteem, and they helped me find what I needed to begin to think about my needs and well-being. I got into a support group, and I found out that other women have had the same experience and they have survived. I got back into school at the tribal college, and I’m studying to be a teacher.”⁵

⁴ North Dakota Council on Abused Women’s Services/Coalition Against Sexual Assault, “Women are Sacred”, booklet, p.12.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Women Helping Battered Women, Domestic Violence Program in Chittendon County, Vermont. <http://www.whbw.org/a-survivors-story/>

“There is a stereotype that intimate partner violence occurs only in low-income, poorly educated, minority, or ‘dysfunctional’ families. The fact is, intimate partner violence occurs in every community, among people of every age, religion and race, sexual orientation, and at every economic level. This is my story.

Five years ago, one week before my thirtieth birthday, I was living in a desirable neighborhood in New York City. I had a high-ranking position working for the State of New York. I had experienced physical and emotional abuse from my husband over the course of three years. There were risk factors early on in the relationship including: a push for quick involvement, jealousy, unrealistic expectations, and isolation, blaming others for problems, sudden mood swings, and threats of violence. The violence was not an isolated, individual event. One battering episode built upon past episodes and set the stage for future ones. There were a wide range of consequences, some physically injurious and some not; all were painful, especially the emotional abuse and humiliation.”⁶

“I think you have to have people around you that know the same thing that you’re going through because people don’t understand... It would be nice if a social worker came with the police, because when the police take your son, and they handcuff him and take him out of the house, there’s nobody there for you to put their arm around you and say it’s going to be alright, what can I do for you? You’re left in a kind of empty situation.”⁷

Create notes that you can use when you speak

Even though you know the details of your story well, having notes will help you if you lose your train of thought. Once you have told your story repeatedly, you may not need them, but as you begin speaking, the notes may help you feel more confident. Remember that when you speak, your notes will most likely be on the podium, so you will need to write or print them in a font size large enough for you to read from a distance.

⁷ “In their Own Words: Domestic Abuse in Later Life”, Disk 2: Topical Segment and Interactive Workshop. Office of Victims of Crime and National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life. 2008.

What do I need to know about the event?

Know your audience

Seek information about the audience to whom you will speak. How many people will be there? Will the audience include primarily other victims/survivors, only women, people from a particular age group, law enforcement, court or health care professionals, general community members, or be a mixed audience? For example, you may tell your story in a different way when speaking to youth than when telling your story to a group of experienced advocates or faith leaders, or when speaking to a particular cultural group.

Relationships that involve abuse are often complicated. In the course of identifying and addressing domestic violence issues and through the course of your experiences, you may have had contact with many different people and service providers such as community agencies, clergy or health care professionals. Including details about these interactions can be beneficial to audience members and can increase the impact of your story. The more you know about your audience, the better you will be able to choose which components of your experience to include.

TIP If you had negative interactions with individuals, community agencies, clergy or health care providers, be thoughtful about how you include these details. Share how these interactions made you feel and the effect it had on your decision-making, but do not use this public speaking opportunity to criticize or denounce the individual, community organizations or agencies, clergy or health care providers. That type of feedback is best presented in a private meeting between you, the individual, organization or agency in question and local advocates who can help identify and resolve a problem and improve response to future victims.

Know your time frame and stick to it

When you are invited to speak, those inviting you will have a specific time frame for your presentation. Your presentation will most likely be one part of a larger program, and it is important to honor your assigned time frame and not delay the remainder of the agenda. Practice and time your presentation using your notes, so that you can complete the story you want to tell in your allotted time. As a guest speaker, if you do not stay within your allotted time, that may impact whether you are invited to speak again. Going “over time” may also affect the time remaining for other speakers, some of whom may also be survivors. When initially discussing the presentation with the organizers, don’t be afraid to ask if there is some flexibility in the time frame if necessary.


ABOUT THE MEDIA

It is important to ask if media outlets will be at the event and what the implications are of such involvement. If media are there or have been invited, personal safety concerns may arise due to the increased exposure that media coverage might generate. A journalist may want to do a one-on-one interview with you before or after an event. Think about the confidentiality-related issues that might arise for you and ask an advocate to help you negotiate with a journalist if necessary. Do you need your name and address withheld from any stories about the event? If it is a TV or radio outlet, do you need them to blur your face or distort your voice to protect your identity?

REMEMBER: You can always say ‘NO’ to a request for an interview.

After the speaking event, what happens next?

Following the speaking engagement, follow-up with the advocate that asked you to speak. If the advocate is not immediately available then it is strongly recommended that you have a trusted friend or counselor that you can debrief with. If no one is available, then plan a self-care activity (e.g., going for a walk, practicing to yoga,



participating in a spiritual activity, etc.). It is important that you allow yourself some time to have a period after the presentation where you can reflect on the experience of presenting and care for yourself emotionally if necessary. When you do meet with the advocate to debrief, be honest about what this experience was like for you, both positive and negative. Let the advocate know if you'd be interested in speaking again or if you need more time to process your thoughts and to consider whether you want to be on their list of speakers. Retelling your story many times over can be emotionally difficult. Sharing your experience with abuse once does not commit you to retelling your story every time an opportunity presents itself. You should also say no to public speaking requests unless you feel completely comfortable saying yes.

Should I expect to be compensated for sharing my story?

Asking for compensation is a reasonable request. However, be aware that local domestic violence programs and other non-profit organizations that typically organize these speaking engagements operate on small budgets and may not be able to afford to pay for speakers to come to their events. Where possible, domestic violence programs or other event sponsors will try to provide a small monetary stipend as compensation for survivor speakers. In the case of a national or statewide conference or other similar venues, the event sponsors may be able to provide an honorarium and pay for travel related expenses, including mileage reimbursement or transit fares, help with meals while you are there to speak, and accommodations.

Prior to agreeing to speak at the event, confirm with the event organizers whether you will be compensated and how, particularly if your ability to speak at the event is contingent upon financial assistance or compensation (that is, if you need help with gas money, transit fares, or other types of travel to/from the event). Often times, event organizers will do all they can to work out an arrangement that is agreeable and fits within their budget.

“**... it is important to leave a legacy ... of not being afraid to tell the truth... we must pass this on to our children rather than a legacy of fear and victimization.”**

Sonia Sanchez, Black Women Writers at Work

Tips for Victim Advocates

When a survivor expresses a desire or willingness to speak out about the abuse they experienced, victim advocates are in a unique position to provide support and help them weigh the risks and benefits of telling their story publicly. This section of the Guide focuses on ways that advocates can help prepare and support survivors' step into the role of speakers. Considerations for specific populations and safety planning are also provided.

How can I help protect a survivor's identity for a speaking event if requested?

If the survivor speaker wishes to remain anonymous, you can play an important role in strategizing with the host of the event and the survivor speaker. Do not assume that a survivor will prefer anonymity – many survivors do not mind having their pictures taken or their names mentioned, and can safely do so – but if confidentiality issues arise, be prepared to address them. Find out how the event will be advertised or promoted. Ask the host of the event if the names, voices and photos of the survivor, abuser and other family members can be shielded in printed materials or online. Use this as a teachable moment to explain why this is necessary and that for many victims, even after they have left an abusive relationship, their safety may still be at risk.

If a member of the audience does end up identifying the survivor speaker or the host of the event releases personally identifying information about the survivor speaker, immediately engage in safety planning. Such planning may include considering, with the help of an attorney, what legal protections may be needed to prevent or mitigate potential harm.

Just as domestic violence intervention and prevention efforts should be survivor-defined, so should public speaking engagements. Knowing that their story helped another victim seek help, or that their words helped ensure the passage of a new law to enhance safety for other victims and their families, can be very empowering for a survivor, regardless of whether they shared their identity.

How can I support the survivor before the speaking event?

Stories of surviving physical and emotional abuse provide authenticity and credibility to victim advocacy work, and victim advocates often seek ways and opportunities for these stories to be told. Yet, for many survivors, speaking out and relating their story of abuse can place them in a highly vulnerable position.

Help with crafting the story telling.

Victim advocates are experts in helping victims sort through their experiences as they prepare for court, and in other situations where they have to summarize the circumstances of their abuse. These same skills can be utilized in helping a victim/survivor sift through the overwhelming details of their experiences as they prepare to tell their story publicly. Older survivors will have a lifetime to sort out, so more time devoted to this process might be necessary on the part of the advocate. Survivors may minimize aspects of their story that would be very compelling to someone facing similar challenges or from the general public.

TIP If there will be a question and answer period, help the survivor speaker imagine what kind of questions the audience may ask, including victim blaming questions such as "Why did you stay?" or "Why didn't you leave when your children saw you being abused?" or "Didn't you know he would be abusive?" or "Why didn't you evict your child the first time he hit you and stole your money?" This will prepare the survivor to respond in a way that validates their decisions and ensures that they share only the details that they would like to with the audience.

ABOUT THE MEDIA

As indicated earlier, it is important for a survivor speaker to know if media outlets have been invited or might be present and, if so, to consider any implications of such media contact. Physical and emotional safety concerns may be increased for the survivor if media coverage will generate unsafe levels of public knowledge of her personal circumstances. As a victim advocate, you can help a survivor speaker review her remarks and safety plan more closely to anticipate any potential risks that media involvement may generate.

Further, a journalist may request a one-on-one interview with the survivor speaker before or after an event. Details related to whether and how the survivor will be identified and how other confidentiality issues will be addressed should be discussed and agreed upon prior to the interview. There are many ways that media can keep the identity of a survivor speaker confidential. For example, a TV outlet can blur the face and a radio outlet can distort the voice if necessary. The victim can also be provided a pseudonym to hide her identity or specific details can be blocked from the media version of the story.

REMEMBER: A survivor speaker can always say ‘NO’ to a request for an interview. Your role as the victim advocate is to support and honor that choice and help ensure that others do as well.

Talk about the impact that speaking may have on her children and other family members.

Encourage the survivor speaker to talk with her children and other family members about the opportunity to share her story. If the survivor speaker has adult children who grew up with domestic abuse, the children may feel resistant to having the family dynamic characterized in this light. If the survivor speaker is older and the perpetrator of the abuse is an adult child who may or may not be acting as a caregiver, the public sharing about the abuse may change the tone of the conversations with the other siblings and within the family. The reaction of these family members need not discourage a survivor speaker from telling her story, but may influence what is shared and the details that are included.

Even if the children are still small, the survivor speaker may still find it helpful to recall how the children reacted at the time of the abuse, and to establish whether they have been able to address the affects of the abuse on their lives. What the survivor speaker chooses to share about the children should be carefully reviewed prior to the presentation. If the children have unresolved issues or concerns about the abuse, any public sharing of the abuse by the survivor speaker could evoke uncomfortable feelings or fears.

You might also want to talk with the survivor about the potential impact of her story being heard by friends and/or co-workers. This might be a good time to discuss some possible scenarios with the survivor speaker in advance.

SCENARIOS FOR CONSIDERATION

A mother whose small son (age 3) had been sexually abused brought him to a vigil where victims were sharing about their experiences. His mother told his story of abuse and the successful prosecution of his perpetrator. At the end of the rally, the mother held the child up and the crowd applauded. Might he feel re-victimized when he is older that details of his abuse were shared publicly with strangers?

An older survivor tells her story of abuse at the hands of her daughter who lives with her. Her son, who lives in another state but is visiting at the time of the speaking event, had suspected that something was not right. However, he only discovered the full extent of the abuse at the public speaking event. What kind of opportunities for support do you have in place for family members?

A lesbian survivor shares her experience of domestic violence. She was not “out” at work. A colleague was among the audience members and decides not to speak to the survivor anymore after finding out she is a lesbian. How can you plan ahead to anticipate potential challenges for LGBT survivors who decide to share their stories?

An adult child exposed to domestic violence shares her story at a community event. Her sibling is a professional working in the social service field in the same community. How might this other sibling feel about “their” story being told in public?

NOTE: Be mindful of the fact that a survivor speaker could change her mind about sharing her story at any time and for any number of reasons. Some decisions might be related to concerns for her physical safety; others to the impact on her emotional well-being or that of her loved ones. Be sure that you underscore that the decision to speak publicly about the abuse they have experienced is her or his choice at all times. They can freely change their minds – even if this results in not having a speaker at the event.

How can I provide support during the presentation?

Talk to the survivor speaker about what they will need on the day of the presentation. She may want you to attend the event with her or even stand behind her while she speaks. While it may be difficult for her to anticipate her needs, exploring options with her will help her to feel empowered to make choices. Discussion and practice will not necessarily fully prepare her for the feelings that may arise once she begins speaking so deciding on a signal or code word to indicate to you that she is in distress and needs you to assist or interrupt the presentation might be helpful.

There may be situations where she may become distressed and not remember to use the signal or code word. Under extreme circumstances you may witness cognitive signs of this (e.g., the survivor speaker beginning to mumble or get very confused all of a sudden). If this happens, you should have a plan on how to intervene and offer support.

You might also want to consider the possibility of having a panel of survivors speak if appropriate. This would allow an opportunity for the survivors themselves to provide support to each other before, during and after the event.

How can I support the survivor after the speaking event?

Say “Thank You.”

It takes courage and resiliency for a survivor speaker to share their story publicly. Remember to be appreciative and offer affirmation of their efforts. A handwritten note or email of appreciation a few days later is encouraged as well.

Follow Up

It is important to follow up with the survivor speaker after the presentation, both immediately after and a few days later, to process what the experience was like for them. On the day of the event, help the survivor speaker plan for how they will spend the rest of the day, including whether they will be alone and if they think they may need emotional support. Develop a plan for the survivor speaker to get help if they experience a delayed emotional reaction to speaking out. You may also want to plan a time 2-3 weeks after the event to discuss any unexpected feelings, reactions, or repercussions that may have come up since the speaking engagement.


Provide Sufficient Resources

Be prepared to make additional referrals to someone outside your program, if necessary, if feelings and reactions remain strong for the survivor speaker or to deal with other issues that may have arisen during the course of speaking. For instance, you may find that she is still overwhelmed by expenses in the aftermath of her abuse. If a Victims' Compensation Program might cover some of these expenses, make sure she knows about this resource and others. Or you may find that her children need access to intensive counseling to deal with the impact of the abuse and that she needs help identifying an affordable therapist for them.

Should I safety plan with the survivor?

In their book, **Safety Planning with Battered Women: Complex Lives, Difficult Choices**⁸, Jill Davies, Eleanor Lyon and Diane Monti-Catania present a philosophy of safety planning that accounts for “batterer-generated risks” and “life-generated risks.” The risk of physical violence, stalking or custody disputes in the courts would all be considered “batterer-generated” risks, while poverty, health issues, and lack of housing or formal education of a survivor could be considered “life-generated” risks. Ms. Davies and her colleagues stress that even if advocates use a template for safety planning, each plan must be defined and designed by the woman whose life it affects.

⁸ Davies, Jill, Lyon, Eleanor, and Monti-Catania, Diane, “Safety Planning for Battered Women: Complex Lives, Difficult Choices,” Sage Publications, (1998).




Depending on the location of the presentation, friends, family members or co-workers of a speaker's abuser may be in the audience or may hear about the survivor speaking out. If this is a possibility, or if other safety issues can be anticipated, you should engage in safety planning with the survivor speaker prior to each speaking engagement. Remember that every safety plan is unique to the individual survivor, the specific safety risks and other challenges she faces and the resources that are available to enhance survivor safety. The details and development of a safety plan should emerge from thoughtful conversation with the survivor speaker, and an open mind on the part of the advocate. Safety plans are dynamic tools that need to be constantly assessed in light of new information about the abuser and the tactics of control being employed, as well as the survivor's current circumstances, resources and wishes. In support of the survivor's ongoing safety planning process, you can help the survivor determine whether the risk would be altered or escalated in any way by sharing her story publicly.

Should survivors be compensated for speaking?

All efforts should be made to compensate survivor speakers for their participation in these events and to cover any costs related to travel to and from the event. If the survivor is expected to attend an event lasting for several hours, consideration for meals and childcare are also important. Some survivors may not have the ability to cover expenses up front and will require programs to provide funds or options before expenses are incurred. Below are a few additional points to remember:

- Survivors' experiences and level of expertise are unique.
- While survivors' perspectives may be different from that of "paid" professionals (with or without direct experiences), it is not less valuable.
- Survivors' sharing of their personal experiences can take a significant emotional toll not only on the speakers, but also on their family and friends.

Providing compensation to survivor speakers who participate in speaking events is not only ethical, it can also represent a tangible resource in their path to healing and safety.



Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it."

Helen Keller

Considerations for Specific Populations

This section of the guide was designed to assist advocates to fully consider the unique dynamics present in specific populations when planning speaking engagements. Survivor speakers may of course feel a part of more than one these groups, with overlapping concerns, perspectives and needs for support.

Adults Exposed to Domestic Violence as Children

Victim advocates can assist adults wishing to share their experiences as children explore whether they should seek the approval and/or support from their abused parent to do so as it truly belongs to both of them. Considerations around this include addressing the probable feelings of guilt and remorse that abused parents may feel when hearing their child's perspective.

Further, if there are siblings or other close family members involved, they may also have unexpected feelings of guilt, resentment, or have a differing recollection and perspective on the family's experience. Victim advocates can provide support to the survivor speaker regarding these family dynamics.

When telling a story based on a childhood memory, it is easy for the survivor speaker to be somewhat foggy about the actual progression of events. Double-checking with the adult victim parent (and also with siblings) can help ensure that inaccurate information is not included in the story.

One particular challenge this survivor speaker should be prepared for is the public's general lack of understanding about the differences and connections between domestic violence and child abuse. Adult children exposed to domestic violence are often confronted with blaming statements about their mother's "failure to protect" and must address these types of questions or comments very carefully. Victim advocates may want to engage in additional processing specifically related to this concern.

Victims who have been Charged with or Convicted of a Crime⁹

Many victims of ongoing battering are arrested and convicted of crimes related to their victimization. Speaking out about the first-hand experience of arrest, incarceration, and/or return to the community can be a powerful way to raise awareness, challenge the stigma that is often associated with being charged with or convicted of a crime, and change public policies that contribute to the arrests of battered women.

It is very important, however, to avoid talking about the specific "facts of the case" with anyone other than the survivor speaker's defense attorney if the survivor speaker has any open legal issues.

The safest guideline, as discussed in more detail below, is to avoid talking about the case with friends, family members, advocates, reporters, or in public until all legal issues are resolved and then only in consultation with the defense attorney involved. If the survivor speaker is waiting to go to trial, is involved in the appeals process, plans on appealing the case in the future, is seeking parole, or even if she is on probation or parole, she still has open legal issues that could be jeopardized by speaking out publicly or by speaking to anyone other than her attorney about the details of the case.

NOTE: Facts of the Case refers to the details surrounding the incident itself: what happened, how it happened, where it happened, when it happened, who was involved, and – especially – "why" it happened. How much information would be included or excluded in this definition of "the facts of the case," particularly in terms of the timeframe, is often difficult to determine.

⁹ This section of the guide was developed by the National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women. For more information about this organization go to <http://www.ncdbw.org/> or call 800-903-0111 ext. 3.

If the survivor speaker has an open legal case, there is a risk any time she talks or writes about the facts of the case with anyone other than her defense attorney, because, as they say on TV, anything said can and will be used against her, now or in the near or distant future. Even when the survivor is talking to people whom she trusts and is telling the truth about her experience, what she says could backfire in unexpected ways. When the survivor speaker is sharing her story with a reporter, or to a room full of people whom she does not know, the survivor speaker has even less control over how the story will be heard or reported. There are many examples of survivors' public and private statements being taken out of context and then later used against them in their criminal case (or sometimes in parole or probation matters).

If, despite these cautions, the survivor speaker feels strongly that it is important to share her story publicly, including to the media, it is recommended that she only do so in consultation with – and with the approval of – her criminal defense attorney. Talking to the media about the survivor speaker's case could jeopardize her criminal case in many ways, and her defense attorney is in the best position to help her evaluate the potential risks of talking with the press. The defense attorney also can provide advice about how to limit the scope of what is shared publicly to minimize risks to the survivor speaker's criminal case.

If the survivor speaker's case has been resolved (i.e., she has been convicted of a crime and has served her sentence), there may be less risk associated with speaking out. In such situations, however, it still is best to avoid talking about the facts of the case, especially if the survivor speaker is on probation or parole. She can, however, talk about the effects of arrest and incarceration on her life, if she feels comfortable doing so.

Elder Survivors

Elder survivor speakers have lived a long life and have lots of information to share, both from their own personal experience as well as about generational and historical perspectives. Victim advocates may be able to provide additional help parsing through the parts of their story that elder survivor speakers' most want to share.

Elder survivor speakers might require additional time to tell their story as they may process aspects of their story differently and may need more time to accurately convey their meaning to the audience.

In some instances, the perpetrator of abuse might be an adult child. Keep in mind that sharing these experiences may add a new layer of shame and complexity to an already difficult situation for the survivor and their family.

Make sure that the facility and grounds where the event is taking place is accessible to the elder survivor speaker who may have limited mobility; plan in advance to provide additional support as needed. Be aware that some older survivors might be hard of hearing. Make sure that microphones are available and used during the event. Check with the survivor speaker in advance if other accommodations related to this need are required.

Regardless of the length of the event, the elder survivor may need a place to sit prior to, during, or after her speech.

Teens

Teens who are willing to speak on the subject of teen dating violence bring a very powerful perspective on the topic. If the speaker is a minor, under the age of 18, make sure that you obtain prior written permission from a parent or guardian for the teen to speak out.

Discuss with the teen survivor how speaking out may impact their daily life at home, at school, or on a college campus. It may be helpful to ensure that the teen survivor speaker is connected to their school guidance counselor, university counseling center, and/or the National Teen Dating Violence Hotline (<http://www.loveisrespect.org/>) for ongoing support and referrals for additional services.

When working with youth survivor speakers in preparation for the event, make sure that you plan in advance to respond to questions that might challenge the speaker's credibility based on age.

The experiences of a heterosexual teen survivor may be different than those of a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Queer (LGBTQ) survivor. Be sure to spend additional time processing with the survivor speaker to ensure that adequate supports are in place for ongoing healing.

Be aware of societal views regarding the LGBTQ community and plan ahead for potential repercussions on the teen survivor for "coming out" in public if this happens during the event.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) Speakers

Be aware that the needs of LGBTQ survivors may differ greatly from those of heterosexual survivor speakers. As concerns arise during the process of providing support before, during and after a speaking event, try to avoid making generalizations and ask clarifying questions, in a respectful manner.

LGBTQ survivors often deal with an additional layer of fear and stigma related to societal views about the LGBTQ community. Safety plan accordingly and follow the survivor's lead throughout this process.

Be mindful of the fact that some LGBTQ survivors might not be "out" to their family members or at their workplace. Talk with the survivor about what impact speaking out (and thus coming "out") may have.

Talk with the survivor speaker about any concerns they may have regarding their physical safety and the potential for hate crimes or discrimination in the area. If in doubt, check with local LGBTQ organizations or others that could provide you with additional support; alert law enforcement, if necessary. Overall, make sure that precautionary measures are in place to maximize the survivor speakers' safety.

Be aware that the LGBTQ community may be small and chances are that someone in the audience might know both the survivor and the person who abused them. Keep in mind that this close-knit community might influence the survivor's decision to tell their story.

Talk with the survivor speaker about any repercussions that might occur WITHIN the LGBTQ community after sharing their story.

There may be special considerations if the LGBTQ survivor is also a parent of minor children. Could the other parent use their story against them? Could the information shared be used against them in a custody case, even if the other parent does not raise it?

Male Survivors

Male victims/survivors often deal with societal stereotypes and stigma related to masculinity and ascribed gender roles. Deciding to share their personal experiences of victimization could trigger additional issues for male survivors. Be mindful of such dynamics as you are supporting male survivors to speak publicly.

The needs of a heterosexual male survivor may be different than those of a gay, bisexual or transgender male survivor. Be sure to spend additional time processing with the male survivor speaker to ensure that adequate supports are in place for ongoing healing.

Survivor Speakers with Disabilities

Make sure that reasonable accommodations are discussed well in advance and then provided as requested by the survivor with the disability. For example, the survivor might require printed materials using a large font or e-copies in advance, she might request to visit the venue ahead of time to assess the space for herself, she might request microphones, or require other accommodations.

Ensure that the speaking event is taking place in an accessible location. This may require one or more advance trips to assess the location and discuss accessibility needs with the survivor speaker. Be sure that the physical space is accessible including the restrooms. Sometimes having a ramp that allows entrance and exit to/from a building is not enough to make the location accessible: check the restroom for accessibility, the stage for access (if there is one) and the podium. If meals or snacks are provided, make sure that the survivor speaker can comfortably access the table and catering area, remember to check for dietary needs in advance.

Discuss with the survivor speaker whether any details about their accommodations need to be shared with the audience. For example, if the survivor speaker uses a seeing-eye dog for assistance, it is typically requested that audience members not pet or engage the animal.

If the survivor speaker has a caregiver, follow the program's usual protocols for someone accompanying a survivor for services, especially as they relate to confidentiality, exposure to other survivors and the expectation that the caregiver will not share any information they may hear. Explore the extent to which the survivor speaker is comfortable speaking in front of her caregiver or any other challenges that may potentially arise and make plans with the survivor speaker to address each. The caregiver may be a relative who does not want the survivor to share personal information about the family, or is very protective and concerned about the impact it will have on the survivor. It may be necessary, with the survivor's permission and participation, to work with the family member to reinforce issues of self-determination, empowerment and the survivor's rights to autonomy.

Safety plan with the survivor speaker. Remember that abusers may utilize disability-specific tactics to exert power and control such as the destruction of adaptive equipment, maltreatment of service animals, withholding of medications, etc. Safety plan accordingly.

Deaf/Hard of Hearing Survivors

If you are a hearing advocate organizing a speaking event with a Deaf survivor for a mainstream program, you will require the services of certified/qualified ASL interpreters to be able to communicate with a Deaf survivor. You will also need an interpreter to assist you during the preparation phase of this event with the survivor to maximize communication. Check with the survivor speaker to learn if they prefer specific interpreter(s).

Be aware that the Deaf community tends to be very close and chances are that someone in the audience might know both the survivor and the perpetrator. Keep in mind that this close-knit community might influence the survivor's decision to tell her story.

Be prepared to follow the lead and pace of the survivor speaker during the event, as well as prior to the event in terms of other accommodations that might be required in preparation. Note that between the signing and interpretation, telling their story may take a little longer than planned for a survivor speaker who is Deaf (as it happens with most communication through an interpreter even when this is a simultaneous process.)

Discuss with the survivor speaker whether any details about her accommodations need to be shared with the audience. This might be a good opportunity to educate a hearing audience about proper etiquette when communicating with Deaf individuals; for example, all questions need to be directed to the survivor speaker and not the interpreter.

NEVER use the survivor speaker's hearing children or relatives to interpret.

Be mindful of the fact that sometimes hard of hearing individuals are reluctant to ask for accommodations. Make sure that microphones are utilized during the event. Offer additional accommodations to the survivor as requested.

English as a Second Language (ESL) Speakers

Survivors whose first language is not English might have a different accent than the mainstream audience is accustomed to hearing. The survivor speaker might also fear saying the “wrong thing” or making grammatical mistakes if they are unsure of their English speaking abilities.

Make sure that all supports are in place, including an interpreter, if requested by the survivor speaker. Encourage the survivor speaker to take her time and empower her to request any necessary accommodations if needed.

Be aware that immigrant communities are sometimes small and individuals tend to know one another. For example, discuss with the survivor the possible repercussions of telling her story if there are relatives/friends of the abuser present (see earlier section on potential repercussions).

Be aware of the make up of the audience and the community at large. Plan in advance for the possibility of difficult interactions in the event that someone in the audience is displaying anti-immigrant sentiments.

NEVER use the survivor speaker’s children or other relatives to translate.

Surviving Family Members of Domestic Violence Homicide Victims

Speaking events might be very powerful, but also very difficult for surviving family members of someone killed by an abusive partner. To the greatest extent possible, involve the surviving family members in how they want their loved one to be remembered and honored during the event, especially if they themselves will not be speaking. There may be personal touches that they want included.

Depending upon the circumstances of the homicide, there may be an ongoing investigation or pending litigation that could have an impact on whether surviving family members wish to take on the role of survivor speaker and what is shared and by whom. As a victim advocate, be sure to encourage the survivor speaker/family to consult with an attorney prior to, and after, scheduling a speaking event if there are any concerns in this area.

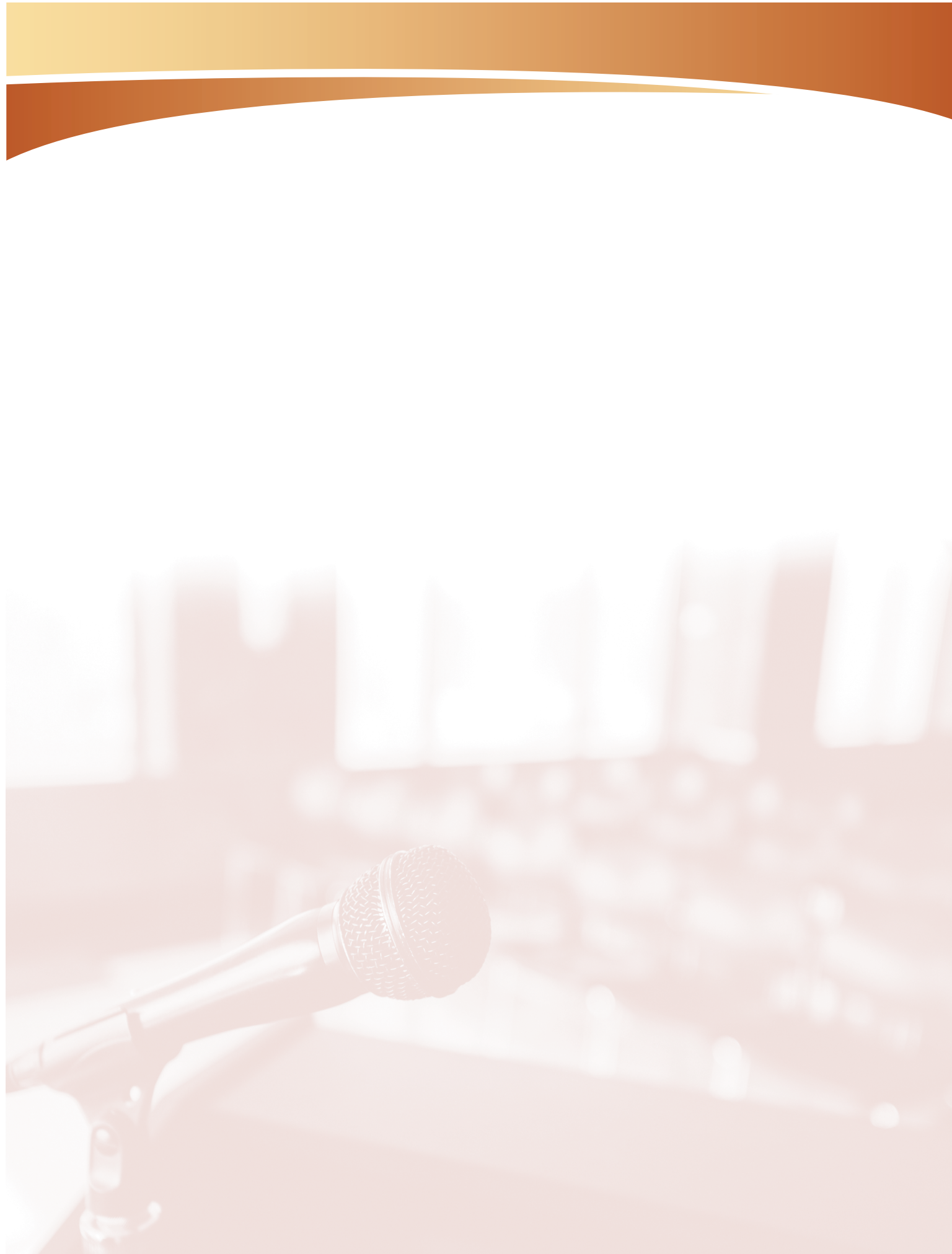
Remember that healing is a very individualized process and be respectful of personal boundaries as you work with these survivors. Even if the homicide occurred years ago, retelling the story can elicit very strong emotions.

Be mindful that these survivors may not be able to continue their presentation shortly after they begin or that it may be a highly emotional rendering throughout the entire presentation. Have tissues available at the podium and determine in advance, a signal they can give to let you know if they cannot continue or need a break.

Family or friends of the perpetrator may be present. Help the survivor speaker prepare for this possibility.

The media may have a particular interest in being present in these circumstances, especially if the case is a high profile homicide. Preparing in advance for dealing with questions from the media is essential.

It is extremely important to provide onsite counseling and schedule sufficient follow up after the event.



“

To be hopeful in bad times, ... is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.”

Howard Zinn



Advocates' Resource for Safety Planning with Survivor Speakers

Safety planning helps survivors identify, create, and organize strategies to increase their level of safety, as well as that of the survivor's children, family, and loved ones. Combining critical thinking and knowledge about community resources, victim advocates can be instrumental in helping survivors develop safety plans that are responsive to their unique concerns, the circumstances of the abusive relationship, the level of past/present violence in the relationship, and the tools and resources available to the survivor and within the community.

While many survivor speakers will not be in immediate danger when speaking out, it is because we greatly respect and value their experiences and recognize the need for ongoing risk assessment that the following information is provided. Victim advocates must be prepared to help address any safety concerns a survivor speaker may have.

Before the Event

Survivor speakers might want to ask themselves these types of questions: Will it be safe for me to share my story publicly at this event? What does my gut tell me? If a survivor speaker feels that for any reason their own safety, that of their children or other loved ones, will be at risk, victim advocates should err on the side of safety and not try to talk the survivor into speaking. It is important for victim advocates to support survivors in trusting their own instincts for safety. Ultimately, it is their decision to speak out or not, and all survivors are entitled to privacy and protection.

NOTE: For some survivors, the concept of "trusting your gut" might not be helpful in determining whether it's safe to speak out or not (i.e., in assessing the potential for danger). In these instances, victim advocates should continue to explore any concerns with the survivor and help her determine the potential level of risk.

Once a survivor speaker makes the decision to speak out, it is vital to review the safety planning tips outlined below.

During the Event

If security or local law enforcement are present at the event, the victim advocate should introduce the survivor speaker and make the commanding officer aware of any particular safety concerns. For example, if the survivor speaker has a current Order of Protection (also referred to as a no contact order, stay away order, restraining order, or protection from abuse order), the victim advocate should share a copy with law enforcement, as well as a photo of the abuser for easy identification. If the abuser has a history of carrying or having access to a weapon, the survivor speaker should inform law enforcement.

It is recommended that the victim advocate and the survivor speaker work out a code word or signal that can be used during the event to alert advocates and/or law enforcement of any suspected danger. It is also recommended that the victim advocate familiarize the survivor speaker with the layout of the facility or grounds so they can be aware of emergency exits, safe places to hide, the locations of telephones to call 911, and the quickest path to get to their car to leave the site.

Advocates can also share these additional tips with survivor speakers with ongoing safety concerns:

- Keep personal cell phone, car keys, purse/backpack, medications, adaptive equipment, etc. handy in case of emergency.
- If pepper spray or Mace is carried as an added security measure, keep it close by during the event and after until certain there is no risk of harm.
- Stay with the victim advocate and bring a friend, family member, or co-worker along – there's always strength in numbers. Others can also help keep an eye out for potential safety concerns.
- Think and visualize where to go and how to get to safety if the event becomes unsafe. What path is best to take?

- Ensure that both the victim advocate and the survivor speaker has a copy of the protection order at the event in case it needs to be enforced by law enforcement against the abuser. Any program assisting or supporting a survivor speaker at an event should also know, before the event, who or where to call if legal assistance becomes necessary.

Above all, both the victim advocate and the survivor speaker must trust their instincts. If anyone feels unsafe or an eerie feeling of unease sets in, act on it – tell someone, call for help, and get to a safe location.

NOTE: When safety risks have been identified, victim advocates should advise survivor speakers that if a dangerous situation escalates quickly and they cannot hide or get out of harms way, and an assault appears imminent or begins, they should try to make themselves physically smaller by curling into a ball. They can then protect their face and head by putting their arms up over their head and weaving their fingers together.

After the Event

An escort should be provided for the survivor speaker as they leave the location of the speaking event, particularly when law enforcement or security is available. At a minimum, victim advocates should accompany the survivor speaker to their car or other source of transportation as they leave the facility or grounds. Periodic check-in calls should be scheduled with the survivor speaker following the event to ensure that they have returned home or reached their next destination safely.

Further, victim advocates should schedule a safety check-in call within 3-5 days of the speaking event to assist the survivor speaker in the event that the abuser has resumed unwanted contact, begun to make threats, or has behaved in any other manner that would raise safety concerns for the survivor speaker. It is also encouraged that the victim advocate respect any boundaries set by the survivor speaker with regard to follow-up contact or future requests to be a guest speaker.

In Conclusion

The tips, scenarios, and related information offered throughout this guide are here to assist victim advocates in thinking through each step involved with the sharing of a survivor's story publicly. Information related to specific populations is also included with the purpose of inviting you to consider and honor the uniqueness of survivors and their experiences.

In her book, **Surviving the Silence**, Charlotte Pierce Baker attests that “the way out is to tell: Speak of the acts perpetrated upon us, speak the atrocities, speak the injustices, speak the personal violations of the soul.” Speaking out publicly can produce many healing effects as shame, isolation, fear, and the carrying of a “secret” begin to diminish. Giving voice to the pain and suffering, as well as to the strength, resilience and recovery that many survivors experience is powerful. It takes courage to stand before others and speak about the intimate details of one's life; we hope that this guide is useful to any survivor speaker preparing to share their story, or for those working to support someone else who will embark on that journey.



**The Beginning.
Now, go forth and do good."**

Teresa Ellis, National Red Cross Volunteer





For more information, please contact:

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