

Abuse Prevention for Seniors and Vulnerable Adults



According to the Center for Disease Control, there are hundreds of thousands of seniors and vulnerable adults who are abused, neglected, or financially abused every year. Abuse can happen in many different environments, including the person's home, a family member's house, an assisted living facility or nursing home, and even at your ministry. Unfortunately, many times people closest to seniors are directly responsible for the abuse because they have direct access; mistreatment can come from family members, strangers, healthcare providers, caregivers, or friends. Learn how your ministry can help protect seniors and vulnerable adults, as well as your congregation. 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.

SAFEGUARDING

- To safeguard against abuse in your ministry, the first step is developing a sound abuse prevention policy that clearly states your church has a zero-tolerance policy for any form of abuse. Your policy should be a living, breathing document that is embraced by everyone in your congregation.
- Your abuse prevention policy provides the framework of expectations for clergy, leadership, staff, volunteers, and congregants for any program or outreach ministry involving seniors or vulnerable adults, as well as children.
- Your abuse prevention policy should set the bandwidth of acceptable behavior for everyone in the congregation. This includes outlining what forms of touch or expressions of affection are considered acceptable in your congregation, and what forms are not.
- It is critical for your ministry to consistently follow your abuse prevention policy. Inserting vague language that does not clearly state expectations and leaves staff and volunteers confused does not help anyone, especially the congregation it is written to protect. Do not put anything in the policy unless it will be consistently followed. Attorneys regularly advise ministries how difficult it is to defend a liability claim in a court of law when policies are not being consistently followed.

SCREENING

- Does your ministry use a reputable screening service to conduct background checks that provide support for interpreting details in the report if you have questions?
- Criminal history checks should be performed on all employees and volunteers who have access to seniors, youth, or vulnerable adults.
- Reference checks should be performed on all applicants that include three personal references in addition to two professional references if the candidate is seeking employment.
- Establish standards to disqualify a person from being hired or able to volunteer.
- Re-screen employees and volunteers after they are hired, making sure to adhere to state requirements for screening and training.

TRAINING

- Do employees and volunteers receive training about how to prevent, identify and report abuse?
- Are employees and volunteers provided with information about how to report concerns internally and through the appropriate organizational process?
- Do employees and volunteers receive training, following best practices and organizational policies, about what constitutes appropriate contact with seniors and vulnerable adults?

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- Do employees and volunteers receive training about mandatory reporting laws?
- Do your staff and volunteers receive ongoing training that meets state requirements?

REPORTING

- If an employee or volunteer suspects, witnesses, or receives a report regarding inappropriate contact or behavior, your policy should guide about how, and to whom to report such an incident both within and outside the organization. Set a policy that requires all clergy, leadership, staff, and volunteers who know of suspected inappropriate contact/behavior to report the incident.
- Your policy should identify who in your ministry is responsible for investigating reports of suspected inappropriate contact or behavior, and for reporting criminal behavior to law enforcement.
- Establishing these policies and procedures makes everyone accountable for setting a culture of safety out of care and concern for the most vulnerable populations in your ministry.

SIGNS OF ABUSE

You may see signs of abuse or neglect when you visit with a vulnerable adult in your congregation. The following are signs of abuse:

- Stops taking part in activities or becomes withdrawn or acts agitated or violent
- Looks messy, with unwashed hair or dirty clothes
- Has trouble sleeping or loses weight for no reason
- Displays signs of trauma, like rocking back and forth
- Has unexplained bruises, burns, cuts, or scars
- Has broken eyeglasses/frames, or physical signs of punishment or being restrained
- Develops bed sores or other preventable conditions
- Lacks medical aids (glasses, walker, dentures, hearing aid, medications)
- Has an eviction notice for unpaid rent, a notice of late mortgage, or home
- Has hazardous, unsafe, or unclean living conditions
- Displays signs of insufficient care or unpaid bills despite adequate financial resources

If you see signs of abuse, try talking with the person to understand what's occurring. Most importantly, get help or report what you see to your supervisor or adult protective services. You do not need to prove that abuse is occurring. Professionals will investigate. *<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/elder-abuse>

TIPS FOR PROTECTING VULNERABLE CONGREGANTS

- Keep an eye on congregants that are considered vulnerable; try to engage them.
- Implement a sound abuse prevention policy that is consistently followed.
- Understand that abuse, neglect, and exploitation can happen to anyone.
- Know what to look for.
- Tell someone if you have any concerns.
- Help limit vulnerable adult's isolation. Discuss options with him or her and encourage them to stay in contact with others.
- Report any suspicions of abuse, neglect, self-neglect, exploitation of abandonment.

<https://www.insuranceboard.org/safety-central/safeconduct-abuse-prevention/>

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/elder-abuse>

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/elderabuse/fastfact.html>