Conducting Safety and Access Reviews

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Activating Change

Objectives

Participants will be able to:

- Explain why accessibility and safety are critical when serving survivors with disabilities and Deaf survivors.

- Identify common barriers to access and safety within disability organizations and victim service agencies.

- Describe how to conduct a physical access and safety review of their organization or facility.

- Recognize key accessibility requirements and strategies for improving access, documentation, and budgeting.

What is this all about?

→ Today we will discuss:

- Why assessing access and safety matters
- Common barriers survivors encounter
- How to conduct site reviews
- ADA and WCAG accessibility basics
- Budgeting and documentation
- Strategies to improve organizational accessibility

Why talk about it?

"My barriers are doubled as a survivor and a person with a disability."

Source: Vera Institute of Justice – Center on Victimization and Safety survivor focus group

What might these "double barriers" look like for survivors trying to access services?

Survivors with disabilities:

- Experience violence at higher rates
- Often face additional barriers to services
- May rely on systems that are not designed for accessibility

If services are not accessible, survivors may:

- Remain in unsafe situations
- Avoid reporting violence
- Lose access to support services

Understanding Barriers

→ Barriers may include:

Physical barriers
Communication barriers
Programmatic barriers
Attitudinal barriers

→ **Example:**
A survivor may be able to enter the building but cannot communicate with staff effectively. A survivor may be able to communicate with staff effectively but not enter the building.. A survivor may avoid a building that made access difficult.

Safety and Access

- **Two Questions When Reviewing a Space**
  - Can survivors enter and use the service without difficulty or barriers?
  - Can survivors remain safe while receiving services?

Both must be present for services to truly support survivors

Without Access?

- Survivors may return to abusive environments
- Survivors may delay seeking help
- Agencies may unintentionally exclude survivors with disabilities

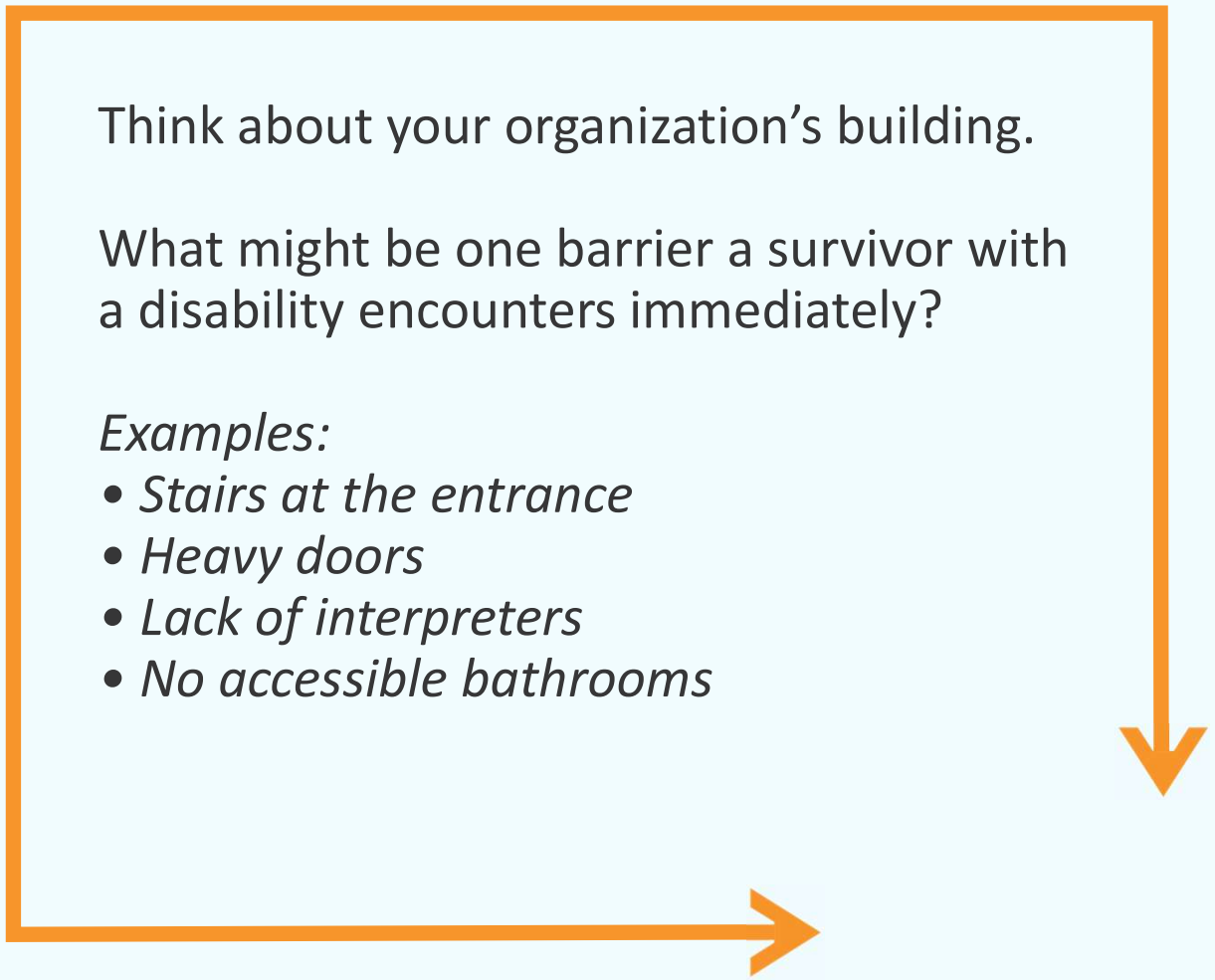
Reflection

Think about your organization's building.

What might be one barrier a survivor with a disability encounters immediately?

Examples:

- *Stairs at the entrance*
- *Heavy doors*
- *Lack of interpreters*
- *No accessible bathrooms*



What is Accessibility?

→ *Accessibility* means people with disabilities can enter, navigate, and use services without barriers.

→ *Universal design* means spaces are designed to work for as many people as possible without requiring adaptation or specialized design.

When you prioritize accessibility, you proactively and regularly review spaces for barriers that impede people with disabilities from receiving services.

Physical Accessibility Features: General

- Accessible entrances
- Automatic doors
- Accessible parking
- Wide hallways
- Accessible reception desks
- Accessible bathrooms
- Clear signage
- Elevators

Physical Accessibility Features: Shelters

- Accessible bedrooms
- Accessible bathrooms
- Roll-in showers or mobility accessible tubs
- Grab bars
- Accessible kitchens
- Clear space for mobility devices
- Visual alarm system
- Bed shakers

What is Safety?

→ *Safety* means survivors can navigate a space without fear or emotional and physical distress.

When you prioritize safety, you proactively and regularly review spaces for features, attitudes, and behaviors that dissuade survivors from seeking services.

Safety Considerations

- → Secure entrances
- → Private meeting spaces
- → Adequate lighting
- → Confidential entry options
- → Accessible emergency exits
- → Clear signage

When You Have One But Not the Other

Survivors with disabilities will not be served effectively, if at all.

Example:
A secure shelter provides privacy, confidentiality, and safety.
But if the shelter cannot be navigated barrier-free, survivors with disabilities cannot use it.

Example:
A ramp provides access.
But if the building has no private meeting space, survivors may be in danger.

Scenario 1

Maria is a survivor of domestic violence who uses a wheelchair.

When she arrives at a shelter, she encounters:

- Stairs at the entrance
- Narrow bedroom doorways
- No accessible bathroom
- Staff unsure how to accommodate mobility needs



What access barriers did Maria encounter?



What safety risks could this create?



What changes could prevent this situation?

Safety and Access Reviews

Conducting Reviews

→ Organizations should conduct regular site reviews to identify barriers.

→ Reviews should be done in teams, including survivors and those with disabilities.

This involves:

- Moving through the facility
- Evaluating accessibility features
- Identifying access concerns

before survivors encounter them

Create a Team



Building a Review Team

→ Site review teams should include:

- Victim service staff and disability advocates
- Survivors, Deaf people, people with disabilities
- Facility managers
- Organizational leadership

Different perspectives help identify hidden barriers.

Team Roles

- → Lead reviewer
- → Measurer
- → Note-taker
- → Observer

Orient Team

- → To review tool
- → To the goal of the review
- → To the organizations and spaces being reviewed

Conduct the Review

- Need measuring tape, clipboard for notetaking, comfortable shoes
- Take measurements (no eyeballing)
- Take detailed notes
- Debrief immediately

Preparing for a Site Review

- → Gather building information
- → Identify areas to assess
- → Prepare accessibility checklists
- → Purchase review materials (measuring tape, door pressure gauge, levels)
- → Assign team roles

What to Look for: Accessibility

- Ramps
- Automatic doors
- Accessible parking spaces
- Accessible route to entrance
- Lowered counters
- Accessible Seating
- Grab bars
- Accessible sinks
- Covered pipes
- Clear signage
- Video doorbells
- Soft lighting
- Scent-free
- Accessible materials
- Visual alarms
- Service Animal policies
- Emergency plan for people with mobility needs

Common Barriers in Victim Service Organizations

- → Inaccessible shelters
- → No interpreters available
- → Limited disability training for staff
- → Policies that unintentionally exclude survivors with disabilities (personal care attendant, service animals, language access, etc.)

Scenario 2

Jordan, a Deaf survivor, arrives expecting an ASL interpreter.

Instead:

- Staff attempt to communicate using written notes
- Staff ask Jordan to bring a friend to interpret next time



What access barriers did Jordan encounter?



What safety risks could this create?



How could the agency prepare for communication access in advance?

ADA Requirements

- Organizations that serve the public must ensure their physical spaces are accessible under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

- A good safety and access review tool will address barriers, while also meeting the requirements of the ADA. Compliance is the floor—aim for the ceiling!

ADA Requirements (Examples)

- Entrances
  - At least one accessible entrance to the building
  - Ramps if stairs are present
  - Doorways at least 32 inches wide
  - Door hardware that can be used without tight grasping or twisting (lever handles)
- Parking
  - Accessible parking spaces located close to the entrance
  - Clear signage identifying accessible parking spaces
  - An accessible route from the parking area to the building entrance

ADA Requirements (Examples)

- Interior Pathways
  - Hallways wide enough for wheelchair access
  - Clear pathways free from obstacles
  - Flooring that allows safe wheelchair movement
- Reception and Service Areas
  - At least part of the reception or service counter no higher than 36 inches
  - Accessible seating in waiting areas
  - Clear floor space for wheelchair users

ADA Requirements (Examples)

- Restrooms
  - At least one accessible restroom available to the public
  - Grab bars next to toilets
  - Accessible sink height
  - Enough turning space for wheelchairs
- Elevators
  - Buildings with multiple floors must provide elevator access to public areas
  - Elevator buttons reachable from seated position
  - Audible or visual floor indicators

ADA Requirements (Examples)

- Communication Accessibility
  - Sign language interpreters when needed
  - Written materials available in accessible formats
  - Staff trained to communicate effectively with survivors with disabilities, Deaf survivors

Website Accessibility

- → Websites should follow Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) to ensure people with disabilities can access information and services online.
- → The standard most organizations aim for is WCAG 2.1 Level AA compliance.
  - → https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG21/

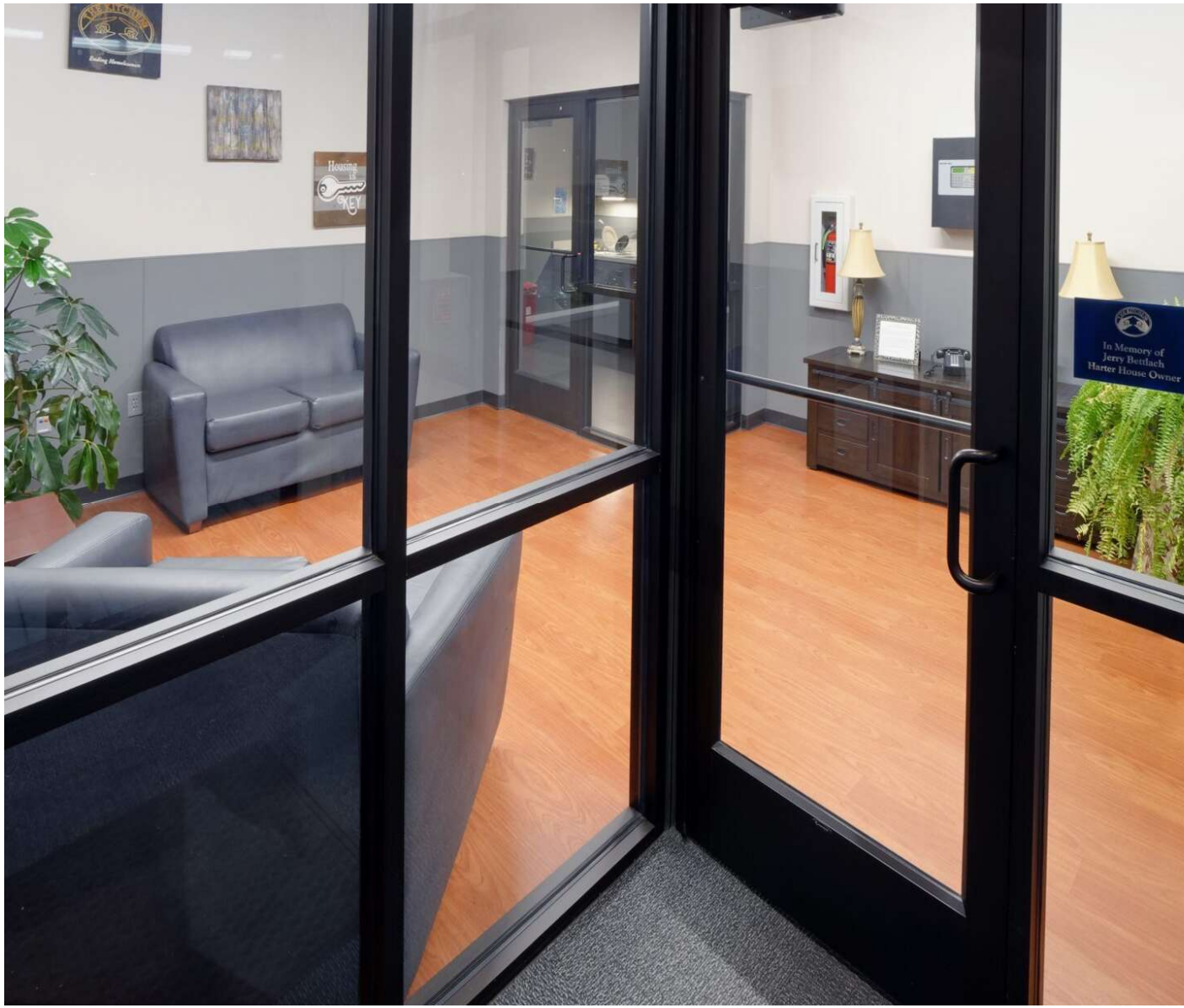
WCAG Examples

- Visual Accessibility
  - High color contrast between text and background
  - Text that can be enlarged without losing functionality
  - Images that include alternative text descriptions for screen readers
- Hearing Accessibility
  - Captions on all videos
  - Transcripts for audio recordings
- Motor Accessibility
  - Websites that can be navigated using only a keyboard
  - Buttons and links large enough to easily select
- Screen Reader Compatibility
  - Proper heading structure
  - Clearly labeled form fields and buttons

Outside Entrance



Entrance to Space



Waiting Room



Office Entrance



Intake



Shelter



Laundry



Public Restroom: Sinks



Budgeting for Accessibility

- → Budget proactively.
- → Access should be prioritized and intentional.
- → Make budgeting for accessibility routine and expected.

Building Leadership Support

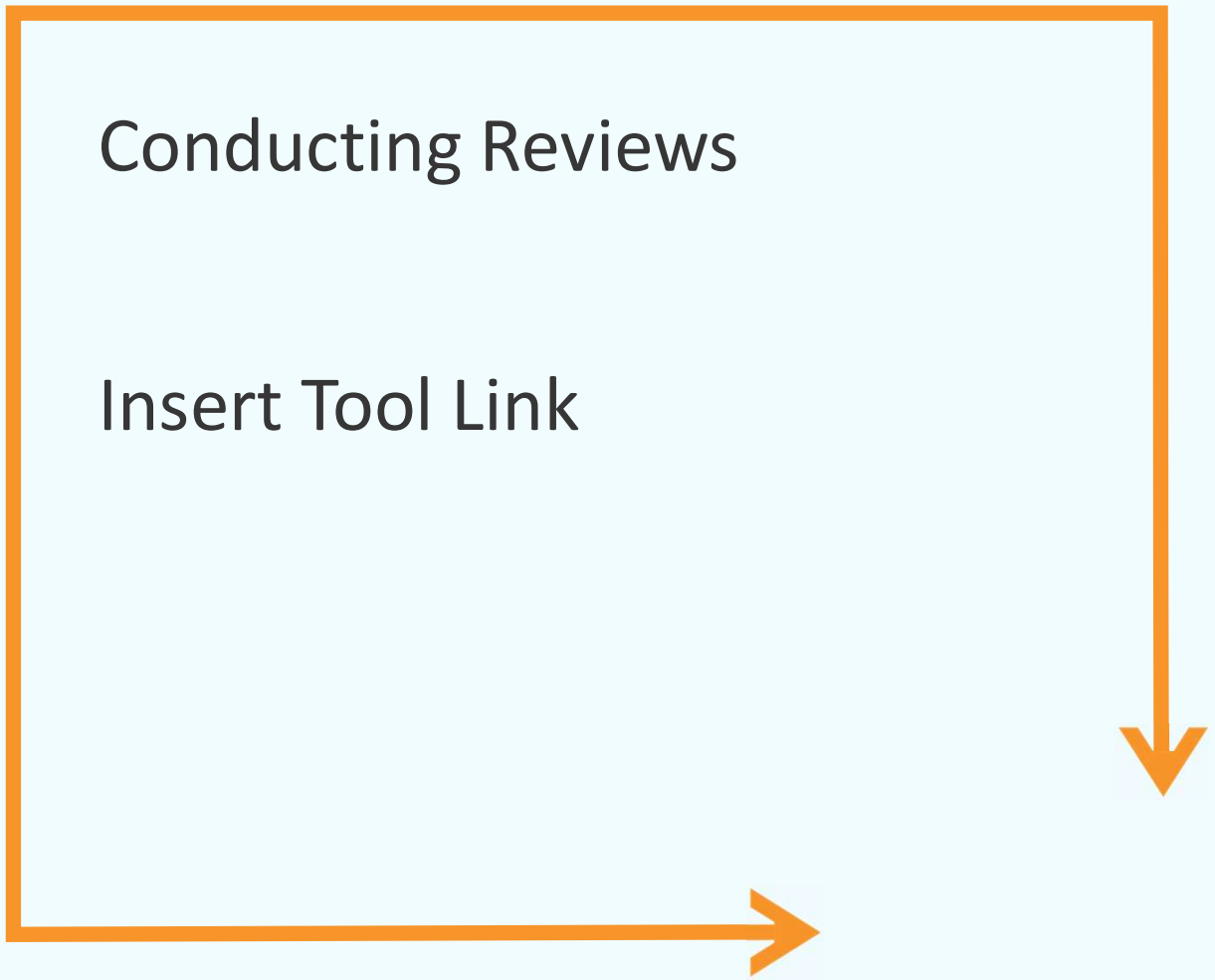
- Strategies include:
  - presenting site review findings
  - sharing survivor experiences
  - explaining legal requirements
  - identifying funding opportunities
  - including leadership on review team

Key Takeaways

→ Organizations should:

- conduct regular site reviews
- address barriers proactively
- budget for accessibility improvements
- train staff

Next Step



Questions?

Webinar #3: Barrier Removal Plans

→ September 8th, 2026

→ 11:00 AM – 12:30 PM