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## Give Us the Words

Responses to questions that advocates may receive from allies when working with people with disabilities.

**Where does she live? (or any question directed to you and not the person)**

**Response:** Please ask her that question.

**Response:** She can tell you.

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**Do you know her mental age?**

**Response:** The only age that counts is her age of 36.

**Response:** She has 36 years of life experience.

**Response:** The truth is that no one can live 45 years and be like a three-year old. That is a myth that some people don't understand.

**Response:** That only refers to one aspect of a person, and she is still an adult.

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**Her staff said that she has a history of lying.**

**Response:** We need to treat every allegation report with respect and dignity. Actually, people with a history of lying are at greater risk of sexual violence because the offender is hoping that no one will believe the survivor.

**Response:** Most people have lied at one time or another. We need to proceed with her statement and follow up accordingly.

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**I don't know how to communicate with this person.**

**Response:** Let's ask her how we can best communicate with her.

**Response:** Everybody communicates in some way. How does she communicate with others?

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## What's wrong with her? Is she retarded or something?

**Response:** She's a person, just like you and me, and she has a disability.

**Response:** Nothing is "wrong" with her — she just thinks differently than we do.

**Response:** The word 'retarded' is not used anymore and is considered disrespectful. Let's focus on what she can do, not what she can't do.

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## Why can't she understand what I'm saying? Is something wrong with her?

**Response:** Maybe she didn't hear you, or she needs you to explain it differently.

**Response:** She's Deaf/hard of hearing. I can help her to understand you, or we can find an interpreter. Perhaps if you use pictures or writing, that will help.

**Response:** She needs time to process what you're saying. Let her think a minute.

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## Why can't this woman give a coherent narrative? It's all jumbled up and out of order.

**Response:** Some women with disabilities can't do clocks or calendars very well, but they know their schedules. If you focus on her activities, you will learn a lot.

**Response:** She has difficulty understanding time. Talk about the people involved, herself and what happened, such as "What did John do? What did you do? What did John do then? What did you do?" Focus on the incident itself, not the timeframe.

**Response:** She's trying to process a lot right now. Give her time to think/calm down.

**Response:** Focus on her sensory experiences and you will have lots of useful information. What did she hear, see, feel, taste, etc.?

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**Help! I said something that made the woman upset, and I didn't mean to! Let's ask her who her guardian is and what kind of information they want.**

**Response:** Tell her you're sorry, and see if you can figure out what it is that upset her.

**Response:** Let's all take a break for a minute and talk things through. You may have brought up some part of the incident she may not have remembered before.

**Response:** After you apologize, maybe you and I can talk to her together about it.

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**Why is that woman flapping her arms like that? It makes her look really stupid.**

**Response:** She has autism. She does that to calm herself down sometimes.

**Response:** By focusing on the flapping, it helps get her mind off the pain and confusion she's feeling right now. Let her flap, and then let her continue her story.

**Response:** She may be feeling uncomfortable, overloaded, or overwhelmed right now. Let's take a break, or talk about something else for a minute. We can come back.

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**Whom should I be talking to here?  
This woman has a guardian and she's incompetent.**

**Response:** Even though she has a guardian, she still has the right to speak for herself.

**Response:** "Incompetent" is a legal term. It doesn't mean she can't express herself.

**Response:** Let's ask her who her guardian is, and what kind of information they want.

**Response:** It is important that the victim have an opportunity to tell what happened to her. Victims with guardians have rights and it is the victim who knows what happened to them.

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**This woman's guardian won't release the information/rape kit/evidence, etc.**

**Response:** Illinois law states that the survivor or law enforcement can release the kit.

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**She says she has a guardian. What does that mean?**

**Response:** When someone has a guardian, a judge has decided they need help making decisions. There are different types of guardians. Let's find out what decisions her guardian has the power to make.

**Response:** A guardian is appointed by a judge to make decisions on someone else's behalf. A plenary guardian makes most major life decisions. A limited guardian only makes the decisions the court has determined they can make. Either way, we want the person to express what they think, too.

**Response:** In Illinois, adults with disabilities who have guardians have the legal right to:

- a. access 5 counseling sessions without guardian consent/knowledge;
- b. consent to the sexual assault exam and release of records;
- c. restrict access to rape crisis center counseling records.

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### **I don't think I can examine her. She is too disabled.**

**Response:** Let's ask her the best way to examine her.

**Response:** I know some alternative positions that might work. Let's ask her what she prefers.

**Response:** There is a tool that might be helpful in working with her-it is the Picture Guide to the Exam Following Sexual Assault. It is helpful with many victims. minute.

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### **Why can't this woman understand the paperwork I'm trying to get her to sign?**

**Response:** She uses pictures to communicate instead of written words. Why don't you explain to her what the paperwork says in everyday language, without big words?

**Response:** She doesn't understand all the legal jargon. Could you please explain it?

**Response:** The print is too tiny for her to read. Do you have a large-print format?

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### **This person is drunk. We can't help her?**

**Response:** Perhaps there are other reasons for her behavior. Have you asked if she has cerebral palsy or is diabetic. Sometimes trauma impacts blood sugar levels, which can make a person appear intoxicated.

**Response:** Ask the survivor what she would like to be moved. It's always important to ask the survivor and not the caregivers how best to care for them.