



Disability and Abuse Project Disability and Guardianship Project

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February 7, 2020

National Sexual Violence Resource Center
2101 N. Front Street
Governor's Plaza North – Building #2
Harrisburg, PA 17110

Re: Gail Burns-Smith Award

Dear Awards Committee:

I am writing to nominate Dr. Nora J. Baladerian to be this year's recipient of the Gail Burns-Smith Award. The award recognizes people who have made significant contributions to preventing sexual violence through their work to facilitate effective partnerships between advocates working on behalf of victims/survivors and those working in the area of sex offender management and treatment.

I have been privileged to be a friend and colleague of Dr. Baladerian for 40 years. I met her in 1980 when she was appointed by Governor Jerry Brown to serve as a member of the Governor's Commission on Personal Privacy. I was the commission's executive director. Over the ensuing years, I have observed Dr. Baladerian in action as she has diligently toiled in the field of disability and abuse, trying to help those with intellectual and developmental disabilities regardless of whether they were victims or offenders.

Before I go into the details for this nomination, I would like to note that this prestigious award has not yet been given to an individual whose work in this field involves victims and offenders with disabilities. This nomination provides NSVRC an opportunity to recognize the excellent work being done by Dr. Baladerian to help this special population.

Dr. Baladerian is a clinical and forensic psychologist. For several decades she has promoted strategies to reduce the risk of, and provide appropriate responses to, sexual violence involving children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Through training programs, professional articles, books, and videos, these strategies have been shared with victims, offenders, and their family members, as well as with adult and child protective service agencies, prosecutors, defense attorneys, civil litigators, and service providers, among others.

Dr. Baladerian convened ten national conferences on disability and abuse that brought together a wide array of individual and organizational interests to focus on victimization, including sexual victimization, of children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. At these conferences, hundreds of professionals and representatives of non-profits and government agencies shared ideas on how to reduce the risk of victimization and how to more effectively respond to abuse and criminal victimization of this vulnerable population. Those working with victims and those working with offenders collaborated at these conferences.

In 1997 Dr. Baladerian convened a state-level Think Tank to address the problems of abuse of individuals with disabilities, focused on California. This Think Tank brought together directors of generic state agencies that provide services such as the state departments of Health, Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Education, and included the Attorney General's office and law enforcement representatives among others. About 40 individuals participated in this landmark gathering which was filmed for later review and study. The purpose was to brainstorm ways to bring together those who work with disability issues, those who work on abuse issues, and the various state departments who serve them, so that these perspectives could blend together and develop more effective strategies for responding to abuse and victimization of individuals with disabilities, especially those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Dr. Baladerian did follow-up work with these agencies for several years subsequent to the Think Tank forum.

Having provided mental health therapy and counseling for sexual assault victims with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the 1970s and early 1980s, Dr. Baladerian was commissioned by the Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women (LACAAW) in 1985 to "translate" their survivor guide for rape victims into a version understandable by victims with intellectual disabilities. She created three versions. Book I was designed for those who read best with few words. Book II was written for people with disabilities and their advocates. Book III was developed for family members, advocates, and service providers.

From the perspective of "preventing" abuse and victimization, Dr. Baladerian came to realize that the goals of completely stopping victimization is unrealistic and that generally preventing victimization is unlikely. What is realistic, however, is teaching children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and their family members and service providers, how to reduce the risk of abuse in their specific life circumstances and how to respond if or when it occurs. In 2013, she published "A Risk Reduction Workbook for Parents and Service Providers: Practices to Reduce the Risk of Abuse, Including Sexual Violence, Against People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities." She also commissioned the publication of a Spanish-language version of this workbook. Dr. Baladerian has conducted numerous trainings throughout the nation on how to develop an individualized risk reduction and response plan.

From the perspective of reducing the risk of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities from becoming sexual offenders or from re-offending, Dr. Baladerian co-published a book with a young offender. It is titled "The Rules of Sex for Those Who Have Never Been Told." She realized that some people with developmental disabilities commit offenses simply because they had never been taught what is socially and legally acceptable and unacceptable. Many young people in this population have never received an understandable and accessible education on sex, love, and relationships. Parents and service providers either may be in denial about the young adult having sexual feelings and needs or they may be uncomfortable talking about sex. In addition to ongoing national distribution of The Rules of Sex, in both English and Spanish language versions, Dr. Baladerian has conducted trainings for people with disabilities and people in their circle of support on how to implement the book's principles in everyday life.

From the perspective of promoting effective and appropriate responses to sexual violence involving children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, Dr. Baladerian worked with the United States Department of Justice, Office of Victims of Crime, to develop training videos for law enforcement officers and other first responders.

To assist prosecutors and victim-witness personnel to more effectively do their jobs, Dr. Baladerian worked with OVC to develop a video titled “Victims with Disabilities: The Forensic Interview - Techniques for Interviewing Victims with Communication and/or Cognitive Disabilities.” The video and discussion guide, released in 2007, provide a specific set of guidelines for law enforcement officers, prosecutors, victim advocates, forensic interviewers, and others for interviewing adults and children with communication and/or cognitive disabilities.

Two years later, under the direction of Dr. Baladerian, OVC released “Victims with Disabilities: Collaborative, Multidisciplinary First Response.” This video and trainer’s guide not only provide guidelines for interacting with adult and adolescent victims of crime who have communication and/or intellectual disabilities, but also help law enforcement personnel gain a deeper understanding of the lives, personal attributes, and abilities of individuals with disabilities.

In terms of providing direct mental health therapy, Dr. Baladerian has been treating children and adults with developmental disabilities – both victims and offenders – for decades. She has developed techniques to build trust and open up communication, both verbal and nonverbal, with these individuals. She has looked outside of the conventional therapy toolbox and has found methods of therapy that are not dependent on verbal skills or moderate intellectual functioning. One of those methods is known as Thought Field Therapy – the first energy psychology modality that has been approved by a federal agency (SAMHSA) for trauma, depression, anxiety, and other psychological conditions.

Not willing to keep the skills she has developed to herself, Dr. Baladerian has conducted trainings on how to provide mental health counseling and therapy to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. For example, last year Dr. Baladerian and Dr. Karyn Harvey did a two-day training for therapists at William James College on “Trauma Treatment with Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.” The program provided foundational information to therapists about those with cognitive, communication, movement, and sensory disabilities, generally recognized as “developmental disabilities” and how the disability requires adaptation by the therapist in service delivery. It also included a 6-hour certificate course in Thought Field Therapy. These therapists are now better equipped to provide treatment for victims and offenders who have developmental disabilities.

Dr. Baladerian’s work in connection with sexual victimization of individuals with developmental disabilities includes public education through the media. For example, she worked closely with Joe Shaprio, a reporter with National Public Radio, to develop a series – Abused and Betrayed – that was aired on NPR’s Morning Edition in 2018. One segment of the series began “Nora Baladerian and Karyn Harvey are both psychologists with an unusual specialty — they are among a small number of therapists who treat people with intellectual disabilities who have been the victims of sexual violence.” The series was widely acclaimed. It was heard by tens of thousands of listeners throughout the nation. As a result, the public has a better understanding of the victimization of this vulnerable population and the toll that such victimization has on individuals with developmental disabilities.

For decades, Dr. Baladerian has encouraged the federal government and local law enforcement agencies to track data on crime victimization of children and adults with disabilities, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Whereas such data was mostly unavailable when she first lobbied for better crime and abuse data, now there are annual reports by child welfare

agencies on maltreatment of children with disabilities and by the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics on crime victimization of teenagers and adults with disabilities.

Not only has Dr. Baladerian promoted better research on the prevalence of abuse and victimization, she has initiated such research. In 2012, she directed a national survey on disability and abuse by the Disability and Abuse Project of Spectrum Institute. Dr. Baladerian and her colleague Jim Stream, executive director of the Arc of Riverside County, formulated a series of questions to be distributed to people with disabilities, their families, and service providers, as well as therapists, law enforcement officials, and others. The topic of sexual abuse and victimization was included in the survey. Through Dr. Baladerian's tireless efforts to enlist the participation of the wide network of contacts she has developed over the years, 7,289 individuals took part in the survey.

In 2013, a report on the survey responses of people with disabilities and their families was released. It included data on the rate of abuse, including sexual abuse, the rate of multiple victimizations, the rate of reporting to authorities, why reports were not made, the responses of authorities, and whether the victims received therapy, among other topics. "The First Report: Victims and Their Families Speak Out," has been cited by many educators, advocates, and researchers. The survey and the report helped stimulate conversations throughout the nation about the serious problem of abuse of people with disabilities. Sexual abuse was part of those conversations.

In 2015, Dr. Baladerian initiated a "Rule Out Abuse Campaign" to alert physicians of the prevalence of abuse of children and adults with disabilities and to encourage them to consider and rule out abuse as a potential cause when they evaluate patients with developmental disabilities for otherwise unexplained symptoms. This campaign came out of years of Dr. Baladerian hearing parents tell her that their child had debilitating symptoms and that doctors who evaluated them could not determine the true cause. Then, months or years later the parents learned that their child had been a victim of abuse, sometimes sexual abuse. The medical problems and psychological symptoms were a natural byproduct of that trauma but the cause was not discovered by the doctor because he or she failed to even consider the possibility of abuse. Dr. Baladerian has made presentations to various medical organizations encouraging them to adopt the principles and practices promoted by the "Rule Out Abuse Campaign." Among these organizations are Kaiser Permanente and the American Association of Developmental Medicine and Dentistry. A "Rule Out Abuse" presentation is scheduled to occur next month in Idaho.

Through the Disability and Abuse Project, Dr. Baladerian operates a weekly newsfeed – a service that gathers news stories about abuse and crime victimization of individuals with disabilities. She shares the newsfeed each week with a Listserv of more than 800 people who have professional interests in disability and abuse issues. This allows people who work with this population to remain aware of what is happening on the ground in their region of the country as well as nationally.

In terms of making an impact on a large class of individuals, some of whom were victims and others offenders, Dr. Baladerian's persistent advocacy was instrumental in shutting down a network of unlicensed "boot camps" and "boarding schools" that traumatized troubled teenagers. These teens had been sent to these places of confinement without any judicial authorization. She was cofounder of the Emancipation Project – a function of Spectrum Institute – which advocated for the closure of these abusive environments. The Emancipation Project operated from 2004 to 2006. Ultimately, federal and state officials shut down some 400 businesses that confined more than 14,000 teenagers. These closures no doubt prevented some of these teens from sexual victimization at these facilities.

I also want to mention some work that Dr. Baladerian did in 2009 to help an 18-year old offender with intellectual disabilities who engaged in sexual touching of a six year old neighbor boy. Despite his limited understanding of sexual taboos, and despite his complete lack of sexual education, this young man was given a prison sentence of 100 years. Dr. Baladerian networked with colleagues and organizations involved in criminal justice and those involved in disability rights to encourage officials in Texas to correct this overly harsh sentence. Ultimately, the young man's sentence was reduced from 100 years to 10 years. His newly-appointed attorney then took steps to ensure that his client would be housed with other inmates who have intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Dr. Baladerian's educational and advocacy activities have been recognized by the Los Angeles County Psychological Association (2019), American Psychological Association (2018), National Children's Advocacy Center (2010), National Adult Protective Services Association (2010), International Conference on Violence, Abuse and Trauma (2008), and the United States Attorney General (2008), among others.

After you consider the depth and scope of her professional work to help victims and offenders with intellectual and developmental disabilities, it would be appropriate for the National Sexual Violence Resource Center to present this year's Gail Burns-Smith Award to Dr. Nora J. Baladerian.

For more information about Dr. Baladerian's professional practice, go to: <https://norabaladerian.com/> and for additional information about her nonprofit activities, go to: <https://disabilityandabuse.org>.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or need further information.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Thomas F. Coleman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Thomas F. Coleman
Legal Director
Spectrum Institute
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