

How to Hold a Vigil: Site Coordinator's Guidebook

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Choose and confirm a location

Make sure your location is accessible to people with a variety of disabilities. For example, people should be able to get to your vigil location using wheelchairs or other mobility devices, blind and partially sighted people should be able to navigate to your location, etc. For more information about ensuring your event is accessible, check out ASAN's [Accessible Event Planning guide](#).

An ideal vigil location is accessible by public transportation, in a public space, and somewhere that gets some foot traffic. It should also have some relevance to the issues we are calling attention to – holding your event in front of a courtroom, City Hall, or your DA's office sends the message that we want the justice system to take this seriously.

You may also want to hold your vigil indoors or in another non-public area. Try contacting local nonprofits or community meeting spaces, explaining the purpose of the Day of Mourning vigils, and asking if they might be willing to let you use their space. Here are some possible venues to approach:

- **Public colleges and universities.** Especially if you already have a connection to a university, these can be good places to hold events provided it is accessible to the public.
- **Public libraries.** Not all libraries offer free meeting spaces, but some do.
- **City buildings.** Some city-owned buildings may offer free meeting space for organizations.
- **Community centers,** particularly those for marginalized communities, for example, LGBTQ+ community centers.
- **Local community performance spaces.**

If you plan to hold your vigil outdoors, make sure you have a backup location reserved in case of rain or snow.

If you are planning a Day of Mourning vigil, you should have your location and time finalized as early as possible, but **at least three weeks before** the event. If you are planning a vigil in the wake of a recent murder, you will not have this kind of advance notice, but **do secure your location as soon as possible.**

Get a permit

If your event will be on public property, **you will probably need a permit.** Your city may not require a permit to hold events on public property, or may not require a permit for small gatherings. Even if you are not legally required to get a permit, if your city issues permits for assembly, you should still get one, in case you are asked about it during the vigil.

There is often a wait to get a permit - it can take anywhere from two weeks to over a month to approve or deny a permit. Therefore, **vigil coordinators should apply for a permit as soon as possible** after deciding on a venue.

The process of getting a permit, and the requirements for permits and public gatherings, are different in different places. Because of this, we cannot include very detailed instructions in this guidebook. To find out your city's permit policy, you can use a search engine on the web and search

“**[your city or town]** + **[gathering or assembly permit]**”. You can also call the local police department, using their non-emergency number, and ask about permit requirements.

Sample script for this call: “Hi, I’m planning an event at **[place]** at **[day/time]**. It’s a vigil for people who have died. We’ll be reading some statements and holding signs. I’m calling to ask how I can get a permit for this event.”

If you want to use candles, you should ask about that during this call, or at some other point during the permit application process. Some places need it specified on the permit if you will be lighting candles, and some places will not allow it during a public event.

If you need help navigating the permit process or the permits website for your city, contact ASAN.

Finally, **remember to take your permit with you to the vigil.** If you can, bring a physical copy of the permit. If this is not possible, have the phone number of the city office that issued the permit so they can confirm it.

Use Facebook to announce your vigil

Once you have your time and location, you can start spreading the word about your vigil. Begin by making a Facebook event page.

Savannah Nicole Logsdon-Breakstone is ASAN’s Social Media Director. Make sure to include her as a co-administrator of your Facebook event page. She will be easy to find, as no one else on Facebook has this full name.

As well as using Facebook to invite people you personally know, reach out to local organizations and ask them to send the link to their members. You don’t need to stick to disability rights organizations – other groups focused on social justice issues, such as LGBT groups, may be willing to help promote the event as well.

You can also create and spread flyers with the time and location of your event. Leave stacks of them with friendly organizations, and post flyers around your area. Email zgross@autisticadvocacy.org for a customizable copy of ASAN’s template, or feel free to make your own.

If you receive threatening comments

In the run-up to the 2013 Day of Mourning, some vigil sites received threatening, offensive comments on their pages. The commenter did not show up to any of the vigils, but ASAN's policy is to take threats seriously to ensure our members' safety. **If you receive aggressive comments on your page, especially if they mention or allude to physical violence, these are the steps to follow:**

1. Do not respond to the comment or contact the person who wrote the comment.
2. Take a screen capture of the comment. Screen captures are also called screenshots and screen-caps. How to screencap depends on the type of computer. There are four Wikihow articles for computer operating systems listed below. For other operating systems you might be using, you can Google or search Wikihow for "Screencap + [operating system]" or "Screenshot + [operating system.]"
 - a. **Mac OS:** <https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT201361> or <http://www.wiki-how.com/Take-a-Screenshot-in-Mac-OS-X>
 - b. **Windows PC:** <http://www.wikihow.com/Take-a-Screenshot-in-Microsoft-Windows>
 - c. **Chrome OS**, runs on Chromebooks: <http://www.wikihow.com/Screenshot-on-Google-Chromebook>
 - d. **Linux:** <http://www.wikihow.com/Take-a-Screenshot-in-Linux>
3. Report the comment to Facebook. This should bring up an option to ban the commenter from the event page. You may have to report the multiple comments from the same person for this to work. If you need help figuring out how to ban the commenter from your event page, contact ASAN.
4. Once you have reported the comment to facebook, delete it.
5. Get in touch with ASAN and let us know what happened as soon as possible. Include the screencap in an email. We take threats seriously and will have our Legal Director advise.
6. ASAN may advise you to alert the local police that you have received a threat. If this is necessary, call the police department using the non-emergency number to report that an online threat has been made about an upcoming event which will take place on public property. Give them the time and location of the event. Let them know that you have a screen capture of the comment and can email it to them.

Reach out to the press

Getting media presence at your vigil is very important. Our goal is not only to mourn our dead, but to send a message that our lives are equally valuable, and society should treat us as such. We are calling for states to prosecute these murders as aggressively as they prosecute the murders of non-disabled children. We are calling for journalists to write about these murders in a way that respects the victim, not in a way that excuses the murderer. These demands are more powerful if more people know about them. This is why it is **vital to maximize press presence at your vigil**.

The first step is to **create a press list**. Look up your local newspapers, radio and TV stations – they should have a “contact us” or “report a news tip” page on their website which will tell you where to send a press release. You can also contact local non-profits and ask them if they have a list of press contacts they would be willing to share with you. This may save you time if your vigil has to be planned quickly. If there has been a murder or attempted murder in your area recently, you should also contact the reporters who wrote articles or reported on TV about the case. Compile the email addresses and phone numbers you find into a list of contact information. This is your press list.

You may want to get in touch with your Mayor and/or District Attorney’s office and invite them to send a representative. If they agree, you should include this in your press release and mention it when you speak with reporters. This will give local media more incentive to attend your vigil.

If you are planning your vigil for more than two weeks out, send the first press release to everyone on your press list 1-2 weeks before the event. If your vigil will be sooner, just send the press release as soon as possible. If you do not have time to send individual emails, you can enter every email address on your list into the “BCC” field of a message, and then begin it with a generic salutation such as “To whom it may concern”. If you can, follow up with another email one week before the event, or on a shorter timeline, a few days before. In the few days immediately before your vigil, you should also make some phone calls to the offices of local newspapers and TV stations.

See the next page for a template press release. Please note that this template press release requires customization.

Template Press Release

NOTE: If there has been a recent murder or attempted murder case in your state, or especially in your local area, make sure to include a paragraph on this in your press release.

For Immediate Release

[the date you are sending out the press release]

Local Contact: [your name]

Phone: [phone number where you can be reached during the day]

Email: [your email]

Local Disability Community Commemorates Lives of Disabled Filicide Victims

[YOUR CITY] – As part of a nation-wide Day of Mourning, disability rights advocates in the [your city] area will be holding a vigil on [date] to honor the lives of disabled people murdered by their families and caretakers. [If this vigil is for a specific incident in your community, replace “As part of a nation-wide Day of Mourning,” with “In memory of [victim]”]

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), which tracks these cases, has compiled a list of over 700 reported murders of people with disabilities by relatives or caregivers over the last 35 years. The total number of killings is likely higher than the amount which are reported in news media. This problem is made worse by irresponsible news coverage which presents these murders as the sympathetic acts of loving and desperate parents, by a justice system which often gives a lighter sentence to a parent who kills a disabled child, and by the dangerous cultural prejudice that says a disabled life is not worth living.

ASAN held the first Day of Mourning in 2012 as a response to the murder of George Hodgins, a 22-year-old autistic man from California, by his mother. ASAN has continued to organize the event each year, partnering with other disability rights groups including Not Dead Yet, the National Council on Independent Living, the Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund, ADAPT, and the American Association of People with Disabilities. Day of Mourning is a national event, with 20-30 participating cities each year.

Little public attention is paid to the disabled victims of these violent acts. Media coverage and public discourse about such killings frequently justifies them as “understandable” and sometimes “merciful,” rather than appropriately condemning these crimes and those who commit them. The national Day of Mourning is a time for the disability community to commemorate the many lives cut short. By honoring disabled victims of murder and celebrating the lives that they lived, these vigils send a message that disability is not a justification for violence.

The [your city] vigil will be held at [location], and begins at [time]. Speakers will be [if you have a list of speakers, put it here, making sure to include job titles if relevant].

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization run by and for autistic people. The Autistic Self Advocacy Network seeks to advance the principles of the disability

rights movement with regard to autism. ASAN believes that the goal of autism advocacy should be a world in which autistic people enjoy the same access, rights, and opportunities as all other citizens. We work to empower autistic people across the world to take control of our own lives and the future of our common community, and seek to organize the autistic community to ensure our voices are heard in the national conversation about us. Nothing About Us, Without Us!

Materials

All you really need for a vigil is the list of names and your prepared remarks, but it can be helpful to have additional materials. You can make signs with slogans (for example, “No excuse for murder,” “Mourn for the dead and fight for the living”), or have cardstock and markers available for attendees to make their own. A display of photographs of the victims is a good way to honor them as individuals, and many people find it more moving to look at pictures of people who have died, than to hear or read their names. You can find photographs on the Disability Day of Mourning website, <http://disability-memorial.org/>.

You can also print out and distribute this year’s flyers and posters (available on the ASAN website), and have a sign-in sheet for attendees.

Most sites choose to incorporate candles into their vigils. If you are not allowed to have open flames at your site, or if it is very windy, consider using battery-powered candles instead.

The list of names

Every year, ASAN sends site coordinators the list of names that will be read at the vigil, as well as a file which can be used to print large-sized posters displaying these names. **The names are not sent out until the week before the vigils.** This is because it is likely that we will find out about more murders in the months and weeks leading up to the vigil, and we will want to include those victims’ names on the list.

The list includes each victim’s name, age, date of death, and cause of death. **It is up to you how much information you read.** Some people choose to read all the information, and some prefer not to read the causes of death, as these can be very disturbing. Use your discretion about whether or not to read the cause of death, especially if there will be young children at the vigil.

After several years of maintaining the list of victims and adding to it through research, the list now has over 700 names on it. Reading out all these names can be a logistical challenge. You will want to decide in advance how you plan to tackle this. Some options are:

- Ask one person, or several volunteers, to read all the names from the list.
- Pass the list around to everyone at the vigil, asking each person to read a name until the whole list has been read (note: this takes longer than having just a few people read from the list).
- Read the list from start to finish at a specific point in your vigil.
- Divide the list into a few sections and break up the sections with speakers and other readings.

Starting in 2017, **ASAN will also be sending out a recording of all the names being read**, which site coordinators can play at the vigil, rather than having someone at the vigil read the list.

To ensure your vigil goes smoothly, plan for reading the names to take a significant chunk of time. One person reading just the names (as opposed to including age, date, and cause of death) might be able to read the whole list in about a half an hour. Passing the list around and reading all the information could take well over an hour. It's okay to factor this into your decision-making about how much information to read aloud and how to logistically manage reading the list.

However you choose to handle reading the list, **the important thing is that you should read all the names on the list** if at all possible. Because of the way we find out about these murders, we are constantly adding names to the list of people who were killed years or even decades ago. If we read only the names of the people who died most recently, some people's names would never be read at all. We also want to read all the names because for some of the people on the list, the vigils may be the only time when their deaths are mourned. We are trying to make sure that their lives are commemorated for years to come - and in some cases, we are the only people who will do that. We understand that as we learn more people's stories and the list continues to grow, it won't always be possible to read all the names - but we want to do it for as long as we are able.

What kinds of things to do at a vigil

- It's a good idea for the site coordinator, or someone on your team, to prepare remarks for the event. If you can line up additional speakers in advance, this is even better. There will be some sample remarks available on the ASAN website.
- Remember, the purpose of this vigil is to remember disabled people who were killed by their parents or caregivers and to mourn our dead, but also to send a message that our lives are equally valuable, and society should treat us as such. We are calling for states to prosecute these murders as aggressively as they prosecute the murders of non-disabled children. We are calling for journalists to write about these murders in a way that respects the victim, not in a way that excuses the murderer.
- Light candles (or turn on electronic ones)
- Read the list of names. You can ask one person to read the whole thing, or pass the list in a circle, having each person read one name. Use discretion – if there are young children present at your event, consider reading only the names and ages, not the methods of killing, as these can be very disturbing.
- Moment of silence
- Invite attendees to speak if they have things to say
- Take pictures or video of your vigil and send them to ASAN

Day of Mourning Self-Care Guide

Introduction

Disability Day of Mourning events can cause many emotions to surface. These emotions include grief, anger, sadness, and anxiety. Some people may find the event brings up past trauma or is otherwise distressing. It can also be difficult to attend events with gatherings of people, and process other people's emotions as well as your own.

Because of this, we have put together a list of suggestions and actions to take for self-care while planning, attending/hosting, and handling days after the vigil. Everyone grieves and mourns differently - not all of these suggestions may be helpful for you, and you know yourself best. Use this self-care guide as a starting point to make the plan that will work best for you.

Before the Vigil

- If you are organizing the vigil with another person or a team of people, talk about how you will divide the work that has to be done before, during, and after the vigil to avoid any of you getting overwhelmed.
- Dealing with emotions can make people tired and stressed. Try to build in time for rest, or time to de-stress, after doing a thing related to the vigil. For example: "I will take a 1 hour break and watch this series of cat videos on the Internet after getting the Day of Mourning poster printed."
- Some autistic people and people with other disabilities find it harder to do important self-care tasks when they are stressed or dealing with emotions. Make a plan in advance for how you will make sure that you take care of yourself (eat regularly, get enough sleep, etc.) during the vigil planning process.
- Take time to do your preferred de-stressing activities. These are different for everyone, but some examples are:
 - creating art
 - sensory and self-regulatory activities
 - journaling or blogging
 - interacting with pets or getting support from service/support animals
 - learning things about a topic that is a special interest for you
 - watching TV shows and movies
- Identify a few people who are good listeners and ask permission to lean on them for moral support during the process of planning the vigil.
- Plan ahead for self-care during the vigil. If you have someone who can help emotionally support you and go with you to the vigil, ask them ahead of time if they can attend with you.
- Try to make sure that someone else at the vigil knows the planned schedule and will be able to help run the vigil for a while if you need to take a short break during the event.

- (See “After the Vigil” and “Additional Resources” for more things you might want to plan for ahead of time).

During the Vigil

- Some people, including some autistic people, may have grief reactions that encompass a wide range of emotions and effects, including feeling detached, or finding it hard to show emotion.
 - If you are among these people, your reactions are not out of line - it is totally okay to react this way.
 - It’s also okay if you need to process your emotions by doing things like crying, walking around, stimming, etc.
- If you think you might lose speech during the vigil, bring another communication tool such as an AAC device or pen and paper - whatever works best for you.
- If you find it soothing, bring a favorite comfort object or item to fidget with during the vigil.
- If you need to take a break during the vigil and step out of the room or area, that’s okay, too.

After the Vigil

- You may want to take a break from vigil-related things, rather than reading and sharing vigil write-ups immediately afterward.
 - If you want to take a break, but feel like you need to share posts about the vigils on your group’s social media, consider finding a person who can share them for you. If you can’t find someone, it’s fine to wait a couple days.
- Take at least a few hours for either alone time or being with other people, depending on what works best for you.
- Try to stick to your routine if possible.
- Take a break from social media if that helps you, or go on social media areas that aren’t as advocacy-oriented (i.e. a favorite YouTube channel, Facebook group, or Tumblr tag).
- Make sure to take enough time to rest and recharge. Again, do the de-stressing activities that work for you, and remember to get enough food and sleep.
- Some autistic people may have delayed emotional reactions to the vigil - if you know this is you, make a self-care plan that you can put into place when the reaction happens. This can include a list of soothing things to do, people you can talk to, or anything else that will help you process your emotions.