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### Protecting God's Children for Adults

Vol. 21 No. 9

### Protecting Vulnerable Adults

By [The VIRTUS<sup>®</sup> Programs](#)

#### Introduction

While we  
all value  
the



protection of children and youth from harm, the protection of adults who could be considered vulnerable is equally important. While each of us can be vulnerable in any given set of circumstances, the phrase "vulnerable adults" can apply, but is not limited to:

- Persons 18 years of age and older, with physical, mental, emotional or behavioral conditions or deficiencies,
- Adults living with intellectual or developmental disabilities,
- Adults with an infirmity or illness, or situation that renders an inability to defend, protect or get help when injured or abused, or even a deprivation of personal liberty that, even if only occasionally, limits their ability to understand or to want or otherwise resist an offence;<sup>1</sup>
- Individuals whose condition or disability impairs their ability to provide adequately for their own care,
- Adults who habitually lack the use of reason,<sup>2</sup>
- Individuals who have a court-appointed guardian,



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- The elderly, whose various circumstances might make them susceptible to persons or situations that may cause them harm,
- People who receive services within ministerial or shelter-type environments, including persons who are homeless, or who are residents of shelters, and,
- Adults who receive care services from a licensed home care or personal care service within their own homes.

### **Abuse of vulnerable adults**

Each year, approximately 500,000 allegations of abuse of vulnerable adults are reported to Adult Protection Services. Studies indicate that as many as 10 percent of the vulnerable adult population is subject to abuse, and that only one in six cases of abuse are ever reported. It's often difficult for vulnerable adults to tell anyone about the abuse. One reason is because the people who are abusive are often relatives, business professionals and institutions, con artists and care providers. Vulnerable adults who fall victim to one of these people are often afraid to communicate—sometimes because of fear of retribution or because they are dependent on their abuser. They may also have feelings of shame, may not remember what happened, or they may have a debilitating physical, verbal, emotional, and/or intellectual psychological impediment that prevents them from communicating or coming forward to report an abusive situation.

Among vulnerable adults, the patterns and methods used by abusers are similar to the behavioral patterns of those who abuse children. In particular, there are those who seek out and "groom" vulnerable adults and those who take advantage of particular situations by abusing others. These abusers are primarily found among the family members, care providers, and others who are known and trusted by the adults. When the victim is an adult with intellectual or developmental disabilities, the offender is often a care provider. However, when the victim is an elderly person, the most likely offender is a family member.

### **What we can do**

The good news is that the five steps outlined in the *Protecting God's Children*<sup>®</sup> Program can also help us prevent and respond to the abuse of vulnerable adults. The steps are:

1. Know the Warning Signs
2. Screen and Select Employees and Volunteers
3. Monitor All Environments
4. Be Attentive, and,

## 5. Communicate Your Concerns

Some of the warning signs of an adult's inappropriate relationship with a vulnerable adult are the same as those that indicate someone is a potential risk of harm to a child. Additional signs that indicate a care provider could be a risk of harm to a vulnerable adult are when the person:

- Acts with indifference toward the vulnerable adult in his or her care, pays little attention or shows little patience toward them
- Prevents the adult from speaking to visitors
- Gives the vulnerable adult "dirty" looks or "stares down" to intimidate them
- Uses fear, or a threat of force to get the vulnerable adult to follow instructions
- Takes privileges away from the vulnerable adult
- Suddenly seems to have a larger cash flow or more expensive things, whereas the vulnerable adult may appear to have less or is struggling financially
- Isolates the vulnerable adult from other people; refuses to allow visitors; keeps the vulnerable adult away from others who might observe warning signs
- Yells at the vulnerable adult, and,
- Uses excessive or frequent physical force to restrain the adult or "force" them to "comply" or follow instructions.

Screening and selecting employees and volunteers to work or volunteer with vulnerable adults should follow the same procedures as screening and selecting those who are working or within ministry with minors. The monitoring of environments involving vulnerable adults should include taking note of the environment, watching for warning signs of abuse, and assessing if there are any potential grooming behaviors present. Monitoring environments also includes adequate supervision for those using technology to interact with vulnerable adults.

Being attentive to vulnerable adults means we notice if there are any indicators that might show that a vulnerable adult could be experiencing neglect, physical abuse or sexual abuse. This could include observing:

- Injuries such as cuts, bruises, and other wounds that appear to be uncared for or never seem to heal
- Poor skin color, sunken eyes, dehydration or apparent malnutrition
- Frequent trips to the hospital (for reasons unassociated with a chronic medical condition)
- Soiled clothing, apparent pain from touching
- Lack of social contact
- Fear, anxiety, anger, depression, and confusion

- Apparent disorientation or confusion and far-fetched stories to explain their situation and/or circumstances
- Living conditions that are inadequate or consistently unclean is cause for concern
- Room temperatures that are too extreme in both winter and summer, and foul odors in the house, and,
- Possible financial abuse, which could include the purchase of expensive care provider gifts, the disappearance of personal items and financial issues such as credit card problems, missing bank account funds or bounced checks.

## Communicate Your Concerns

Just like if we see or hear something concerning regarding children and youth, we must also communicate our concerns if we have a suspicion of neglect or abuse of a vulnerable adult. A suspicion of neglect or abuse of a vulnerable adult must be reported to local law enforcement, or your local [Adult Protective Services](#) agencies.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to reporting suspected abuse of vulnerable adults, we must also communicate concerns that arise about the behavior of their care provider or other adults visiting and/or providing a service to vulnerable adults. If we notice that a care provider, family member or another adult is behaving in a way that indicates that they are a risk to the vulnerable adult (*even if it is just one time*, or the risk seems minor in comparison with others), we must communicate our concerns. In this case, communicate your concern to someone who can do something about it, such as the supervisor of the care provider, or the supervisor of the adult who is visiting or providing a service. If you are not sure with whom to communicate your concern, contact the organization the individual in question represents.

## Conclusion

As members of the community, we must learn about the threats at-risk populations face and practice these steps to prevent abuse from happening in the first place and stop any abuse from continuing for all vulnerable people. By understanding the reality of vulnerable adult abuse, considering our own behavior, learning these warning signs and communicating concerns—we strive to protect others who may not be in a position to protect themselves. Thank you for your commitment to helping the vulnerable in any situation.

### References

- 1 *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*. Accessible online at [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20190507\\_vos-estis-lux-mundi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20190507_vos-estis-lux-mundi.html)
- 2 *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. Accessible online at

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**1) Which of the following is NOT a sign that a vulnerable adult could be experiencing neglect or abuse?**

- A)  Close relationships with family and friends, and a consistently positive attitude.
  - B)  A fearful or anxious demeanor, or when the adult expresses worry, fear or anxiety regarding their care provider.
  - C)  Apparent disorientation or confusion and far-fetched stories to explain their situation and/or circumstances.
  - D)  Living conditions that are inadequate or consistently unclean is cause for concern.
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