

# Supporting Survivors of Domestic and Sexual Violence in the Legislative Process

## SUPPORTING SURVIVORS AS THEY SHARE THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCES

Retelling one’s experience of violence can be painful. Survivors may experience trauma response through “fight”, “flight” or “freeze” reactions, and in meetings or hearings may exhibit increased agitation, argumentativeness, avoidance, dissociation (detachment from immediate surroundings), anxiety and more. Survivors will also utilize their own coping strategies (having headphones in before testifying, leaving the room when needed, bringing a person for support, etc.). These strategies are not intended to be disrespectful or reflect a lack of engagement.

**Words matter. Consider these tips to best support survivors through your language and actions.**

INSTEAD OF:	CONSIDER:	BECAUSE:
“Why didn’t you just leave?” or “Why didn’t you ask for help?”	“What was done to make you feel you couldn’t leave?”	The rephrased question does not assign fault/blame to the victim and acknowledges that it may have been impossible to leave or ask for help.
“Will you provide me details about your experience?”	“Is there anything you’d like to share that would help shed light on sex trafficking/ domestic violence/ sexual assault?”	Asking a survivor additional details about the violence may increase the trauma they experience in retelling their story. Instead, connect the survivor’s experiences back to the larger issue of violence against women in an effort to learn more about how their experience relates to the policy issue being discussed.
Unsolicited touching or hugging.	Using non-physical forms of comfort and asking the individual first if it is okay to touch them.	After experiencing violence, specifically sexual violence or violence between intimate partners, physical touch may evoke memories of the violence rather than feel comforting, even if well-intended.
Speaking for a survivor, stating what they should/ shouldn’t do, assuming what they feel, claiming to understand their experience, or directing them to do things a certain way.	Asking questions or posing suggestions that promote a survivor’s ability to make decisions for themselves and use their voice.	When someone has experienced violence, another person has exerted control and power over them. Restoring a survivor’s sense of control will aid their healing process and may increase comfort engaging further in the legislative process.
Appearing disengaged through body language.	Being mindful of body language and engagement.	Body language that appears disengaged, even unintentionally, may cause a survivor to shut down or feel not listened to, potentially increasing the pain of retelling their story or prevent them from engaging in the legislative process.

*Additional considerations on reverse →*

INSTEAD OF:	CONSIDER:	BECAUSE:
Rushing a survivor or their story.	Giving the person the time and space to share their story, as well as time and space to process your questions.	Testifying at hearings takes courage and emotional energy. It is important that survivors feel heard and listened to. Feeling rushed, even if the committee is in agreement with their position, may cause someone to feel dismissed or insignificant to the committee.
Assuming a survivor doesn't want any questions.	Recognizing survivors are experts on their own experience and may welcome respectful questions.	Asking them respectful questions may help them to feel heard and acknowledged. This may also reveal new information about the impacts of a bill.
"Rescue"	Healing, recovery, restoration, process of relief from sex trafficking	Perpetuating the idea that domestic/sexual violence and trafficking victims need someone to save them simplifies a complex crime and ignores the fact that leaving the situation is only the first step of a very significant recovery effort. Use terms that describe a long-term process of recovery and healing.
"Ex-boyfriend/ex-girlfriend", "estranged", "peer"	Abuser, assaulter, attacker, perpetrator	Calling an abuser or assaulter "peers," "estranged," or "ex-boyfriend/girlfriends" minimizes the violence and makes it seem as though the victim and abuser were on equal footing, instead of one person who has/had power and control over the other.
"Sex scandal", "domestic dispute", "quarrel", "temper tantrum"	Trafficking, intimate partner violence, domestic violence/abuse, sexual assault	Words like "scandal" minimize the severity of domestic and sexual violence and imply equal power between the parties involved. Be clear about what the situation actually is to not minimize the violence experienced by survivors.

### Support Survivors When Asking for Testifiers on a Bill

When asking for testimony, it is important to always prioritize the survivor's safety and well-being. It is helpful to present them with all potential options for becoming involved, not only in-person testimony. Consider reminding the survivor that if they choose to testify, their testimony becomes public record, the hearing will be televised, senators may ask questions, and the media may be present and try to speak with them afterward. These factors may have detrimental impacts on a survivor's safety or well-being, so it is important that a survivor has all the information. You may consider informing a survivor that they may bring a support person with them to a hearing or meeting. **You may also connect the survivor to Survivors Rising (402-999-2725 or www.SurvivorsRising.org), who can explain the legislative process and provide support.**

### Resources for Survivors

If a survivor is in crisis and is seeking supportive resources, please connect them to one of the following:

- **NEBRASKACOAALITION.ORG**  
(to access local service providers in their local area)
- **NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE**  
**800-799-7233**



[www.SurvivorsRising.org](http://www.SurvivorsRising.org)  
[www.OmahaWomensFund.org](http://www.OmahaWomensFund.org)