

Wellness Ministry for Seniors and Vulnerable Adults



In the larger church environment considerations of health and wholeness (collectively known as wellness) of their community is a focus of outreach ministries. From meal delivery to art classes and home-based Eucharist, wellness ministry consists of health and healing. Because spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical health are interdependent, many ministries take a holistic approach in meeting a person's spiritual needs. Some congregations have the benefit of a Faith Community Nurse (FCN) to champion the wellness ministry, others do not. Faith Community Nurses combine professional nursing expertise and knowledge with theological concepts to facilitate the church's mission for healing and wholeness. Churches who do not have an FCN must consider ways to serve but also protect the unique spiritual and physical needs of every population they serve, specifically the elderly and vulnerable adults. A vulnerable adult is:

- Any adult at or older than the age designated as an elder by applicable state law.
- Any adult who is infirm or diminished in capacity due to age, illness, or disability.
- Any adult who is wholly or partially dependent upon one or more other persons for emotional, psychological, or physical care or support, such dependency may be temporary as in the case of an accident, illness, or crisis.

Considerations for Wellness Ministries:

- Establishing a team is the first step. Who will be on the wellness ministry team? Invite interested members of your congregation, educators, medical professionals, school nurses, dietitians, representatives from local health care providers, and others who have an interest in promoting health and wellness to join the team. The team is the decision-making body for the ministry.
- The team should have a sound policy that protects a vulnerable population as well as protecting staff and volunteers from being accused of any impropriety. Considerations in the policy should be the protection of member's rights, well-being, and safety with measurements of privacy and confidentiality. Detailed sections of the policy should describe the various services of your wellness ministry. What services are you able to provide? How will you best provide them? Who will be recipients of the services? How are services requested?
- Many of the details contained within a well-crafted sexual abuse prevention policy can also serve to protect vulnerable adults in your congregation. Certain concepts like the "rule of three" are universal concepts that can serve to protect both populations.
- One of the most often overlooked aspects of working with vulnerable adults is proper training. Any congregant who is serving as a volunteer or employee in the wellness ministry for vulnerable adults should be trained. The team should determine the training curriculum. Training should also include the importance of documentation and paperwork. In order to keep the team and general church leadership informed, reports should be generated and reviewed. This data can help the team evaluate if services need to expand or change in the future.
- Recruiting volunteers to perform the wellness services is important as well. Aligning the right individuals with the right tasks is key. When recruiting, consider asking individuals to complete a skills assessment. You may have "hidden" carpenters or accountants in your group. Understanding each volunteer's skillset can help you make the best decisions for your congregants. Not all volunteers will have the same passion for working with vulnerable adults.
- Many elderly and vulnerable adults have a lifelong commitment and connection to their place of worship. As they age, they may call upon their pastor for assistance, needing their faith community more than ever. Conversely, they may become less mobile or lose access to transportation, thereby losing their ability to participate. Ministries can address these concerns and through a comprehensive plan to protect seniors and vulnerable adults, as well as the congregation serving them.