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ELDER ABUSE AND FAITH:

A GUIDE FOR
SERVICE PROVIDERS
ON REACHING OUT TO
FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS
REGARDING ELDER ABUSE

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Faith community affiliation is significant for many Americans; 76.5% identify as Christian, 1.3% Jewish, 0.5% Muslim, 0.5% Buddhist, 0.4% Hindu, 7.6% other, and 13.2% not religious.¹ Faith-based organizations are especially vibrant components of rural, immigrant, refugee, and ethnic, racial, and religious minority communities. In addition, older women are more likely to be faith-involved and to turn to their faith leaders for help when facing abuse.² These are all compelling reasons for domestic violence, sexual assault, and elder abuse service providers to collaborate with local faith-based organizations.

Faith communities and leaders are already being called upon to respond to domestic and sexual violence and elder abuse. Horton and Williamson comment, "Each year more abuse victims, perpetrators, and family members seek help from clergy and religious leaders than all other helping professionals combined."³ Unfortunately, faith leaders usually do not know how to respond to elder abuse, sexual assault, or domestic violence safely or effectively. They may jeopardize victim safety by encouraging victims to stay in abusive relationships; normalizing, denying, or justifying abuse; silencing; engaging in unsafe practices such as couples' or family counseling; breaking confidentiality; romanticizing suffering and self-sacrifice; or failing to refer to community service providers. They may be judgmental or directive. They may simply be stretched too thin, or not understand the safety issues involved.

By reaching out to faith community leaders with training and resources, service providers can improve the safety and effectiveness of faith leaders' responses to victims, improve access to services, and strengthen a multidisciplinary, coherent, collaborative community response to elder abuse that supports prevention and intervention and reaches older victims and underserved communities.

The most important reason for faith community outreach, however, has to do with survivors and victims themselves. For many women (particularly older women and women in underserved communities) faith is a critical resource, a pillar of identity and community, and an essential element in decision-making and healing. For these women, faith cannot be "checked at the door."

Outreach to religious communities can be time and labor intensive and challenging. There is tremendous diversity within faith communities, and a broad spectrum

of faiths and denominations, each with its own norms and mores. Also, different faith communities and faith leaders are in different places along the continuum of understanding domestic violence, sexual assault, and elder abuse. The outreach process must be tailored to meet these individual needs.

Outreach may take the form of phone calls, letters with information about domestic violence, sexual assault, and elder abuse, follow up after community education events (such as vigils), site visits, or responses to phone inquiries about your work from local faith communities. A brief handout that explains domestic violence, sexual assault, and elder abuse and your services will be an indispensable tool. Optimally, the handout will be targeted to your local faith community.

The more personal your outreach is the better. Taking two faith leaders out to lunch (be aware of dietary restrictions and holiday observances) to talk about your program may be more effective than a mass mailing.

In this document, we have listed some of the outreach challenges that you may encounter, and some possible strategies for overcoming these challenges. This document is part of the **Elder Abuse and Faith Toolkit** developed by Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence and the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (NCALL), a program of the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WCADV). The toolkit contains resources that will help service providers reach out to and collaborate with local faith communities.

Other resources in the toolkit are:

- 🕒 Tips for preparing for and having a successful first visit with a faith community leader.
- 🕒 A bookmark, brochure, and booklet of information about elder abuse that you can give to faith leaders in your community. You can put your agency's contact information on the back of the brochure.
- 🕒 A sample cover letter that you can put on your own stationery and use to introduce the materials to faith communities and to provide contact information about your agency. This letter can be downloaded and adapted from the Safe Havens website at www.interfaithpartners.org or from the NCALL website at www.ncall.us.

If you encounter this outreach challenge . . .

Time Constraints

Like you, faith leaders are extremely busy. They must address the many needs of the people in their congregations. They are first and foremost the spiritual leader, but they are often also the CEO, strategic planner, and financial manager. Some faith leaders serve more than one congregation, or work full-time jobs in addition to their duties within the congregation. Faith leaders are usually deeply engaged in the concerns of their congregations and communities.

. . . here are some strategies that may be helpful.

⌚ Reassure faith leaders that you know that they may be stretched thin. Pledge to honor their time. Tell them that you are building a community-wide team approach to elder abuse. Assure them that once they are part of the response team, their role will be more clearly and narrowly defined. They will be able to refer to and work with community service providers to enhance victim safety. In the end, being part of the team will save time and may save lives.

⌚ Express how desperately faith community leadership is needed on this critical issue. Faith communities are often the first place that survivors and family members turn for help.

⌚ Acknowledge that faith leaders are on the front lines, and that you would like to make that easier for them by providing supportive and easy-to-use tools, training, and resources.

⌚ Encourage a pro-active approach. Before a congregant asks for help in a crisis, the faith leader can learn more about elder abuse; get to know local services, and gather resources that a victim may find helpful.

If you encounter this outreach challenge . . .

Over-Commitment

Often, faith leaders and congregations are involved in many community issues. They may also be providing aid and relief in far-flung communities around the world. Although agreeing that elder abuse is an important issue, they may not feel that they have the energy and time to become involved.

. . . here are some strategies that may be helpful.

- ② Honor the congregation's visionary work and commitment.
- ② Connect that work to efforts to end elder abuse. For example, if the congregation is deeply committed to ending homelessness or poverty, point out that many older women and men are hungry or impoverished due to elder abuse.
- ② If the congregation is engaged in peace and justice initiatives, point out that elder abuse is a peace and justice issue that affects families and communities on a daily basis.
- ② If the congregation works to strengthen families, point out that elder abuse undermines and destroys families.

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Minimizing

The shame that is an intrinsic part of elder abuse often silences victims and survivors. In addition, many victims find it difficult to use the ugly language needed to describe what happened when speaking with their clergy or religious leader. And, because they lack elder abuse training, faith leaders may not yet have developed the ability to “read between the lines” to understand the full import of a disclosure. As a result, they may think that elder abuse is not a widespread problem.

. . . here are some strategies that may be helpful.

☉ Be able to cite compelling and meaningful statistics or “head-snapping facts.” For example: “Every year, 11% of older Americans experience elder abuse.”⁴ Also, a 1998 study showed that “reported and corroborated elder mistreatment and self-neglect are associated with shorter survival”⁵

☉ If reports of elder abuse have increased in your area over the last few years, this too can be compelling.

☉ Also, note that the American population is aging. “The population of persons 65+ in 2030 is projected to be twice as large as in 2000.”⁶

☉ Know your local statistics.

☉ In addition, a personal story from a survivor will help clergy and lay leaders understand emotionally and intellectually the impact and prevalence of elder abuse. This may happen as part of an introductory training facilitated by a service provider, or could be provided as a video resource (see www.ncall.org).

If you encounter this outreach challenge . . .

Distance

Sometimes, faith leaders are aware that elder abuse is an important issue, but they haven't made the connection to their own congregations. Or, like the rest of us, they fall prey to the impulse to distance themselves from victims. So they may say, "This isn't happening here/in my congregation!" or "I've never heard anyone in my community talk about this."

. . . here are some strategies that may be helpful.

☉ Acknowledge the long history of silencing both within faith communities and in the wider culture. Acknowledge that elder abuse is a crime of shame, and that often victims are too ashamed to disclose. Until the ice is broken within the congregation, many victims and survivors will not feel safe coming forward. Many clergy and lay leaders have heard disclosures only after they break the silence in a public way or receive training or in some way indicate that they are open to talk about this issue.

☉ Use a local case that you can share safely (if there is one). This may help illustrate how the issue of elder abuse affects the community.

☉ Affirm that elder abuse affects people of all races, cultures, faiths, classes, physical abilities, sexual orientations, ages, etc.

☉ Explain some of the reasons a victim may not speak to his or her faith leader: she may fear she won't be believed; fear repercussions from the abuser; be embarrassed or too ashamed; have a mental or physical condition that makes disclosure difficult; fear judgment; or love the abuser and be unready, unwilling, or unable to make changes.

If you encounter this outreach challenge . . .

Distrust

Clergy and lay leaders sometimes fear that service providers may not honor marriages and families, may encourage divorce, may interfere in families, or may overlook essential ethical and religious considerations.

. . . here are some strategies that may be helpful.

🕒 Commit yourself and your agency to the long-term work of relationship and trust building.

🕒 Attend faith community events when appropriate. Listen and learn all you can about the congregations in your community.

🕒 Reassure clergy and faith leaders that domestic violence shelters, elder abuse advocates, and sexual assault service providers do not ever tell victims and survivors what to do. Rather, service providers prioritize safety and provide options.

🕒 Discuss safety and its importance to elders and families. Try to find common ground. Perhaps both your agency and the congregation would agree that no one deserves to be unsafe, exploited, controlled, or neglected.

🕒 Affirm that victims and survivors who are abused by an intimate partner, family member, caregiver, a person in a position of authority, or a person with whom there is an expectation of trust don't usually want the relationship to end, they just want the abuse to stop.

🕒 Note that the earlier abusers are detected, referred to services, and held accountable, the earlier victims may have improved lives and enhanced safety.

🕒 Note that earlier detection and intervention means less impact on victims and other family members.

If you encounter this outreach challenge . . .

Concerns about Family Integrity

Congregations typically include many families, and often extended families, across several generations. Because they marry couples, celebrate births and anniversaries, help to welcome, teach, and form the next generation, perform funerals, and are in other ways involved, faith leaders are concerned about the integrity of families and relationships. At times, this can become a concern for the public unity of the family without due consideration for the private reality.

In addition, many faiths and denominations have a highly developed theology about, and sacramental understanding of, marriage. This also heightens the weight put on maintaining family integrity.

. . . here are some strategies that may be helpful.

🕒 Note that the person who uses abuse in his or her relationship with an older adult breaks the basic trust that is the cornerstone of any relationship.

🕒 Assert that no one deserves to be abused, particularly by someone within their own home or family.

🕒 Focus on the positive: ending elder abuse means strengthening families and communities.

🕒 Talk about the long-term impact on the older person and on other family members, and how prolonged exposure to violence, abuse, neglect, or exploitation in the home will have serious and lasting negative effects on everyone living in the home.

🕒 Violence, abuse, and assault are not family values. They undermine and destroy families. Affirm that service providers, like faith communities, value and support quality of life for individuals and families.

🕒 Note that a 1998 study showed that elder mistreatment and self-neglect result in earlier deaths and decreased quality of life for older adults.⁷

If you encounter this outreach challenge . . .

Legal Issues

In many states, clergy are mandated reporters of abuse of children and dependent and older adults. However, reporting guidelines and protocols are often poorly defined or confusing, and most clergy have not received any training. Clergy wonder how to do the right thing.

. . . here are some strategies that may be helpful.

- ⌚ Laws differ by state. Be familiar with state laws regarding clergy as mandated reporters of child abuse or of abuse of dependent or older adults.
- ⌚ Make sure that clergy in your area know that domestic violence perpetrated against a competent adult is not usually covered under mandatory reporting laws.
- ⌚ Be prepared to answer any questions faith leaders may have.
- ⌚ Offer to provide support when they are working with a victim or survivor. Be available to discuss the difficult issues and nuances that arise for them regarding safety and reporting.
- ⌚ Help clergy and faith leaders focus on the victim's needs with regard to safety and reporting.



If you encounter this outreach challenge . . .

Confidentiality

Many faith leaders have not received training about confidentiality, and may not understand the term in the same way that service providers do. In addition, congregations often encourage open sharing of personal problems so that congregants can pray for and/or support one another. Congregants may be less individualistic and more community-focused than in the wider culture. From this viewpoint, the importance of confidentiality may not be immediately apparent.

. . . here are some strategies that may be helpful.

- ② Be prepared with a clear and concise definition of confidentiality. Stress the importance of confidentiality as the cornerstone of victim safety. Explain why confidentiality is critical to elder abuse victims and survivors.
- ② Share the confidentiality guidelines you use as a place for faith leaders to begin to develop their own guidelines around confidentiality and elder abuse.
- ② As a general guideline, state that confidentiality should be maintained in all situations UNLESS the faith leader is mandated to report elder abuse OR someone is going to hurt another person or themselves.
- ② Be prepared to answer any questions faith leaders may have. Offer to provide support when they are working with a victim or survivor.
- ② Invite faith leaders to further discussion.

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Endnotes

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2 Elizabeth Podnieks, EdD, RN and Sue Wilson, PhD, "Elder Abuse Awareness in Faith Communities: Findings from a Canadian Pilot Study," *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect*, Vol. 15, No.3/4, 2003, p. 123.

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4 Acierno, Ron, Melba Hernandez-Tejada, Wendy Muzzy, and Kenneth Steve, "National Elder Mistreatment Study," U.S. Department of Justice, 2009, pp. 4 ff.

5 Lachs, Mark S., Christianna S. Williams, Shelley O'Brien, Karl A. Pillemer, and Mary E. Charlson, "The Mortality of Elder Mistreatment," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, August 5, 1998, Vol. 280, No. 5, p. 428.

6 U.S. Census, 2005.

7 Lachs, Mark S., Christianna S. Williams, Shelley O'Brien, Karl A. Pillemer, and Mary E. Charlson, "The Mortality of Elder Mistreatment," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, August 5, 1998, Vol. 280, No. 5, p. 428.

For more information, please visit www.interfaithpartners.org or www.ncall.us.

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