



Coronavirus considerations for survivors with limited English proficiency

Just a few months ago, the phrase “social distancing” was not familiar, let alone used in conversation every day, as it is now. As the world continues to deal with the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19), this is just one of many new terms that have worked their way in to daily life. While it can be difficult enough to understand jargon around the virus as an English speaker, anyone with limited English proficiency living in the United States may struggle even more. This puts survivors of domestic violence who don’t fluently speak, read, write, or understand English in a very vulnerable position.

An abuser may have limited the educational opportunities a survivor has to learn English, in order to keep the survivor dependent on him/her. That likely leads the survivor to rely on the abuser for information, which the abuser may manipulate, in order to instill fear – like lying about the symptoms of coronavirus, or the survivor’s ability to get a test. Limited English proficiency may also mean survivors don’t fully understand information about the virus, including what it means to practice “social distancing” or how medical appointments are being handled. An abuser can again manipulate that, for example telling a survivor they can’t get treatment, or that the survivor has been removed from the family’s insurance.

If a survivor does get access to medical care, Hubbard House encourages the survivor to use a translator provided through the healthcare facility, not their abuser. We recommend the survivor carefully assess the safety of their situation in requesting a translator, because if the abuser is present, he or she may not want to lose control of the conversation and may not allow a translator to be involved.

If the abuser serves as the translator, he or she could intentionally skew the information provided to healthcare professionals, or lie to the survivor about her/his diagnosis. An abuser could tell the survivor she/he is positive for coronavirus, for example, and then use that to justify even more harsh isolation or cleaning rules. If the abuser has a limited English proficiency as well, he/she may feel higher levels of stress around the challenges in getting information. The abuser may use external frustrations or factors like these as an excuse to abuse or escalate abuse, but abuse is NEVER the fault of external factors or actions of the survivor. It is solely the decision and choice of the abuser.

Hubbard House wants survivors to know you are not alone, and we provide around-the-clock services through our emergency shelter, Hotline, and Textline to any and every survivor of domestic violence who needs support. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also has coronavirus information available in several languages, [including Spanish](#).

Additional barriers

Hubbard House is not an expert on issues of immigration or seeking medical care as an immigrant, but we understand that survivors of domestic violence who are also immigrants to the United States face unique challenges. We have provided a summary

of the information we have found below. If in doubt, and if you can safely do so, a call to an immigration attorney may put to rest any pressing concerns.

For survivors with a limited English proficiency, they or someone close to them – like friends and family – may be immigrants. An abuser can exploit that, whether the immigrant is undocumented or has applied for and received some level of legal residency. An abuser may threaten to get the survivor or loved one deported, destroy legal documents like passports, or withdraw residency applications, as an example. Even if the survivor or loved one is legally in the US, an abuser can call an employer and falsely claim the survivor is undocumented, which potentially puts that job at risk.

Broadly, many immigrants -- survivors and otherwise -- may also be hesitant to seek medical care for a number of reasons. First, some immigrants are concerned [US Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#) may detain them if they are undocumented and go to get medical help. ICE says they do not conduct operations at medical facilities “except under extraordinary circumstances.” Those facilities include hospitals, doctor’s offices, accredited health clinics and urgent care facilities, according to ICE. The organization Protecting Immigrant Families emphasizes that immigrants do not have to disclose their residency status to healthcare professionals. For undocumented immigrants, if you are asked about your insurance, finances or immigration status, the organization recommends you respond, “I am not eligible for health insurance and do not want to apply.”

Second, immigrants may be concerned about the impact of seeking medical care on their ongoing residency applications. The federal government is able to consider whether someone applying for a Green Card or for entry in to the US uses certain public benefits, in determining whether to grant that request. [US Citizenship and Immigration Services](#) (USCIS) says testing, treatment and preventative care for coronavirus will NOT be considered in this “public charge” review. Additionally, USCIS says if an immigrant needs to get public benefits because of a loss of work or other direct impact of coronavirus, and that person can submit documentation to show that, then USCIS will consider it as a possible exception in their “public charge” review.

Help is available

Hubbard House wants survivors to know that we are here for you. We do not ask for or consider your immigration status in offering services. We also have the ability to serve survivors in many different languages. Survivors can contact Hubbard House 24/7 by calling our Hotline at 904-354-3114 or sending a text message to our Textline at 904-210-3698.

To survivors in danger, we have life-saving emergency shelter available for you, your children, and any adult who depends on you who also lives in the home. If you are not comfortable coming to shelter or do not have a need for emergency shelter, we have trained advocates who can help you plan for your safety in your current situation and provide other support and services, when you’re ready.

The abuse you’re experiencing is not your fault, and you are not alone.