A Peer to Peer Guide About Domestic and Sexual Violence

Developed by Green Mountain Self-Advocates
Introduction

Who We Are

Green Mountain Self-Advocates (GMSA) is Vermont’s self-advocacy network run and operated by people with developmental disabilities. We support over 600 members who belong to 18 independent self-advocacy groups. Together we work to change attitudes that hold people back from achieving their dreams. Our goal is for people with disabilities to make their own decisions and speak for themselves. We are building a self-advocacy movement through public education, awareness, peer mentoring, support, advocacy, and direct action.

Disclaimer: Reader, Be Aware!

The material in this booklet might be hard to read and think about. The topics and examples can bring back uncomfortable memories and feelings. If you feel that you need support after reading this, we urge you to talk to a friend, family member, or safe person. You can also speak with someone at the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence Hotline:

1-800-489-7273

Contact us to find out more at:

Green Mountain Self-Advocates
73 Main Street, Suite 402 Montpelier, Vermont 05602
Phone: 802-229-2600
Toll free in Vermont: 1-800-564-9990
E-mail: gmsavt@gmail.com
Visit us online at: www.gmsavt.org
What is This All About?
A policy is a set of guidelines that give us directions about what to do when different things happen. This “policy” will help you understand what “abuse” is, and give you guidelines to follow when you hear about abusive situations.

Who is This Policy For?
This policy is for the use of the GMSA Board of Directors, staff, and volunteers. GMSA will provide education and ongoing support for local self-advocacy groups to adopt these policy recommendations. It is also a good reference for allies and organizations who want to partner with GMSA.

How We Developed This Policy
In July 2009, GMSA held a two-day think tank to put together this policy. The think tank was attended by GMSA peer leaders, support staff, and partners from the Vermont Center for Independent Living and the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. It was facilitated by Mary Oschwald from Portland State University who works on anti-violence projects related to women and men with disabilities. During the think tank, participants came together and decided what should be included in our policy on domestic and sexual violence. We also decided what steps a member should take if they find out about domestic or sexual violence.

Why We Need a Domestic and Sexual Violence Policy
Vermonters with developmental disabilities are often some of the most powerless members of our communities. Several factors make them more at risk to abuse:

- If a person needs assistance, many different people may have access to their homes and bodies.
- People often don’t learn how to protect themselves because many are sheltered and treated like children.
- People might rely on others to help out and are often controlled by those people.
- Many people are not believed when they say that they were abused.

1 This information was modified from The Justice Institute of British Columbia (“Charting New Waters: Responding to Violence Against Women with Disabilities”) and Disability Services ASAP of SafePlace, Austin, Texas (“Vulnerability of People with Disabilities to Abuse/Neglect”).
Studies consistently show people with developmental disabilities are more likely to experience sexual abuse than people without disabilities. While "stranger danger" is the myth that gets taught, research has found that 97 to 99 percent of abusers of people with an intellectual disability are likely to be known and trusted by the person\(^2\). People with developmental disabilities are socially and physically isolated in general, and therefore more exposed to abuse.

**How to Use This Policy**

It can be very overwhelming to find out that there is domestic or sexual violence happening in our communities. These policies and procedures are to support GMSA staff, members, volunteers, and allies to:

- Know what domestic and sexual violence is
- Know what to say and what to do when they hear about abusive situations

WORDS... and What They Mean.
Here are some words that people use when they talk about abuse, along with some definitions of what they mean to us.

**Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence happens in personal relationships. Abusers can be a husband or wife, a partner, a boyfriend or girlfriend, a family member or caregiver. The abuser has power and control over the person. Domestic violence can be:

- Physical (hitting, shoving etc.)
- Emotional (name calling, yelling etc.)
- Misusing a person’s money
- Taking away things needed to survive such as medication, talking machine, wheel chair, etc.
- Using threats
- Destroying property

**Sexual Violence**

Sexual violence is any unwanted or forced sexual touching or activity. It can be brushing against the person in a sexual way, forced kissing, removing clothes without asking, forcing a person to look at pornography or sexual touching/acts you are not comfortable with. Sexual harassment is any comment, gesture, or sexual hint that is unwanted.

**Hotline • Hotline • Worker Advocate**

A hotline is an emergency phone number that you can call. A hotline worker is the person who will answer the phone when you call. An advocate or hotline worker will talk to someone confidentially. They will not report the abuse or tell anyone what you say.

**Perpetrator**

A perpetrator is a person who harms or abuses. Perpetrators can be male or female (although most violence is done by men). They can be of any age, race, religion, rich or poor, gay or straight. Almost all of the time, it is someone you know and not a stranger.

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A person who has been sexually abused is called a victim or a survivor.

Mandated reporters are certain people who must report any abuse they suspect you are experiencing to the police and to protective services.

"Triggers" are people, places, smells, sounds, tastes, or things that remind you of being hurt and cause you to feel fearful, nervous, or panicked. For instance, if you were hurt by someone who smelled like smoke or a certain type of cologne, those smells may trigger flashbacks of the assault. Once triggered, you may feel depressed, angry, or fearful for a period of time.

Consent is getting a "yes." The "yes" must be freely given. Freely given means:

- No lies
- No threats
- No force
- No bribes
- No pressure

You must ask someone before touching or any sexual activity. Both people should be free to change "yes" to "no" at any time.
GMSA Beliefs

A “belief” is an idea that you stand up for and defend because you know it’s the truth. GMSA has strong beliefs about abuse. These beliefs are the heart of our organization. They define how we support people who have been hurt by domestic and sexual violence.

At Green Mountain Self-Advocates, we believe:

♥ The abuse done to you is not your fault
♥ It takes a long time to heal from and understand what happened
♥ Each person heals differently
♥ Everybody deserves a chance to speak about what happened if they choose
♥ Everyone is a sexual being and it’s up to the person to choose how to express their sexuality
♥ Confidentiality should be respected
♥ People should have the choice to talk to a mandated or a non-mandated reporter
♥ Mandated reporters need to remind people what their role is
♥ It is not our role to judge, but to listen and support
♥ The person telling his or her story about being abused is telling the truth
♥ All people with developmental disabilities deserve chances to learn and grow, even someone who has hurt others in the past
♥ Everyone has the right to have a plan for how to get support if they are abused
♥ Listening to stories of abuse can be upsetting and it is important to take steps so all group members feel safe and comfortable
♥ Community education and support for members and allies are important ways to prevent domestic and sexual violence
♥ Working with other organizations gives us more access to support
♥ We can—and will—talk about domestic and sexual violence with our friends, family and allies
Recognizing Domestic and Sexual Violence

Honoring the Rights of a Survivor

People who have been abused have the right to:

- Know that domestic and sexual violence is *never* okay and it is not their fault!
- Be afraid or be angry
- Be assertive and say NO
- Be heard and taken seriously
- Be happy and live without fear
- Leave situations where they feel uncomfortable
- Be trusted and to trust others
- Not feel guilty
- Have privacy to tell their story or not
- Cry or be moody
- Not have to please everyone
- Ignore what other people tell them to do
- Not forgive a person
- Love, accept, and care for themselves
- Be loved, accepted, and cared for by others
- Be respected, have their feelings accepted
- Ask for help and emotional support
- Not have their decisions judged by others
- Make mistakes, change their mind, and grow
- Set limits and put themselves first
- Get back to feeling good about their body and sexuality

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This list was modified from information from Disability Services ASAP (A Safety Awareness Program) of SafePlace, Austin, Texas, 2000
GMSA Group Agreement Policy

Throughout GMSA there is a strong tradition of establishing group agreements. An “agreement” happens when people put aside their differences and find a common ground. When people agree, they are better able to work on important issues together and make things run more smoothly.

Each local self-advocacy comes up with group agreements. It is important for members to agree on how the group is going to work. We want groups that are safe and fair for all. These aren’t “rules,” these are agreements. All members agree to go along with these ideas.

In keeping with tradition, the GMSA policy on recognizing and responding to domestic and sexual violence is part of the state organization’s group agreements. GMSA will provide education and encouragement for local groups to adopt these group agreements.

Our number one priority is the safety of the groups and the individuals in them!

- We will not judge you or your decisions.
- We will not tell you what to do; we will just help you understand your options.
- We will announce that there are mandated reporters in the room every now and then as a reminder.
- We will support your decisions.
- We will make sure all local groups know the basic resources available to people who have been hurt by domestic or sexual violence. We will have business cards, flyers and posters with hotline numbers and other information available.
- We will provide education and resources on how to respond to and support someone who has been abused.
- We will keep a professional atmosphere in our groups because we are part of an important civil rights movement. Our groups are also places to have fun and be with friends. To keep things balanced we will discuss what kind of public touching and talking is okay.
We are committed to stopping sexual and domestic violence by providing education and workshops. We believe in spreading the word and being proactive about keeping people safe.

We are dedicated to making sure all groups have access to training opportunities about healthy relationships, boundaries, what’s okay in public vs. private and personal safety.

We are accepting of all kinds of relationships. We have zero tolerance of put downs to people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

We will provide resources about creating and maintaining a group environment that is comfortable for all.

We will help groups describe what it means to be a leader. We will explain ways to deal with a group leader who is pressuring, hurting, or making another member uncomfortable. We have high standards for leaders in the self-advocacy movement and our groups have zero tolerance for abuse – we want leaders who are honest.

People with developmental disabilities who have made mistakes and hurt someone are welcome in our groups. We want to help people work on making more respectful choices. Our experience has been that people value belonging to self-advocacy groups and given support they freely choose to follow the group agreements.
Responding to Domestic and Sexual Violence

It can be really overwhelming when someone says they were abused. In this section you can find examples of different types of problems and how to solve them. We have steps you can take if someone tells another member or a group of members that they have been abused. These steps are recommendations that will help keep the person and the group safe.

**Example**

**Harassment**

During a local group meeting, Tom sees John pressuring Sue to get a date. Tom wants to help Sue handle this.

**Steps Tom Could Take:**

- Watch and listen to what is happening.
- Talk to Sue to get her side of the story.

These are good things for Tom to say:

- Your feelings are okay
- Don’t be afraid to tell us what’s going on
- We don’t want people to control you
- You are the boss of your body
- You can say “no”
- You don’t have to be alone
- It is okay to feel angry or scared
- This has happened to other people

- Encourage Sue to speak to John herself. Tom can offer to help by role playing with Sue. Sue should role play saying things like, “I don’t want to be your girlfriend” and “You are making me feel uncomfortable.”

- If John continues to harass Sue, talk to Sue again to get more information.
- Tom may get support from a group leader to talk to John. Go over the group agreements with John. Describe what you heard and saw. Tell John the group has zero tolerance for harassment. If John says he is not harassing Sue, remind him that harassment is defined by the person who is being harassed. Explain what stalking is. Tell John he is starting to stalk Sue.
Ask Sue if she wants to call the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence Network Hotline to ask questions and hear her options. Offer to stay with her while she makes the call and practice making the call first. Encourage Sue to say she has a disability and ask for any support she needs.

**Remember:** Do not tell Sue what to do. She gets to decide what happens next. Support her decisions. Help her out if needed.

Sue might want to:

✓ Do nothing
✓ Talk to another safe person
✓ Make a complaint to the police

**If Sue wants to make a complaint, we strongly suggest that she call or go with an advocate to protect her rights**

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### Sexual Abuse is Reported to a Member

**EXAMPLE #2**

Sam and Dave are going to the movies. Sam notices that Dave has been quiet so he asks if everything is okay. Dave tells Sam that his neighbor made Dave touch his penis. Dave says he is scared the guy will hurt him.

**Steps Sam Could Take:**

✓ Stay calm. Listen.
✓ Don’t ask lots of questions. Don’t tell Dave what to do.
✓ Be supportive.

These are good things to say to Dave:

✓ I’m glad you told me
✓ I’m sorry this happened
✓ You’re not in trouble
✓ It’s not your fault
✓ Don’t feel ashamed
✓ This doesn’t sound safe for you. There are people who can help you with that.
Talk with Dave about calling the Network hotline: 1-800-489-7273.

If Dave wants to, find the Network hotline number, a phone and a private place to call for help.

Be respectful by staying calm, not judging, and listening to Dave. Sam can help Dave calm down if he needs it. Sam should remind Dave that the hotline will be confidential and will help.

Sam can also call the hotline for advice on how to help Dave and how to cope with feelings that come up when you’re dealing with abuse.

Give Dave the hotline phone number and help him place the call if he wants to. Encourage Dave to say he has a disability and ask for any support he needs.

**Remember:** Do not tell Dave what to do. He gets to decide what happens next. Support his decisions.

   Dave might want to:
      ✓ Do nothing
      ✓ Talk to another safe person
      ✓ Make a complaint to the police

   **If Dave wants to make a complaint, we strongly suggest that he call or go with an advocate to protect his rights**

✓ Call Adult Protective Services: 1-800-564-1612
Steps to be Taken by Group Leaders to Support Amy:

- Ask if Amy wants to talk privately to someone she trusts.
- Remind Amy that mandated reporters need to report rapes. Group leaders remind everyone about confidentiality. Also say to everyone that leaving now or any time is okay if you feel upset.
- Listen to Amy’s story. Don’t ask anything.
- Be supportive.

These are good things to say to Amy:

- It is good that you are telling us
- We are so sorry this happened to you
- This is not your fault
- Don’t be afraid to tell us what’s going on
- We don’t want people to hurt you
- You don’t need to feel ashamed
- You don’t have to be alone
- It is okay to feel angry or scared
- This has happened to other people
- What are you most concerned about right now?
- What is most important to you right now?
- This doesn’t sound safe for you. There are people who can help you with that.
- Who is a safe person in your life? Can you talk to them about this?

- Get the Domestic and Sexual Violence Network Hotline phone number: **1-800-489-7273**, a phone and a private place to call for help.
- Explain to Amy that the people on the hotline can help her figure out what to do to be safe. Give Amy the hotline number and support her to place the call. Encourage Amy to say she has a disability and ask for any support she needs.
Remember: Do not tell Amy what to do. She gets to decide what happens next. Support her decisions. Help her out if needed.

Amy might want to:
✓ Do nothing
✓ Talk to another safe person
✓ Make a complaint to the police

** If Amy wants to make a complaint, we strongly suggest she call or go with an advocate to protect her rights

✓ Amy may also want to call Adult Protective Services at 1-800-564-1612

Steps to be Taken by Group Leaders to Support Group Members

It can be upsetting to hear about someone being raped. Here are some things that group leaders can do to help their members:

✓ If you are still in a group after Amy tells her story, ask how everybody else is doing.
✓ Help group members process what’s going on.
✓ Ask each member to think about how they are going to take care of themselves when they get out of the meeting. Some things to talk about are how they are feeling, how they will relax, who they have to talk to, etc.

I know this is hard. You will be ok!
**Steps the Group Leaders Could Take:**

- Tim should tell the GMSA officers what he heard.
- Have an officers’ meeting and discuss the issue. Review the GMSA policy about events being safe for everyone.
- Make a plan to contact Jake.
- Officers will go over the GMSA Peer to Peer Guide about Domestic and Sexual Violence with Jake. Say that the conference needs to be safe for everyone.
- Tell Jake he cannot attend the conference alone. He can only go to the conference if he has supervision while he is there.
- Explain to Jake that he needs to send in his registration form with his support person’s registration form.

**Sexual Violence at a Conference**

Tim hears Jake say he is going to the conference alone this year without any staff support. Tim remembers there was a complaint against Jake. A few years ago Jake went into Mary’s hotel room and was lying on top of her and touching her. Mary’s roommate had to try really hard to get Jake to stop and leave the room.

**Hey Jake, the conference needs to be safe for everyone!**
Example: Harassment of a GMSA Member Who is Gay

At a workshop about gay and lesbian issues, Phil interrupts several times saying that his church says gay people will go to Hell and that boys cannot date other boys. These comments are making others feel uncomfortable, especially John.

Steps a Group Leader Could Take:

- Check in with John.
  These are good things to say:
  - I’m sorry this happened
  - We accept all people, gay or straight
  - Put downs are not okay
  - We will tell Phil to stop
  - Don’t be afraid to tell us what’s going on
  - It is okay to feel angry or scared
  - This has happened to other people

- Group leaders will talk to Phil about what he said. Do this with or without John. Encourage John to speak with Phil. Offer to help by doing a role play or being there to support quietly. John can role play saying things like, “It offends me when you put down gay people” and “You are making me upset with your hate words.”

- Group leaders will talk to Phil about what said. Tell Phil he can’t force his beliefs on other people. Explain the GMSA policy of zero tolerance for harassment especially hate speech.

- Group leaders could remind everyone in the workshop about the zero tolerance harassment policy.

- Ask John if he wants to call the Network hotline (1-800-489-7273) or the SafeSpace hotline (1-866-869-7341) to ask questions and share his story. Offer to stay with him while he makes the call. It might be helpful to practice making the call first. Encourage John to say he has a disability and ask for any support he needs.
Emotional and Verbal Domestic Abuse
Becky and Jason live together. Becky has not been going out with her friends lately. Jessica is worried and asks Becky how she’s doing. Becky says Jason calls her r#tard, stupid, and ugly all the time. He says she’s cheating on him. When she says that’s not true he yells at her.

Steps Jessica Could Take:
- Listen to what Becky says.
- Be supportive.

Some of the things Jessica can say are:
- It’s okay to feel angry, scared or any other feelings that come up
- Don’t be afraid to tell us what’s going on
- You don’t need to feel ashamed
- You’re not alone
- It’s not your fault
- This happens to other people
- You don’t deserve to be treated that way, you deserve respect and love
- What are you most concerned about right now?
- What is most important to you right now?
- What have you done in the past to try to stay safe? How has it worked?
- This doesn’t sound safe for you, there are people who work for the hotline who can help you with that
- Who is a safe person in your life? Can you talk to them about this?

- Get the Domestic and Sexual Violence Network Hotline phone number: 1-800-489-7273, a phone and a private place to call for help. Explain what the hotline is. Tell Becky that what is said is kept confidential.

- Give Becky the hotline phone number and help her place the call if she wants to. You can help her role play calling the hotline first, helping her practice telling her story. Encourage Becky to say she has a disability and ask for any support she needs.
Remember: Do not tell Becky what to do. She gets to decide what happens next. Support her decisions. Help her out if needed.

Becky might want to:
✓ Do nothing
✓ Talk to another safe person
✓ Make a complaint to the police

** If Becky wants to make a complaint, we strongly suggest she call or go with an advocate to protect her rights

✓ Becky may also want to call Adult Protective Services at 1-800-564-1612

To wrap up, remember that there are a lot of things you can do to help a victim of domestic or sexual violence.

Be a Good Listener. Don’t talk too much!
Show Respect. Don’t Judge!
Keep Your Focus on the Victim. (not on yourself)
Educate and Empower. Help the Person Make their Own Decisions.

YOU can help make a difference!

If you want more information about this Peer to Peer Guide call Green Mountain Self-Advocates at 1-800-564-9990
IMPORTANT PHONE NUMBERS USED IN THIS BOOKLET

- Vermont Adult Protective Services
  1-800-564-1612

- Vermont’s Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence
  1-800-489-7273

- SafeSpace
  1-866-869-7341

- Green Mountain Self Advocates (GMSA)
  802-229-2600
  Toll free in Vermont:
  1-800-564-9990

- Always feel free to call GMSA at
  1-800-564-9990 if you need advice or support.
Policies and Procedures:
A Peer to Peer Guide About Domestic and Sexual Violence

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