



# How People with Disabilities Use Social Media

## Report

**SAFE** | stop abuse for everyone

A merger of Austin Children's Shelter and SafePlace



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#### Disclaimer

This *How People with Disabilities Use Social Media Report* is expressly indicated for educational purposes. This report does not provide any advice regarding medical, psychiatric, or educational diagnosis or treatment for any individual and is not meant as legal or clinical advice. The information in this Toolkit is compiled from a variety of sources, including, but not limited to experiences of SAFE staff. SAFE does not endorse any specific agency, organization, product, service or other resource listed in this manual. Such resources are included for informational purposes only. SAFE assumes no responsibility for claims, warranties, views, or opinions of any manufacturer, company, services, or individuals listed in the *How People with Disabilities Use Social Media Report*.

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Dianne King, SAFE Disability Services Technical Writer, coordinated the focus groups and authored the report, which was edited by Michelle (Shell) Schwartz, SAFE Disability Services Director. Assisting with the focus groups and report were Disability Services staff members Rebekah Adams, Lucy Barber, Heather Kamper, and James Noblitt.

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- ADAPT of Texas
- The Arc of the Capital Area
- Austin Clubhouse
- Austin Resource Center for Independent Living (ARCIL)
- Disability Rights Texas (DRTx) PAIMI Council (Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Mental Illness)
- Easter Seals of Central Texas
- Mary Lee Foundation
- National Federation for the Blind of Texas – Austin Chapter
- SAFE Disability Services Program Advisory Committee
- Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired

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<sup>1</sup> SAFE is a merger of the Austin Children's Shelter and SafePlace, the domestic violence and sexual assault center in Austin/Travis County.

<sup>2</sup> Disability Rights Texas is the federally-funded state protection and advocacy organization for people with disabilities.

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## Executive Summary

SAFE and Disability Rights Texas (DRTx) staff initiated a project to identify:

- types of social media being used by people with disabilities within the local community;
- whether or not to engage people with disabilities in social media on issues related to interpersonal violence; and
- if so, how to do so most effectively.

This information was gathered as part of an OVW grant funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

As part of this OVW grant, SAFE launched a Facebook page tailored to the Deaf community. This site is regularly updated and content is focused on topics related to healthy relationships, gender-based violence and community accountability. Interest by the Deaf community has grown since this site was established in Spring 2012.

SAFE and Disability Rights Texas (DRTX) staff knew that some people with disabilities use social media for personal connection. They wondered if social media could also prove to be a more immediate, cost-effective and sustainable method of providing resource and service information, as well as outreach to women with disabilities. While research indicates that fewer people with disabilities have access to the Internet than people without disabilities (54% vs. 81%), at least half of the research participants with disabilities did report having access to some form of social media (Pew Research Center, 2011).

Before this project, the partner agencies had not created a forum where people with disabilities could share how they make decisions about:

- using social media to access information on resources, disability rights and self-advocacy; and/or
- following topics related to abuse and relationships via social media.

To begin exploring the use of social media by people with disabilities, project staff conducted a series of face-to-face interviews (n=5) and discussion groups (n=7) with a total of 51 adults with a range of disabilities, including brain injury, Blindness, intellectual/developmental disabilities, mental illness, multiple disabilities and physical disabilities. Most of the discussion groups took place during regularly scheduled meetings of disability service and/or advocacy organizations (i.e., ADAPT, Austin Resource Center on Independent Living, Easter Seals, The Arc of the Capital Area, etc.).

Overall, 94% of the discussion group and interview participants reported using social media. This is a rate nearly twice that of Americans with access to the Internet, according to the Pew report (2011). This higher rate was more than likely based on the method of recruitment—we intentionally invited participants to discuss their use of social media.

Participants reported primarily using social media in the following ways: Keeping up with friends and family (59%); following various issues (38%); finding out about events and learning new things (31%).

The social media platforms most commonly used were Facebook (76%), Twitter (18%), LinkedIn (16%), Blogs (12%), Google+ (4%), other (14%) and none (4%).

The 51 people with disabilities participating in discussions and interviews made the following recommendations for more effectively engaging people with disabilities through social media. Recommendations focus on three primary areas: accessibility, content/format and outreach.

*Accessibility* – Participants noted two different types of accessibility: 1) whether or not people with disabilities have the access to and the knowledge to use computers, devices or social media sites; and 2) whether those social media devices and platforms are accessible to people with a wide range of disabilities. According to participants:

1. Many people with disabilities do not have access to and/or training on how to use computers, smart phones, tablets, the Internet or various social media.
2. For some people with disabilities, particularly individuals who are blind or visually impaired, participating in social media is only possible if the devices and design of the platforms are accessible to people with a variety of disabilities.
3. Accessible social media is clear, simple, short, easy to follow and user-friendly to people with a range of disabilities as recommended by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Participants also recommended that agencies ask for feedback from disability service groups and people with disabilities on the design and accessibility of SAFE and Disability Rights Texas social media platforms, websites and blogs.

*Content-Format* – Participants strongly recommended that agencies address the fact that Internet privacy, safety and confidentiality is of particular concern for people with disabilities.

Those interviewed reported following a wide range of interests through social media, including politics, news, celebrities and disability-specific topics. They recommended engaging people directly by:

1. Providing a forum for people with disabilities to post, share and learn from the community;
2. Including people with disabilities as regular contributors.

*Outreach* – Participants recommended the following outreach activities:

1. Connect with agencies/groups relevant to people with disabilities through social media.
2. Collaborate with disability service agencies for social media content and stories.
3. Develop a confidential avenue for people to get more information about services.
4. Develop two separate social media platforms – one for donors and volunteers and one

for potential clients and survivors of abuse.

## **Our Process**

During this project, partners SAFE and Disability Rights Texas (DRTx) explored whether social media is an effective outreach and advocacy strategy for people with disabilities.

Project staff conducted five individual interviews and seven discussion groups in Austin, Texas, with 51 adults with a variety of disabilities. Discussions and interviews focused on how people with disabilities are making decisions about using social media and following topics and how SAFE and DRTx could best engage people with disabilities via social media.

**Questions for discussion** – SAFE and Disability Rights Texas (DRTx) developed the following key discussion questions as part of a grant project funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women. (The entire grant project focuses on increasing accessibility and outreach to people with disabilities and people who are Deaf through both agencies.)

Discussion questions were intended to help identify:

1. If social service agencies should engage and provide outreach to people with disabilities through social media on issues related to interpersonal violence.
2. If so, how can social service agencies most effectively engage people with disabilities through social media platforms to provide information about resources, disability rights and self-advocacy and issues related to interpersonal violence?

Discussion group facilitators/interviewers also gathered information about the types of social media being used by people with disabilities and how they were being used.

## ***Participants***

The majority (46) of the 51 people in this exploration were interviewed during an existing, regularly held disability-specific meeting or class. Additionally, five participants were interviewed individually. Three of those five people represented a disability service agency group, and two were interviewed independently of any group or class.

The adults participating in the discussion groups and interviews represent the following 10 Austin-Travis County disability service or advocacy groups:

- ADAPT of Texas, a civil rights group of people with disabilities
- The Arc of the Capital Area
- Austin Clubhouse, a psychosocial rehabilitation program for adults with severe and persistent mental illness symptoms
- Austin Resource Center for Independent Living (ARCIL)
- Disability Rights Texas PAIMI Council (Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness)
- Easter Seals of Central Texas



- Mary Lee Foundation, a residential and vocational service provider
- National Federation for the Blind of Texas–Austin Chapter
- SAFE Disability Services Program Advisory Committee
- Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (transition-aged youth)

Discussion group participants reported one or more disabilities, as follows (some participants are in more than one category):

- Mental health
- Blind or visually impaired
- Intellectual/developmental disabilities
- Traumatic brain injuries
- Autism spectrum disorder
- Various physical disabilities
- Multiple disabilities

Physical disabilities included quadriplegia, paraplegia, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, seizure disorder, multiple autoimmune disorders and others.

Two of the seven discussion groups and one of the five interviews were co-conducted by two doctoral students from Texas A&M University (Kayla Sweet and Jennifer LeBlanc). During a two-semester special project, the students conducted a literature review; developed an extensive analysis of data from all discussion groups and individual interviews; and wrote a project report that included their findings, parts of which are included here, as noted.

### ***Discussion group and individual interview questions***

Participants with disabilities responded to six open-ended questions and five multiple-choice questions.

#### *Open-ended questions:*

1. How do you use social media? (*Prompts: Do you use social media? What social media do you use? Do you use social media through a phone or a computer or both? Which do you use primarily?*)
2. What makes you follow specific issues on social media? (*Prompts: Have you “liked” or followed any issue specific to nonprofit agencies, such as those focusing on disability rights, healthy relationships or victimization? If so, which ones? Why did you get interested in that agency?*)
3. Do you believe that social media is a good way to let people with disabilities know about services and how to help them if they experience abuse?
4. What is the best way to engage people with disabilities through social media?
5. How can SAFE and Disability Rights Texas encourage people with disabilities to follow them on Facebook, Twitter or their blog?

6. Is there anything else you want SAFE and DRTx to know about using social media to let people with disabilities know about their services?

*Closed-ended multiple choice questions can be found in [Appendix A](#).*

### ***Discussion group and interview recording***

The discussion groups and individual interviews were not recorded with audio equipment for purposes of confidentiality. Facilitators, project staff and one to two note takers met before and after groups and interviews to coordinate the discussions, debrief and share impressions. Notes were taken by the interviewer for two of the individual interviews.

## **Getting Started: What Do We Already Know?**

**Disability and abuse:** An increasing number of large and small scale studies indicate that people with disabilities are more likely than people without disabilities to be victims of abuse, including domestic violence and sexual assault.

- Crimes against people with disabilities (22 per 1,000) were reported as more than three times higher than that for persons without disabilities (6 per 1,000) (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011).
- In a survey of 5,326 North Carolina women, those who self-reported having a disability were 7.6 times more likely to be sexually assaulted than women without disabilities (Martin, et al., 2006).
- In a national study on personal assistance abuse, Powers et al. (2002) noted that 67% of the 200 women with physical and/or cognitive disabilities interviewed reported lifetime physical abuse and 53% reported lifetime sexual abuse.
- Valenti-Hein & Schwartz (1995) reported that 90% of people with developmental disabilities will experience sexual abuse at some point in their lives. Forty-nine percent will experience 10 or more abusive incidents.

**Social media and people with disabilities:** According to Sweet and LeBlanc (2013), limited research is available with a specific focus on how people with disabilities use and access social media. The majority of studies that were found targeted specific disability groups, their social media use and accessibility issues (Sweet & LeBlanc, 2013).

However, the available research does provide a glimpse into how people with disabilities are using social media. In one large-scale Canadian study, researchers reported that the top four uses of social media by 723 current or recently enrolled students with disabilities consisted of: 1) watching videos on YouTube (91%); 2) using MSN/Windows Live Messenger, Skype, Google Talk or another instant messaging service (79%); 3) searching for someone on Facebook,

MySpace, etc. (79%); or 4) adding a friend to Facebook, MySpace, etc. (76%) (Asuncion, Fichen, Budd, Gaulin, Amsel, & Barile, as cited in Sweet & LeBlanc, 2013).

Another group of researchers described how people with disabilities use two popular social media sites, Facebook and LinkedIn, primarily to network, followed by services, outreach, education and advocacy (Baker, et al., as cited in Sweet & LeBlanc, 2013).

**The problems with access and training:** To gain access to social media, people with disabilities need to have access to the Internet, yet a PEW Research study (2011) found that only 54% of adults with disabilities reported use of the Internet compared to 81% of adults without disabilities.

In addition to having less Internet access, people with disabilities face another barrier to social media use: Both the devices used and the social media platforms need to be accessible. In fact, “no group faces barriers to Internet access that are as multifaceted, numerous and hard to address as people with disabilities” (Jaeger, 2012, p. 156 as cited in Sweet & LeBlanc, 2013).

Further, in addition to accessibility, other barriers for people with disabilities may be a lack of training and experience in how to use the Internet and social media. While research is limited, it does show a consistent pattern of problems with accessibility. However, “despite these access issues, people with disabilities still use social media as a way to interact and gain information,” according to Sweet and LeBlanc (2013, p. 11).

## **Unanswered Questions**

During the discussion groups and interviews conducted by project staff, a number of unanswered questions surfaced, regarding how people with disabilities use and are affected by social media. These questions tended to fall into one of these three categories: a) social media accessibility, b) social media use and c) how social media affects isolation and abuse of people with disabilities. While there are a number of unanswered questions about how people with disabilities use and are affected by social media, this report separated unanswered questions into three categories: a) social media accessibility, b) social media use and c) how social media use affects isolation and abuse of people with disabilities.

### ***Social media accessibility – Unanswered questions***

- How does the lack of accessibility on social media and on social media devices create barriers for people with disabilities? How can these issues be alleviated? (Sweet & LeBlanc, 2013)
- What other factors besides disability are barriers to social media usage to people with disabilities? (Such as socioeconomic status, rural vs. urban setting, lack of access to training, etc.)

- What are specific gaps in knowledge for people with disabilities on computer, Internet and social media use?

### ***Social media use – Unanswered questions***

- How is social media use among people with disabilities affected by age, income, gender, education and disability type? The answer to this question may inform social service agencies about who will and who won't be reached by social media.
- How can social service agencies use the most popular forms of social media to reach people with specific disabilities?
- What messages are most effective through social media? Is social media more effective as an outreach tool to let people know what services are available or as an educational tool about abuse dynamics and legal rights, or both?

### ***Social media and its impacts on abuse and isolation – Unanswered questions***

- Do social media users with disabilities report experiencing abuse/discrimination at the same rate as their peers who do not use social media? Are social media users with disabilities better informed on topics of abuse than peers who do not use social media?
- Do social media users with disabilities identify as being less isolated/more supported than their peers who do not use social media?
- Are women with disabilities who use social media at high risk for online bullying and harassment?
- Do social media users with disabilities use different coping strategies when dealing with abuse/discrimination than their peers who do not use social media?

## **The Texas A&M University Evaluation Study Summary**

Based on the qualitative analysis of the discussion and interview data, eight themes were identified relating to how people with disabilities interact with social media: *Follow, Knowing, Format, Types of Social Media, Device, Access, Outreach* and *Concerns* (Sweet and LeBlanc, 2013).

**Follow** refers to the idea that people with disabilities follow friends, social events and other things related to their personal interests. But people with disabilities may follow other social media sites as long as they are accessible and pertain to their interests.

**Knowing** refers to a) knowing how to use computers and other social media devices; b) understanding and being able to use social media devices; and c) knowing how to recognize different forms of abuse.

**Format** refers to the idea that social media must be accessible, easy to use, include instructions and hold the reader’s interest.

**Types of Social Media** – While people with disabilities utilize many types of social media, there did not seem to be a substantial difference between the types of social media preferred by participants in comparison to the general population.

**Devices** – While many devices, such as smart phones, computers and tablets, can be used to access social media, participants with disabilities did not seem to favor any other types of devices than those used by the general population and in fact utilized many of the same devices typically used by anyone to access social media.

**Access** was identified as a predominant factor/issue in the use of social media by people with disabilities. Both the device used (Smart Phones, personal computers, etc.) and social media tools (Facebook, YouTube, etc.) need to be accessible to reach people with disabilities.

**Outreach** – The need for outreach was highlighted by many participants who also recognized that agencies may need creative and disability-competent tactics to reach out to people with disabilities through social media.

**Concerns** – Throughout the study, concerns raised by many participants included Internet safety, personal privacy and security of social media sites. Two other areas of concern were spamming of excess emails and the time-consuming nature of social media.

The themes just outlined are interdependent and overlapping factors that need to be considered when determining the best practices for using social media to engage people with disabilities (Sweet & LeBlanc, 2013, p. 21).

## What Did People with Disabilities Tell Us?

*"As an individual, I despise Facebook, but it's the easiest way to keep up with events."*

*"There's always too much stuff that's pending or that needs updates or answered."*

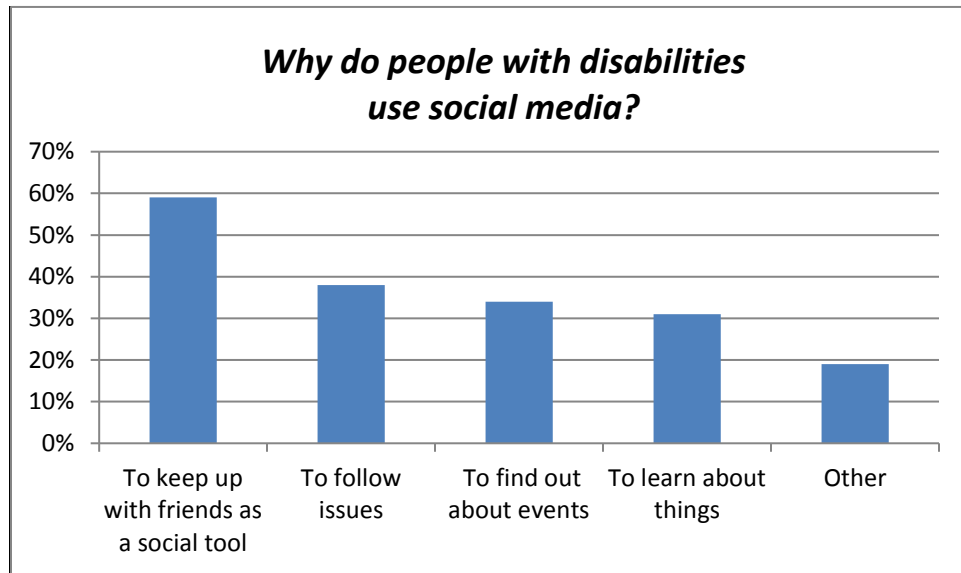
### Yes, people with disabilities use social media.

The adults with disabilities participating in this project's discussion groups and interviews do indeed use social media – 94% reported occasional to frequent social media use. They also use social media in much the same way as do people without disabilities: to keep up with family and friends and to follow topics of personal interest.

**Note:** The high percentage of adults in this project who reported use of social media is not an accurate reflection of people with disabilities in general; only 54% of people with disabilities use the Internet (Pew Research Center, 2011). Because these groups and interviews were set up to talk about social media, they are likely to have predominantly attracted social media users.

### *Why do people with disabilities use social media?*

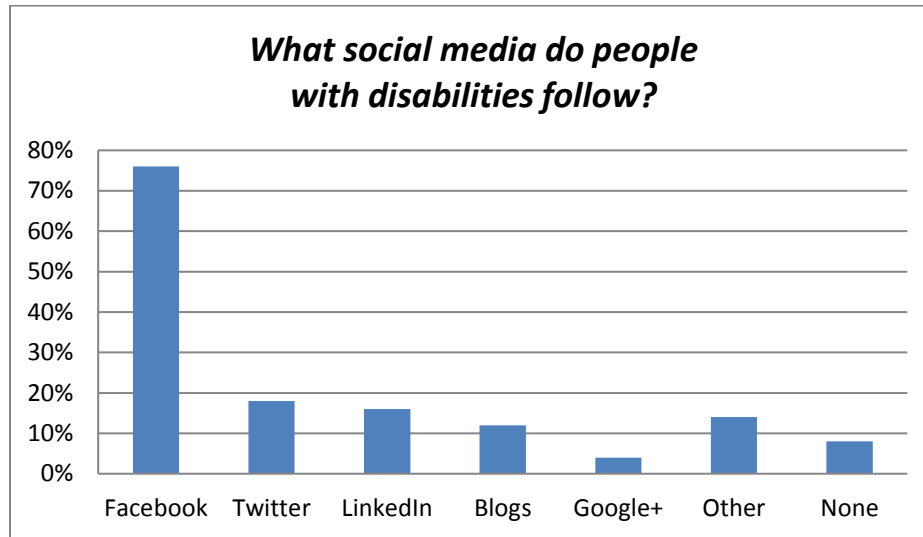
Adults participating in the discussion groups and interviews reported primarily using social media as a tool to keep up with friends and family (59%), followed by a way to follow issues (38%), to find out about events (34%) and, finally, to learn about things (31%).



*Figure 1.* Percentage of discussion group and interview participants with disabilities reporting various reasons for using social media.

## ***What social media do people with disabilities follow?***

The primary social media tool used by participants is Facebook (76%), followed by a markedly smaller interest in Twitter (18%), LinkedIn (16%), Blogs (12%), Google+ (4%), none (4%) and other (14%).



*Figure 2.* Most discussion group and interview participants reported using Facebook, followed by Twitter, LinkedIn, Blogs, Google+, other and none.

**Note:** While it was not given as an example, 50% of the participants also volunteered that they use YouTube.

## ***How often do people use social media?***

While people who generally use social media participated in discussion groups and interviews, several strongly cautioned that social media does not reach all people with disabilities. Participants stated:

- *"It's important to keep in mind that a lot of people do not have access to technology, a lot of people with mental illness are poor and do not have a lot of resources for computers and tablets."*
- *"In the state of Texas... there are a lot of people who are disabled, who are in poverty and because of that they don't have access to some of the social media that we take for granted."*

This point is underscored by the previously cited PEW study, which showed that 54% of adults with disabilities use the Internet, compared with 81% of adults without. The study also noted that people with disabilities are statistically older, less educated and of lower income than the general population, while people who use the Internet are statistically younger, college educated and higher income than the general population. Yet even when those factors were

taken into account, disability itself was enough to lower the rate of Internet use (PEW Research Center, 2011).

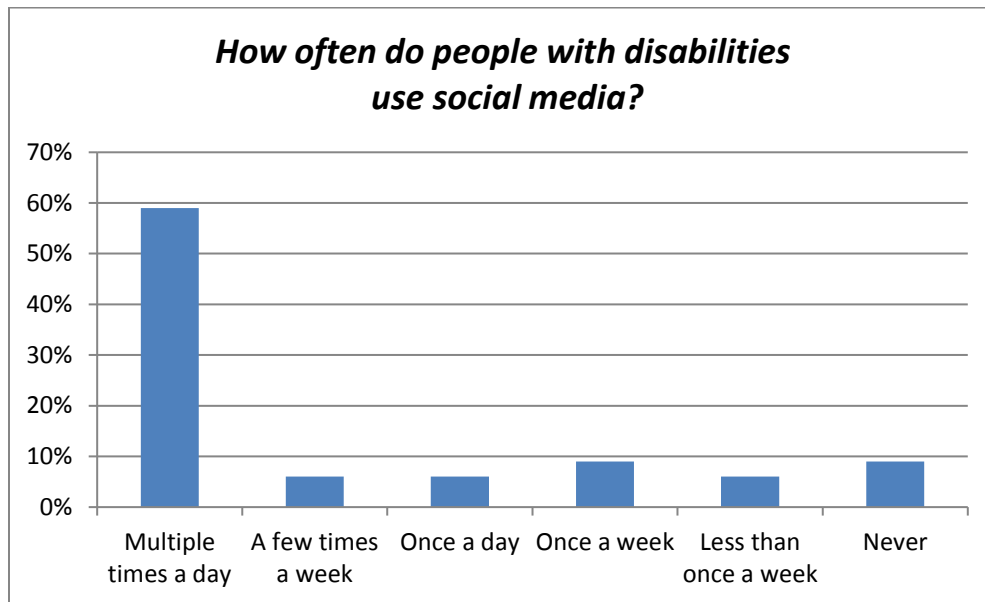
In addition to people who lack access to the Internet or lack training and experience in using the Internet, some people with disabilities simply choose not to use it, as noted below:

- *"I don't like it so much, I like face to face."*
- *"I'm not really a big fan of technology. I usually (am) just an old-fashioned guy, I use cell phones."*
- *"For me, just call me on the telephone and I'll call you back."*

Others who do use social media noted that it can take too much time and be confusing:

- *"I don't know how to access everything or find time to respond to everything."*
- *"It gets too confusing and time consuming."*

Regarding frequency of social media use, more than half (59%) of the participants reported using social media multiple times a day. Use then sharply declined to once a day (6%), a few times a week (6%), once a week (9%), less than once a week (9%) or none (9%).



*Figure 3.* The percentage of interview and discussion group participants reporting frequency of their social media use.

### ***What concerns people with disabilities about social media?***

As noted earlier, the two primary areas of concern about social media mentioned during the discussion groups and interviews are 1) accessibility and 2) the interrelated issues of personal privacy, confidentiality and Internet safety.



## **Accessibility**

*"Some people are slow with certain disabilities, explain it slower so they get it and process it."*

*"Have more text that gets that message across in a fairly simple way".*

As noted earlier, access to social media for some people with disabilities requires both accessible devices (Smart Phones, personal computers) and accessible social media (i.e., Facebook, YouTube, etc. with closed caption options or options for large print, etc.). Accessibility was the biggest concern to people who are blind or had visual disabilities, who require social media tools and websites compatible with screen reading technology or other adaptable equipment. In fact, several people who are blind mentioned losing the ability to use some of the most popular social media sites when those sites upgrade or change their format.

Accessibility of social media sites is also important for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities. A woman who has a physical and an acquired cognitive disability recommended following the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines by keeping posts and sites clear, easy, simple and short.

## **Internet safety, confidentiality, privacy**

*"Privacy is a big issue. People take advantage of those with disabilities."*

*"I want a confidential avenue to get more information."*

The topics of safety, confidentiality, anonymity and privacy were repeated during discussion groups and individual interviews. Participants did not want their personal information shared to other groups or posted on Facebook walls. They were concerned that "liking" an agency on Facebook or answering a quiz would release their personal information and that of their friends to outsiders or cause them to be spammed by excessive emails or posts. They wanted access to a site where they can hold private, confidential discussions with other people with disabilities. They were afraid they could lose benefits such as Social Security or Medicare by using social media. People with mental illness, said one participant, will most likely want to be able to access information anonymously.

## ***What is the best way to engage people with disabilities?***

*"I tend to follow things I feel will have an impact on me or someone I'm close to."*

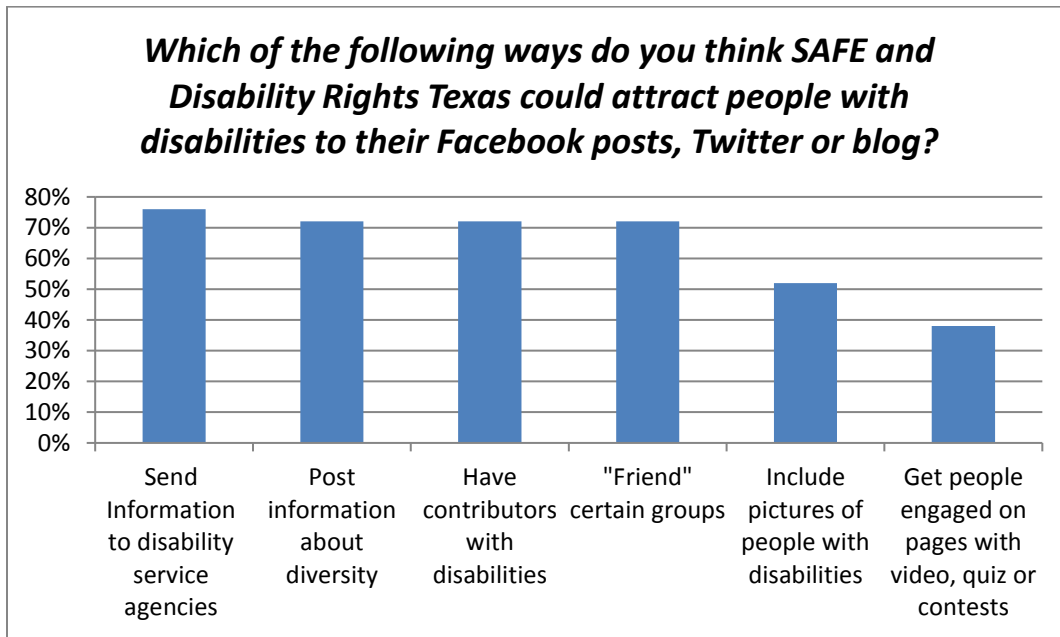
*"If I'm needing your services, I'm not going to 'like' you."*

Seventy-six percent (76%) of the project participants recommended that SAFE and Disability Rights Texas send information to disability service groups to attract people with disabilities to their own social media sites. In addition, 72% who answered this question about how to engage

people with disabilities recommended posting information about diversity, friending certain groups and having contributors with disabilities. While social media may be a good way to outreach to people with disabilities, participants also reported experiences that make them cautious:

*“When you vote on that site, they would start to send you a ton of emails. As a result I’m really hesitant to vote for something because I don’t want them to spam me.”*

*“I have liked several political-type things on Facebook... but then they post a lot and that’s irritating.”*



*Figure 4.* Percentage of discussion group and interview participants who recommended a variety of ways to outreach to people with disabilities through Facebook posts, Twitter or blog.

### ***What would make you like or become a fan...?***

When asked *What would make you "like" or become a "fan" or decide you want to post a comment on Facebook or Twitter*, 50% of the participant group responded that they are motivated by appeals for help and by free events; 47% by seeing someone they know become a fan of an agency or individual; and 40% by information that would help them in their life or something posted by someone they know. What drew the least interest at 27% were offers for free things, discounts, giveaways and coupons.

Yet, as discussed earlier, people were hesitant to “like” an agency because of the concern that their information would be shared with others. “Sometimes the quizzes on Facebook are kind

of weird. I don't know how many people really do quizzes and when you do it, it sends me to another page with my personal information ”.

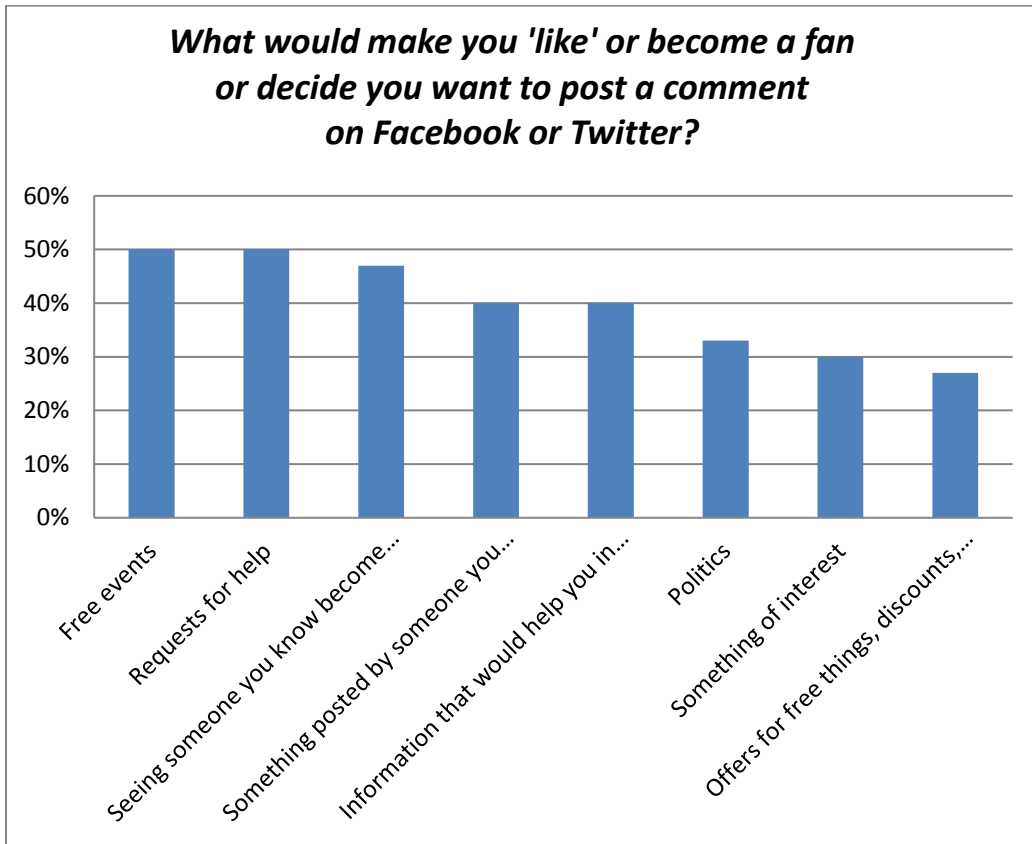


Figure 5. Percentage of discussion group and interview participants who indicated methods that would make them *like*, become a *fan* or decide to post a comment on Facebook or Twitter.

### **Address disability issues for a diverse audience**

*"Engage us, not the people who support us, our family, caregivers, etc."*

*"I know a lot of people with mental illness, and it's a good way to reach out to people, especially through the online support groups."*

Among this diverse group of people with disabilities, one common interest is actually related to disability itself. People expressed interest in other topics – politics, news, current events, learning new skills – but they also routinely talked about being interested in networking with other people with disabilities, learning and sharing helpful information.

One participant shares experiences of her own day-to-day life on social media to bring awareness to the general public about disability-related issues and experiences. In addition to strong recommendations to address people with disabilities directly, participants also recommended

reaching people with disabilities through other people with disabilities. Advice included having peer experts share their experiences; creating a forum where people with disabilities can tell their own stories in their own words; and hosting trainings specific to people with disabilities. Other comments:

- *"Let people learn and share from the community rather than 'experts' at SAFE or DRTx."*
- *"It's always important that blind people feel like they're being (included). In abusive situations they may not have a lot of opportunity to feel in control of their life."*

Rather than focusing on an entire *community* of people with disabilities, some participants recommended focusing on specific disabilities and keeping information relative to the audience. An example is training people with visual disabilities on how to recognize signs of abuse. "We're not going to see bruises but (explain) ways that can be clear to us," requested one participant who is blind.

In fact, several participants recommended developing separate social media pages for people with specific disabilities, such as mental health issues. The benefits might include:

- *"Removing the stigma from mental illness and bringing the experience to our community."*

### ***Take advantage of what social media does best: Networking***

*"Be connected to groups I'm already connected to."*

*"Friend my church."*

To increase outreach to people with disabilities, the collective advice of people interviewed is to connect with agencies, organizations and other groups where people with disabilities already have connections; to recruit other agencies and people to promote your agency's services; and to know how to use different types of social media for different purposes. (*See Appendix B of a list of organizations that people interviewed follow on social media.*)

More details on these and other tips:

- Connect with other agencies, people and organizations:
  - Post links on your resource pages and ask other groups pertinent to people with disabilities to post your link on their resource pages
  - Collaborate with disability service groups
  - Connect with large organizations; bigger organizations receive more hits
  - Find agencies that might not be aware of your services
  - Use email newsletters to promote social media activities by including linked invitations like: *see our blog* or *see our website*
  - Post training notices on Facebook and ask others to repost

- Send information to local emergency staff
- Get other people and agencies to promote your agency
  - Post videos and website links
  - Get followers to post, create excitement
  - Get other organizations to connect with your agency's posts
  - "Call out" to other groups
- Know your media:
  - Use different social media for different purposes, such as:
    - Facebook is the most popular interactive social media and appeals to multiple age groups
    - LinkedIn gets information out to professionals
    - YouTube can be used to teach and learn new things
- Keep up with trends in technology: Example: Young adults are more likely to text than email.

### ***Suggested formats & content***

*"There is too much information out there."*

*"No pictures of people getting checks!"*

*"Tell people what they need to know to get services."*

Many of the discussion group and interview participants described a daily onslaught of social media posts. Their recommendations for content include keeping the material short and to the point; keeping agency public relations separate from client outreach; and finding ways to catch people's attention.

### **Find a "posting" balance**

The message from people with disabilities participating in discussion groups and interviews in this project was to post interesting material and post to enough to maintain interest but not so much to overwhelm. Other comments:

- *"Tell me what you want me to know and I can go look at it. Be like an English teacher; give the topic sentence."*
- Post material that others will want to share with their own networks.
- *"Do whatever it takes to create excitement and get other people to post on your behalf."*
- Keep your social media sites and posts eye catching and engaging.
- Include personal stories and updates about those stories.
- Be new. *"If it tells me something I haven't heard before or tells me things I need to know or even the same information, if it tells it in a different way, I'll keep coming back to that site."*

- Include art, pictures, poetry, music, inspirational quotes. (**Note:** Include text about pictures and text about audio for people who are blind or Deaf audiences.)
- Develop posts that encourage discussion. Keep conversations between followers going and posts active. *"A site that posts weekly or even once a day, if there are not too many posts that it overwhelms me, I'll stay with it."*
- To avoid overloading your intended audience, be selective with what you post and comment on. As one person stated, *"There's too much information out there."*

### **Separate public relations from information about services.**

Be clear about your intent. Trying to get more social media followers and letting people know about services are two entirely differently things. "If I need your services, I'm not going to *like* you," one person said. Other recommendations:

- Let people know what they need to do to receive services.
- If you are trying to reach survivors with disabilities, acknowledge your donors and funders somewhere else. "No pictures of people getting checks! Tell people what they need to know to get services."
- Provide information on your social media sites that is helpful to people with disabilities.
- Include a flashing phone number for help.
- Provide a strong vision and mission statement so people know what the agencies stand for.

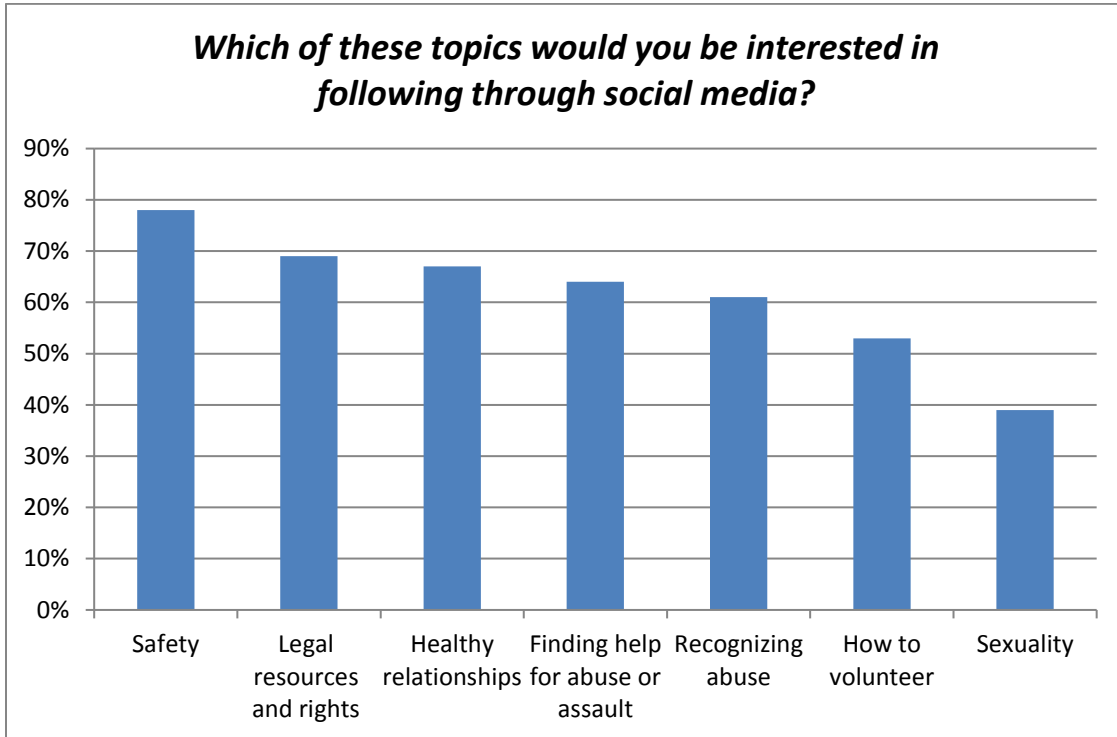
### **Be accessible**

Project participants who are blind were particularly clear on the need for accessible social media, but accessibility is also important for people with physical disabilities, learning disabilities and intellectual/developmental disabilities. Specific recommendations:

- Provide a lot of text information, including descriptions of pictures and graphs.
- Filter social media sites and information through the National Federation for the Blind or your state Division of Blind Services to make sure it is accessible.
- Keep posts and sites clear, easy, simple and short.

### ***Which topics would you follow?***

When shown a list of potential social media topics of interest, people involved in this exploration chose, by order of priority: 1) ways to increase safety (78%); 2) legal resources and rights of people with disabilities (69%); 3) having respectful and healthy relationships (67%); and 4) where to find help for abuse and assault (64%).



*Figure 6.* Percentage of discussion group and interview participants who indicated they would be interested in various specific topics on safety, relationships, legal rights, etc. through social media.

## Limitations of These Results

*Examples of social media given* – Discussion group and interview questions in this project initially focused on the types of social media that were at the time most in use by SAFE and Disability Rights Texas: Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and Pinterest. Less interactive or more limited options such as YouTube, Skype and email, sometimes noted by people with disabilities during the interviews/discussions, were not cited by facilitators as possible avenues for social media use. This affected the results of frequently used social media platforms. As an example, 50% of respondents volunteered they watched videos on YouTube. More people may have noted YouTube if it had been given as an example.

To address this issue, we provided the same definition of social media before each discussion group, rather than giving examples of social media, to ensure each participant had the same information.

*Order and type of questions* – The order and type of questions changed after several groups had already been conducted. During the process of conducting the interviews and discussion groups, the following two main questions were identified as key to the discussion. Other existing questions were developed by the Texas A&M doctoral students into close-ended multiple choice survey questions.

1. “Do you think social media is a good way to let people with disabilities know about services and how to get help if they experience abuse?”
2. “What do you think is the best way to engage people with disabilities through social media?”

See *Appendix A* for the survey table that includes five multiple choice questions.

*Transcripts* - The A&M consultants noted that audio-recorded transcripts, rather than field notes, would have resulted in more detailed transcripts (Sweet & LeBlanc, 2013, p. 21).

*Participant Recruitment* – Participants were recruited to these discussion groups and interviews to join discussions specifically about social media, which may have attracted more social media users than a random sample would have. As noted earlier, 94% of people with disabilities recruited for these groups and interviews use social media, while the national PEW research study found that only 54% of people with disabilities even have Internet access (2011). Additionally, people were largely recruited through existing disability-specific groups. Although SAFE purposefully recruited people with a wide variety of disabilities, it was not a random sample.

## **Summary of Topics**

Topics from the discussion groups/interviews primarily focus on three areas – accessibility, content/format and outreach.

*Accessibility* – Discussion group and interview participants primarily considered two types of accessibility: 1) whether or not people with disabilities have the means and knowledge to use computers, devices and social media sites; and 2) whether those social media devices and platforms are accessible to people with a wide range of disabilities. According to participants:

- Many people with disabilities do not have access to the Internet or social media. To be able to use social media, they would first need access to it, and then they would need to have training on computer, Internet and social media use.
- For some people with disabilities – particularly people who are blind or have visual



disabilities – social media use is only possible if the devices and social media platforms are accessible.

- Accessible social media is clear, simple, short and easy to follow, as recommended by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Participants recommended that agencies seek feedback from disability service groups and people with disabilities on the accessibility of their social media tools, websites and blogs.

*Content/Format* – Along with a full range of other topics, many people interviewed share an interest in disability-specific issues. Therefore, recommendations about content and format include: providing a forum for people with disabilities to post, learn and share directly from the community; and engaging people with disabilities as regular contributors. In addition, people interviewed strongly recommended addressing issues of Internet privacy, safety and confidentiality, which are particular concerns for people with disabilities.

*Outreach* – Among other suggestions, people interviewed recommended connecting with other agencies and groups pertinent to people with disabilities, collaborating with disability service agencies for content and stories, developing a confidential avenue for people to get more information about services and considering having two separate social media platforms – one for donors and volunteers and one for potential clients and survivors of abuse.

## **Social Media Recommendations from People with Disabilities**

Based on the information collected during the exploratory interviews and discussion groups, SAFE and Disability Rights Texas developed the following general recommendations for crisis centers and disability advocacy and service organizations.

### ***Accessibility (formatting)***

- Consult with various disability agencies and people with disabilities to gather feedback about the accessibility of social media tools, website and blogs.
- To increase access and accessibility of social media sites:
  1. Balance text and graphics for readers who are blind or have visual impairments.
  2. Provide text descriptions of pictures and graphs.
  3. Keep content brief, to the point and easy to access.
  4. Format content with clear headings and a topic sentence or summary statement.
- Use different (more than one) social media sites to increase access.
- Add an open-ended survey link to agency websites for suggested changes from users.
- Because 46% of people with disabilities do not have access to the Internet, according to a 2011 Pew study, partner with other agencies to provide computer and social media training to people with disabilities.

## ***Content/Format***

- Address the concerns of Internet privacy, safety and confidentiality.
- Avoid advertisements or public relations/fundraising photos and topics when seeking to reach survivors of violence with disabilities.
- Provide an online discussion area on agency websites that provides anonymity.
- Form an advisory committee of people with disabilities who use social media in different capacities (bloggers, consumers, etc.) to review social media.
- Update content at least weekly.
- Include art, pictures, poetry, music, inspirational quotes (*Note:* Make this material accessible to people who are blind and Deaf audiences by including descriptions of artwork and lyrics for music.)
- Post relevant discussion questions to prompt conversation and keep discussions active.
- Keep website and social media posts relevant and interesting to people with a wide variety of disabilities, as well as quick and easy to access.
- Include people with disabilities as regular contributors.
- Engage people directly by providing a forum for people with disabilities to post, learn and share from each other and from the community.
- Engage users through contests/promotions. For example: Host an online contest for people with disabilities to submit artwork to be used in an upcoming disability services publication.
- Develop content based on the interests of people with disabilities, not just provider interests. People surveyed were most interested (in a closed-ended question) in ways to increase safety, legal resources and rights, having healthy and respectful relationships and where to find help for abuse and assault.

## ***Outreach***

- Use social media to promote and provide education and trainings on disability-specific issues about abuse, healthy relationships, safer sexuality, advocacy and legal rights. Include information geared toward people with specific disabilities.
- Explore ways to reach people with symptoms of trauma and mental illness through social media.
- Collaborate with disability and crisis service organizations for web content and stories.
- Engage people with disabilities directly.
- Use agency newsletters to promote other agencies in the disability or crisis service fields.
- Provide a confidential avenue for people to get more information about services.
- Develop two different social media outreach platforms: one for donors and volunteers and one for potential clients.
- Be clear what will happen when you ask someone to like or become a fan of your agency. If information will be accessible to a corporation or will increase spam, let them know.
- Provide links on the agency website to other resources that people with disabilities may typically use, such as local transportation options and websites for people with disabilities.
- Use social media to allow people with disabilities to suggest social media campaigns.

- Use outreach techniques that people with disabilities said would motivate them:
  - agency appeals for help;
  - seeing someone people with disabilities know become a fan or promote the agency; and
  - information that could be helpful and/or was posted by someone known and trusted.

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## **Appendix**

Appendix A – Multiple-choice questions answered by discussion group and interview participants

Appendix B – Organizations followed by participants

Appendix C – Issues areas followed by participants through social media

## Appendix A

### Multiple-choice questions answered by discussion group and interview participants

#### 1. How often do you use social media?

	Male	Female
a. Multiple times a day		
b. Once a day		
c. A few times a week		
d. Once a week		

#### 2. Why do you use social media?

	Male	Female
a. To keep up with friends as a social tool		
b. To find out about events		
c. To learn about things		
d. To follow issues		
e. Other		

If you answered b. or c. from above, please explain what type of information you are learning about or what types of issues you are following using social media.

#### 3. Which of these topics would you be interested in following through social media?

	Male	Female
a. Having respectful and healthy relationships		
b. Legal resources and rights of people with disabilities		
c. Increasing your safety		
d. How to recognize abuse		
e. Where to find help for abuse or assault		
f. Sexuality		
g. How to volunteer		
h. Other		

#### 4. What would make you "like" or become a "fan" or decide you wanted to post a comment on Facebook or Twitter?

	Male	Female
a. Seeing someone you know become a "fan" of an agency or interest of yours		
b. Something posted by someone you know		
c. Something posted or sent by an agency, if the topic is of interest to you		

d. Offers for free things, discounts, giveaways, coupons		
e. Free events		
f. Politics		
g. Requests for help		
h. Information that would help you in your life		
i. Other		

**5. Which of the following ways do you think SAFE and DRTx could attract people to their Facebook posts, Twitter or blogs?**

a. "Friend" certain groups		
b. Send information to disability services organizations		
c. Have information about diversity		
d. Have contributors with disabilities		
e. Include pictures of people with disabilities		
f. Get people engaged on pages with video, quiz or contests		

(King, Schwartz & Anderson, 2012; and Sweet & LeBlanc, 2012)

## Appendix B

### Organizations followed by participants

- ADAPT
- Amnesty International
- Austin Children’s Shelter
- Austin Clubhouse
- Austin Mayor’s Committee on People with Disabilities
- Austin Resource Center for Independent Living
- Austin State Hospital
- Brain Injury Association
- Bring Change to Mind
- British Broadcasting Corporation
- Care Communities
- Center for Child Protection
- CNN
- Coalition of Texans with Disabilities
- Disability related nonprofits
- Disability Rights Texas
- Easter Seals
- Electronic Freedom Foundation
- HAND
- Hogg Foundation
- Human Rights Commission
- Knowbility
- Lone Star Circle of Care
- Lonestar Paralysis
- Meals on Wheels
- Mental Health America
- Mother Jones
- National Alliance on Mental Illness
- National Federation for the Blind, Voice Disability Feed -
- National Institute of Mental Health
- Occupy Austin
- Patient Conversion Media, Inc.
- SAFE, a merger of Austin Children’s Shelter and SafePlace
- Seton Hospital
- Sims Foundation
- St. David’s Rehabilitation
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
- The Shac
- Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities
- Twelve Steps Meetings
- University of Texas
- UNICEF
- Voices Against Violence
- Veteran’s Administration
- VIA Hope



## Appendix C

### Issues areas followed by participants through social media

- Accessibility
- Adaptive sports
- Advocacy for disability issues
- Animal cruelty
- Biker’s group against child abuse
- Disability blogs on Tumblr
- Disability-related issues that affect them
- Disability rights issues
- Fair wages for workers with disabilities
- Gay marriage
- General news
- Health
- Healthy relationships/victimization
- Local politics
- National websites on epilepsy (seizure disorder)
- Neighborhood watch
- News
- Pending legislation or pending action to improve circumstances of people with disabilities or to help people with disabilities get jobs
- School
- Service dogs
- Transportation issues: How are people getting around in the community, how it applies to people with disabilities and to people who do not drive
- Women’s rights issues

## **About SAFE and Disability Rights Texas**

For more than 40 years, **SAFE**, a merger of Austin Children’s Shelter and SafePlace, has been the leading domestic violence/sexual assault provider of Austin and Travis County. SAFE’s Disability Services provides training and education to help increase awareness about and prevent sexual and domestic violence and abuse. Through presentations and trainings for people with disabilities, disability service providers, domestic and sexual violence staff and criminal justice personnel, the program offers technical assistance and consultation to individuals and organizations seeking to reduce the risks of abuse against individuals with disabilities or to enhance accessibility to persons with disabilities.

**Disability Rights Texas** was incorporated in 1977 (as Advocacy, Inc.) and is the federally designated legal protection and advocacy agency (P&A) for people with disabilities in Texas. Its mission is to help people with disabilities understand and exercise their rights under the law, ensuring their full and equal participation in society. Their attorneys and advocates:

- Provide direct legal assistance to people with disabilities whose rights are threatened or violated
- Protect the rights of individuals and groups of people with disabilities through the courts and justice system
- Advocate for laws and public policies that protect and advance the rights of people with disabilities
- Inform people with disabilities and family members about their rights; make referrals to programs and services