

# Project Illumination – St. Louis

Survivors with Disabilities

# What's the Problem?

- 17% of Missourians experience some form of disability (2000 census)
- 83% of women with developmental disability experienced sexual abuse (Hard, 1986)
- 85% women with disabilities experienced domestic abuse (Fueurstein, 1997)
- 39-68% of girls and 16-30% of boys with disabilities experienced sexual abuse before 18<sup>th</sup> birthday (Sobsey, 1994)
- 25-90% of adults with developmental disabilities were sexually assaulted (Ludlow, 1991)

# More Numbers

- More than 90% of people with developmental disabilities were sexually abused (Valenti-Hein & Schwartz, 1995)
- 49% of those experienced 10+ incidences of sexual abuse (Valenti-Hein & Schwartz, 1995)
- 40% of women with physical disabilities experienced sexual assault (Young, Nosck, Howland, et al. 1997)
- Only 3% of sexual abuse cases involving victims with developmental disabilities were reported (Valenti-Hein & Schwartz, 1995)

# Bottom Line

Taboo subjects (rape, domestic violence)

+

Population historically ignored (people with disabilities)

=

Too many victims

# Abusers/Perpetrators/Batterers

As with people without disabilities, abusers of people with disabilities are most likely to be known to victim

- Family
- Acquaintances
- Residential care staff
- Transportation providers
- Personal care attendants (formal & informal)

# Why such high numbers?

- Social isolation
- Increased dependency on others
- Learned compliance
- Less physically able to defend themselves
- Different lessons about respect, privacy, boundaries
- Limited knowledge and access to services
- Perceptions of powerlessness
- Lack of comprehensive sexuality education

# Why else?

- Lack of control or choice over personal affairs
- Lack of believability
- Communication difficulties
- Correlation with poverty - up to 70% of people with disabilities are unemployed
- Lack of transportation
- Lack of accessible housing

# So what do we do?

- Increase accessibility to domestic violence and sexual violence services
- Prevention: primary, secondary, tertiary

# Spectrum of Prevention\*

- 1) Strengthen individual knowledge and skills
- 2) Promote community education
- 3) Educate providers
- 4) Foster coalitions and networks
- 5) Change organizational practices
- 6) Influence policies and legislation

\*Prevention Institute

# SOP: Strengthening Individual Knowledge and Skills

- Body ownership
- Teaching resistance as well as compliance
- Comprehensive sexuality education
- Healthy and unhealthy relationships
- Laws: sexual abuse, domestic violence, sexual harassment at school and work
- Importance and mechanics of reporting

# SOP: Promoting Community Education

- Project Illumination: Increase visibility of survivors with disabilities
- Stop It Now! Program
  - National helpline
  - Social marketing
  - Offers adults tools to prevent abuse: recognizing signs, calling helpline, talking with adult they believe is abusive and confronting their behaviors

# SOP: Educating Providers I

## Rape Crisis Centers and Domestic Violence Agencies

- Disability awareness
- Outreach strategies
- Designing accessible services
- Effective, accessible service provision

# SOP: Educating Providers II

## Support Services for People with Disabilities

- Risks of abuse faced by some people with disabilities
- Prevention strategies
- Techniques for providing sexuality education
- Detecting, reporting, and responding to disclosures of abuse

# SOP: Educating Providers III

## Parents and Educators of People with Disabilities

- Rights of people with disabilities
- Modeling respect for privacy, boundaries, and positive body image
- Techniques for providing sexuality education
- Detecting, reporting, and responding to allegations of abuse

# SOP: Fostering Coalitions and Networks

- Missouri Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence
- Health care providers Consumer-led Networks
- Local disability organizations, networks & coalitions
- State disability organizations, networks & coalitions
- National disability organizations, networks & coalitions
- Children's Division
- Victim Services Providers Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners
- Law Enforcement

Who Else?

# SOP: Changing Organizational Practices

- School policies
- Rape/Domestic Violence agency policies
  - Building accessibility
  - Budgeting for interpreters for Deaf clients
  - Screening for disability
- Disability agency policies
  - Recruitment, hiring, training of caregivers
  - Screening for abuse histories
  - Acting on allegations of abuse

# SOP: Influencing Policies and Legislation

- Invest in treatment of victims of sexual abuse
- Oversight of state- and federal-funded disability service providers
- Invest in domestic/sexual abuse services
- Invest in domestic/sexual abuse education

# Contact Information

Christina Meneses, M.S.W.

YWCA – St. Louis Regional Sexual Assault  
Center

140 N. Brentwood Blvd.

St. Louis, MO 63105

(314)726-6665 x19

[cmcoan@ywcastlouis.org](mailto:cmcoan@ywcastlouis.org)