

THE ROLE OF THE MEDICAL ADVOCATE

Tipsheet #1

Medical advocates play many roles in supporting trans/nonbinary survivors of sexual assault. This includes normalizing their experiences, providing emotional support, accompanying them through medical events, sharing information, and offering relevant referrals and resources.

Trans survivors may prioritize other services over medical exams and evidence collection. Body discomfort, lack of trust or prior negative experiences with medical providers may create hesitancy to be examined, receive medical care, disrobe, or fully engage in a forensic or medical exam. Advocates can support survivors by being an early point of contact, building a trusting relationship, and sharing information with survivors so they can make an informed choice about what medical components they wish to pursue or not.

General principles of trans-affirming and survivor-centered care

- Ask, share, and use the correct name and pronouns for everyone.
- Reflect and mirror language used by the survivor for their bodies, identities, and experiences.
- Check for clarification when needed.
- Use less gendered language until a preference is known. For example – genitals instead of penis or vagina; chest instead of breasts.
- Check in with the survivor about their safety related to what words are used in charting and documentation (including intake and non-medical forms).
- Provide options at every step – give information so that survivors can make informed decisions.
- Support and affirm survivor choice at every step.
- Offer trans-affirming follow-up resources – know who provides trans-knowledgeable services, who is trauma-informed, etc.
- Ensure materials have included trans people (for example posters and brochures).

- Partner with trans-affirming and trans-led organizations.
- Cross-train, share resources, develop materials, collaborate, work together to collect supplies.
- Hire trans/nonbinary people.
- Be creative in advocacy. Work together to solve problems.

Advocacy during exams

- Help the survivor navigate the exam. This could look like asking:
 - *Do you want to be able to see what is happening with a mirror?*
 - *Would you like me (or the examiner) to describe what is happening?*
- Offer support or distraction. Survivors may need to focus their attention on something other than the exam to feel comfortable with the exam. An advocate might ask:
 - *Do you want me to hold your hand?*
 - *Do you want distractions?*
 - Distractions could be talking about pets or food, watching a TV show or movie on the phone, looking at humorous pictures, or discussing something else.
- Assist the examiner with trans-affirming care. If the provider is not familiar with trans-affirming care, the advocate may offer suggestions.
- Assist everyone involved with trauma-informed care. This may look like:
 - Encouraging the examiner to slow down or take a break.
 - Asking the survivor what they need.
- Validate the survivor's experiences.
- Help the survivor find ways to be comfortable – such as only partially undressing or having extra drapes in a certain area.
- Provide information about the process and what happens next.
- Safety plan. [See Tipsheet #3: Safety Planning]

Intervening with other providers

Another major role of medical advocates is to help other providers support the needs of trans survivors. This may include providing education or intervention with other providers in real-time.

Advocates may do things like:

- Ensure the survivor and other providers are gendered correctly.
- Intervene when someone is misgendered.
- Help providers hear the main concerns of a survivor.
- Help redirect the conversation if inappropriate questions are asked.
- Share information with the survivor or assist/remind the provider to do so.
- Help the provider use correct body maps and language in charting.
- Help the survivor have agency throughout the process. This may include:
 - Reminding the provider to slow down.
 - Asking for the survivor’s consent.
 - Suggesting that the exam can go in a different order or skip sections.
 - Helping to build trust between the survivor and provider.

Provide connection to resources

Sexual assault programs provide survivors with a number of resources and referrals. To support trans/nonbinary survivors it can be beneficial to know additional information about referrals:

- What agencies are trans-affirming and trans-competent?
- What is the process for intakes at the agency?
- Do survivors need ID or insurance?
- What services are provided?
- Are services gender-specific?
 - If so, how does the agency define gender? Is it based on self-identification, legal paperwork, or something else? What are their policies for trans/nonbinary people?

Medical advocates may also support survivors in accessing healthcare outside of forensic exams. This can involve:

- Listening to their concerns about accessing healthcare. Acknowledging their feelings, including fear, dismay, anger, and distrust.
- Being attentive to their needs. Taking the time to listen to what they are looking for.
- Accompanying survivors to medical appointments. Discussing ahead of time the support or intervention they might want.

Organizational supports

Sexual assault programs can provide additional support to survivors including:

- Clothing.
- Gender-affirming items – wigs, binders, packers, breast forms, etc.
- Transportation assistance.
- Food.

Plan ahead

Sexual assault programs can build connections with trans-affirming organizations and proactively prepare to effectively work with trans survivors.

- Train advocates to make calls for survivors or assist survivors in making calls to other agencies (whichever the survivor prefers).
- Advocates can call ahead to assess trans-competency at an organization or to help make an appointment and navigate a resource.
- Advocates can also sit with survivors while the survivor calls another agency, or the advocate can pass the phone to the survivor during the call. This may mean being on speakerphone together (when in a private place) so that the advocate and survivor can both hear everything discussed.
- Prepare to navigate the specific laws and regulations in your area – including gendered laws, mandatory reporting, and more.

Advocates and agencies may also look at how systems and organizations can better support trans/nonbinary survivors by:

- Assessing and training all staff that could interact with survivors/patients, including staff who provide direct services, as well as those who may have more casual interactions (front desk staff, emergency department medical providers, law enforcement, and others involved in survivor care).
- Helping agencies address their intake processes.
- Providing training on the needs of trans survivors, or connecting supervisors to outside agencies that provide training.
- Helping establish processes for survivors to have support during procedures.
- Assessing referrals and resources.



This tip sheet is part of a series focusing on medical advocacy.

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FORGE provides training and technical assistance. Contact us to learn more about providing support to trans survivors.