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August 12, 2020

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

We are writing regarding the issue of domestic violence against people with disabilities. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in three adults, including those with disabilities, have experienced domestic violence.¹ Domestic violence includes physical or sexual violence, stalking, and psychological aggression.² Individuals with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, are the victims of sexual assaults at rates more than seven times those for people without disabilities.³ Additionally, individuals with disabilities may experience violence or sexual abuse at the hands of a paid or unpaid caregiver. To help address this issue, residential domestic violence programs can provide critical services, safety, and stability for people with disabilities who have experienced domestic violence. However, when seeking out these programs for help, victims with disabilities often face a number of physical, informational, and programmatic barriers.⁴ Because of these barriers, people with disabilities may stay in abusive relationships.

The Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services (HHS) have several efforts underway to help people experiencing domestic violence and their children. These efforts include providing grants to state, tribal, and local entities; offering technical assistance; and, overseeing compliance with federal laws and grant requirements. The primary federal funding stream to help victims of domestic violence and their children is HHS' Family Violence Prevention and Services Program, which administers the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA).

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2015 Data Brief-Updated Release (Atlanta, Ga.: November 2018). Also see, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Sexual Violence and Intimate Partner Violence Among People with Disabilities, accessed August 3, 2020.

² *Id.*

³ Joe Shapiro, "The Sexual Assault Epidemic No One Talks About" National Public Radio (January 8, 2018). Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/08/570224090/the-sexual-assault-epidemic-no-one-talks-about>

⁴ Eleanor Lyon, Shannon Lane, and Anne Menard, "Meeting Survivors' Needs: A Multi-State Study of Domestic Violence Shelter Experiences" (October 2008). Available at: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/225025.pdf>

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The federal government should do everything it can to assist residential programs to reach out and serve people with disabilities who are experiencing domestic violence. We therefore request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) examine this issue and provide answers to the following questions:

1. What is known about the prevalence of people with disabilities who have experienced domestic violence and their use of federally funded residential domestic violence programs?
2. What has been the experience of individuals with disabilities in seeking (or choosing not to seek) services provided by FVPSA?
3. What actions have FVPSA-funded residential domestic violence programs taken to make facilities, information, and services accessible and to conduct outreach to individuals with disabilities, and what, if any, challenges have they faced?
4. To what extent does HHS oversee and support domestic violence programs in improving physical and programmatic accessibility, conducting outreach to individuals with disabilities, and meeting relevant federal requirements?
5. How has the definition of domestic violence as part of a sexual relationship in the FVPSA affected the ability of individuals with disabilities—who may experience domestic violence in different types of intimate relationships such as caregiving—to receive services?

Thank you for your attention to this request. For any questions, please reach out to Cathy Yu with the Committee on Education and Labor staff at Cathy.Yu@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,



ROBERT C. "BOBBY" SCOTT
Chair
Committee on Education and Labor



SUZANNE BONAMICI
Chair
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human
Services