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THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC RISK RETENTION GROUP, INC.

 **VIRTUS**[®] *Online*

Vulnerable Adult Abuse (Part 2): Prevention and Proper Response

Editor's Note: *Our mission in the VIRTUS Programs is to educate and empower organizations and individuals to work together to ensure safe environments. Our training articles educate caring adults to prevent not only child sexual abuse, but also many other kinds of abuse, including the abuse of vulnerable adults. The first article in this series gave an overview of vulnerable adults and the types of abuse/exploitation they may experience, along with a case study. This second article provides information about the actions caring adults can take to prevent the abuse of vulnerable adults, and how to appropriately respond if it's occurring.*



Introduction:

When we are involved in a ministry with an organization as volunteers and employees, we can typically expect protective measures to be in place, guided by an official policy. For example, most organizations have a screening process for incoming candidates and procedures in place to monitor programs. Additionally, training is often provided on protocols and proper behavior. But a persistent question often remains on behalf of caring adults: what can we do individually to ensure that the vulnerable persons in our care are protected? To ensure a safer environment, we can take a number of steps on behalf of the vulnerable person, including knowing the warning signs of a potential inappropriate relationship and being aware of potentially concerning situations. We can then more effectively communicate our concerns to either prevent the abuse of vulnerable adults or respond to it if it's already occurring.

We must start by recognizing our own behavior as we interact with vulnerable adults. It's important to uphold specific boundaries when working or visiting with the homebound as well as at hospitals, nursing homes or assisted living facilities. As caring adults, we also should be aware of the behavior of others toward those who are vulnerable.

Warning signs of a possible inappropriate relationship:

There are warning signs that indicate an individual has an inappropriate relationship with a vulnerable adult—similar to ones exhibited by adults behaving inappropriately with children. Do keep in mind that if an individual is exhibiting any of these warning signs, it doesn't necessarily mean there's abuse—however, it's a red flag and must be addressed. Red flags that characterize potentially risky behavior include adults who:

- Always want to be alone with the person
- Discourage others from being around, arranging to be with the vulnerable adult in unmonitored areas or timeframes
- Think the rules don't apply to them

- Use threats or punishments
- Use bad language or tell dirty jokes around the person

Situations that might be harmful to vulnerable adults:

Being aware of the vulnerable persons in our lives, and their behavior, is also crucial. Listen between the lines and pay careful attention to even the slightest signs of fear in a vulnerable adult. Sometimes an adult may disclose fear of a specific individual, or tell you how they've been harmed. Or they may not recognize abuse is occurring. Being aware of what's happening with vulnerable adults who are being physically or sexually abused, neglected or financially exploited includes noticing and responding to:

- Injuries such as cuts, bruises, burns, swelling and other wounds
- One who flinches or reacts strongly when touched
- A lack of personal hygiene care
- Increased complaints about ailments
- Fear, anxiety, anger or depression
- Sudden behavioral/attitude/spiritual preference changes
- Apparent disorientation, confusion and far-fetched stories to explain their situation and/or circumstances
- Inadequate living conditions or a lack of food
- Extreme/inadequate room temperatures, or climate-inappropriate clothing
- Sudden changes to a will/finances in favor of a caregiver or family member
- Financial concerns such as expensive caregiver gifts, disappearance of personal items, credit card problems, missing funds or checks

Avenues to communicate concerns:

After learning the different types of concerns that vulnerable adults can face, the most important thing you can do is communicate. Don't ignore any behavior that makes you feel uncomfortable.

If you don't have a suspicion of abuse, but are concerned about behavior that indicates a risk to the vulnerable adult, communicate directly with the person performing the risky behavior or with a supervisor. Continue pursuing your concerns up the "chain of command" until satisfied that safety has been achieved. It may also be appropriate to communicate with the vulnerable adult about the situation, even if he/she has limited cognitive ability. You can:

- Ask open-ended questions that don't suggest the "right" answer
- Repeat their words back to them
- Ask about what you observed, such as, "How did you get that bruise?"
- Don't promise confidentiality—as you may need to report the information
- Assure them what happened was not their fault
- Stop asking questions if it seems to cause trauma

Adult Protective Services are agencies in almost every state enlisted to protect vulnerable adults from abuse, exploitation and/or neglect. In many states, the law mandates that anyone who suspects that a vulnerable adult is being, or has been, abused report those suspicions to the Adult Protective Services. Adult Protective Services regulations vary from state to state, but if you are concerned that someone is a victim of abuse, you must call! If the individual is within a ministry of which you volunteer or work, you would want to then communicate directly with the organization to let them know of the situation. Regardless of the legal mandates, everyone has an ethical responsibility to report suspected abuse to the proper authorities. Many states host 24/7 hotlines to accept reports, and calls are confidential. For more information, (including county/state phone numbers for reporting), visit the [National Adult Protective Services Association](#). The [National Center on Elder Abuse](#) also provides excellent information on research, news and resources.

Moreover, you can call Adult Protective Services even if you're unsure that you're observing abuse; they'll be able to provide advice on next steps. Keep in mind that it's not your role to investigate, but rather to communicate your concerns to the appropriate party. Just as with reports of suspected child abuse, the law protects those who make reports in good faith from civil liability and allows for anonymity in reporting.

Conclusion:

As members of the community, we must learn about the threats these at-risk populations face and strive to stop the abuse of all vulnerable people. By understanding the reality of vulnerable adult abuse, learning these warning signs and reporting concerns we can protect others who may not be in a position to protect themselves.

Thank you for your commitment to help others, and to protect the vulnerable in this ever-growing community.

[References available upon request.]

To provide constructive feedback on this article, please contact us at editor@virtus.org.

1) If you suspect that a vulnerable adult is being abused, what appropriate action(s) should be taken?

- A) Call the Adult Protective Services in the state and communicate concerns
 - B) If applicable, follow-up with the related ministry/work organization after communicating with the Adult Protective Services in the state
 - C) All of the above
 - D) None of the above
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