



Adult Advocacy
Centers

White Paper

The Need for Funding for Disability-Led Victim Service Organizations

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Introduction

Crime victimization against individuals with disabilities has been a known problem for decades. In 2019 the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that the rate of violent victimization against persons with disabilities was nearly four times higher than the rate for persons without disabilities (Harrell, 2021). Between 2017 and 2019, individuals with disabilities were victims of 26% of all nonfatal violent crime, yet they accounted for only 12% of the national population (Harrell, 2021). Although this victimization rate is alarmingly high, it is not a new phenomenon. Disability advocacy organizations, crime victims service organizations, the government, and other institutions have been aware of the victimization rate since the Crime Victims with Disabilities Awareness Act was enacted in 1988 to gather statistics, yet it has only gotten worse in that time frame (Breaking the Silence, 2007).

This paper focuses on the lack of funding that makes it difficult to lower the victimization rate and provide resources to crime victims with disabilities. Currently, crime victim service organizations receive grant money annually from large government funds, regardless of their successes or failures. Meanwhile, organizations that specifically serve crime victims with disabilities apply for the same funding but are rarely chosen. Money is consistently siloed to historically funded organizations that may propose attractive projects and ideas but often lack the expertise to provide the proposed services. If we, as a society, want to reduce the victimization rate for people with disabilities, some funding should be awarded to disability-led organizations that specialize in serving crime victims with disabilities.



Another issue is that current funding methods fail to support and reflect the interconnectedness of the disability community, which resembles an intersection of individuals. Government disability funds and crime victim services typically support individuals with only one type of disability—developmental disabilities or mental illness, for example. However, individuals often have more than one disability, and this can make it very difficult for those individuals to get support and for organizations that wish to serve people in these intersectionalities to get funding. In addition, money is often siloed to crime victim service organizations that fail to include individuals with disabilities in leadership positions. When funded organizations lack representation from the disability community, the community's voice goes unheard. This paper will discuss the need for a more inclusive and representative funding model that supports all types of disabilities and victims.

History

There is an extensive history of exclusion for the disability community that spans back to when people with disabilities were wrongfully institutionalized, segregated and discriminated against. Prior to the disability rights movement, individuals with disabilities were mistreated because no legal framework existed to protect them. People with disabilities had no power to make decisions for themselves as they were forcibly institutionalized and ostracized from public life, education and economic opportunities. Amidst the disability rights movement, organizations and national institutions advocating for the disability community were created; however, they often failed to include individuals with disabilities in their work, which further excluded this community from decisions affecting their lives. A prominent historical example that showcases the extent of exclusion occurred while passing the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, when former president Jimmy Carter appointed a task force to review regulations of the Act that would directly affect any individual with a disability. The task force had zero representation from the community it was trying to help (Korol, 2021). While positive steps were taken with the passage of this bill, a core issue of representation had been largely ignored.

The continued exclusion led to movements fighting for representation in disability work. The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was one of the first pieces of legislation that included a person with disabilities, Justin Dart, in its creation, which was a significant moment for representation (Biography, n.d.). During the ADA's passage, the disability community consistently conducted protests, sit-ins and speeches to emphasize the community's need to not only have adequate rights but also involvement in legislative decisions. A great example of this growing sentiment was the slogan "Nothing About Us Without Us" that gained popularity amongst the community during the ADA proceedings and increased awareness about the issue (Carmel, 2020). Disability activism in the 1990s shifted the way many in the country viewed the plight and lack of representation of the disability community.

Despite movements championing the disabled community's involvement in disability work, some organizations continue to exclude individuals with disabilities from certain work opportunities. Many historically funded crime victim services organizations lack the vital representation of this community and the expertise needed to help them most effectively. These organizations may employ individuals with disabilities but commonly place them in less powerful roles and rarely in leadership positions with the power to make change. The same issues that were fought against in the past will continue to exist so long as funding continues to be siloed to organizations without disability representation. It is important to prioritize funding for organizations that include individuals with disabilities in leadership roles if we are to further dismantle historical biases that the disability community has been fighting against for decades.

Intersectionality and Representation

Inadequately represented groups have successfully fought for their rights for centuries. From the Suffrage Movement to the Civil Rights Act, these radical rebellions from the norm led to a world of greater equality, acceptance and representation for these respective groups and their unique cultures. In the present, however, people fail to recognize the disability community as its own cultural group that needs representation. The disability community is commonly intersected into other groups of society that may have more prominent, socially acknowledged cultures that overpower the identity of having a disability. The disability community's specific identity is further dismissed through the lack of representation in advocacy organizations and crime victims services organizations. Leadership in these organizations historically centers on white experiences and individuals without disabilities. A lack of representation from the disabled community leads to organizations not hearing and incorporating the lived experiences necessary to make successful changes in victimization services work.

In disability work, it is also common for individuals with disabilities to be tokenized by organizations. If an organization includes one individual with disabilities, no matter the position or level of involvement this individual has in the organization, they can claim to have disability representation. Tokenism enforces the incorrect idea that one person is an accurate representation of an entire group, which is especially inaccurate for the disability community that consists of a wide variety of experiences and intersections among its members. Tokenism causes organizations to hire individuals solely because of their disabilities while still failing to view these individuals as valuable, contributing members. This practice further instills barriers against making successful changes in disability victimization services work.

There is a strong need for organizations that support and advocate for crime victims with disabilities to have representation from the disabled community at all levels of the organization, including leadership roles. Individuals with disabilities are essential to crime victim service organizations because they have a more nuanced understanding of the support and services their community needs. By including individuals with disabilities in organizations and leadership positions, a shared experience and understanding exists between the service provider and the recipient. The current funding methods fail to support changing times that are inclusive of the disability community in work affecting their lives. The organizations that receive much of the funding may not be aware of the disconnect between their services and the community they are working to help. Funding needs to shift to disability-led organizations that support crime victims with disabilities because these organizations offer comprehensive specialized services and accommodations.

The Importance of Intersectionalities and Cross Knowledge

The current method of handling crime victims with disabilities is fragmented. The funded crime victim service organizations often view victimization issues as individual, so they don't cultivate partnerships with related organizations to work systemically. The issue is that these organizations often do not understand how to accommodate individuals with disabilities because they may not seek training from others who are educated in this specific area of work. The lack of accommodations is apparent because many organizations only serve one specific type of disability, which excludes individuals with more than one type of disability and ignores the intersectionalities of the community. Even when organizations do know how to accommodate for the disability community, they can still lack specific training or access to the necessary accommodations. The current system is failing to serve the disability community well, which leaves the group in need of a new, more inclusive system.

It is critical for organizations to start viewing victimization issues for individuals with disabilities as a connected community problem. Collaboration must be pursued among crime victim service and disability advocacy services organizations, so that groups can share their knowledge and experience to better serve victims with disabilities. Disability advocacy organizations working to support the intersections of the disability community and crime victims exist currently, but they are not receiving funding due to systemic barriers. If these organizations are to make necessary changes to the crime services system, funding silos must be dismantled so that money goes to organizations that specialize in serving people with disabilities—particularly organizations led by people with disabilities themselves.

Conclusion

The crime victim service organizations currently funded often lack representation from the disability community, fail to recognize the community's intersections and culture, and lack vital accommodations. Despite the outside world moving towards inclusivity and equality for the disability community, crime victim services are lagging. As victims service organizations that specialize in serving disabilities continue to grow, it is an important time to shift funding to these organizations that can make necessary differences. By providing funding to disability-led organizations with expertise in serving disabled crime victims and establishing an interconnected system among services and advocacy organizations, crime victims with disabilities will receive better aid, which is clearly needed.

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