



Unique Dynamics for Safeguarding Vulnerable Adult Populations

Presented by
PRAESIDIUM
In partnership with FADICA



ABOUT PRAESIDIUM

Our mission is to help organizations prevent the sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults and to preserve trust in respected organizations.

Praesidium is a **leading innovator** of scientifically-based solutions designed to transform the way organizations approach the prevention of sexual abuse.

For **over 30 years**, Praesidium's expertise, consulting, and tailored solutions have helped foster **safer environments** for children, vulnerable adults, staff, volunteers, and all stakeholders involved.



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What is safeguarding?

Safeguarding refers to **measures** and **interventions** that protect people from abuse, harm, exploitation, or violence.

Safeguarding reflects a commitment to **best practices** that **prevent abuse, reduce risk, and keep all persons**—especially children and vulnerable adults—**safe**.

Safeguarding also promotes action that **assures justice** and **supports healing** for victims and survivors of abuse.

You may be more familiar with terms like safe environment, risk management, or abuse prevention — all important aspects of safeguarding.



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Organizational safeguarding includes having a written safeguarding policy, Code of Conduct, and supporting guidance in place as part of “best practices.”



A written safeguarding policy should guide you in answering the question:
What do we need to do to keep people safe at our organization?



Guidance and program expectations should be shared with **all stakeholders**, including staff, volunteers, Board members, program participants, and beneficiaries of service.



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Vulnerable adult frequently refers to an **individual who is eighteen years of age or older** and who is **unable to protect themselves from abuse, harm, or exploitation**, which may be by reason of illness, age, chronic health condition, disability, or other types of physical or mental impairment.

In the support and care for vulnerable adults, **a power differential is inherent**, according to the relationship or situation of trust, influence, or dependency.



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- ✓ Elderly, aging, or geriatric
- ✓ Intellectual or developmental disabilities
- ✓ Physical disabilities
- ✓ Mental health challenges
- ✓ Unhoused or experiencing homelessness
- ✓ Formerly incarcerated
- ✓ Undocumented immigrants
- ✓ Refugees and asylum seekers
- ✓ Survivors of trafficking
- ✓ Substance use addiction or recovery
- ✓ Healthcare patients



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Physical

Sexual

Verbal/Emotional

Mental/Psychological

Exploitation

Neglect

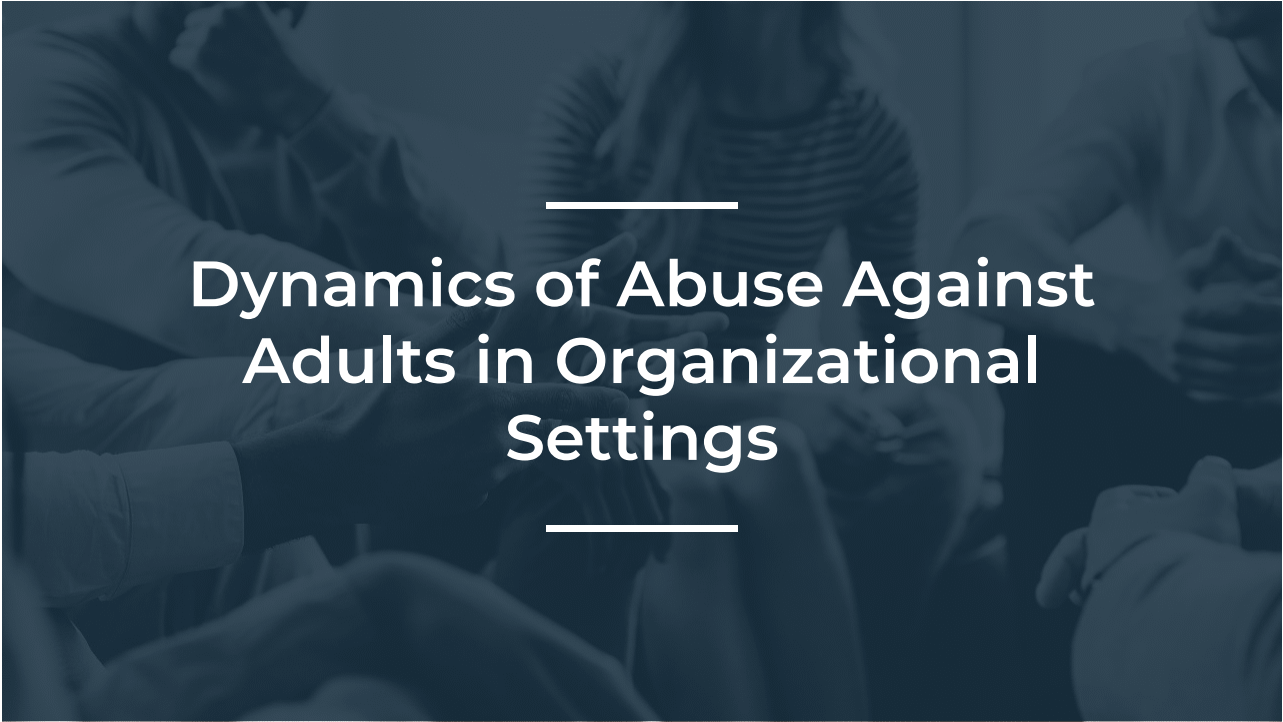
Financial/Economic

Spiritual

Cultural/Identity

Types of Abuse

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Dynamics of Abuse Against Adults in Organizational Settings

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Differences between Abuse of Children vs *Adults*

Power Dynamics

- Significant power imbalance over victims due to age, authority, or relationship to child (e.g., parent, caregiver, teacher)
- *Varied and complex power differentials depending on factors like social status, employment, physical strength*

Capacity to Consent

- Children not legally capable of informed consent to sexual activity regardless of willingness or participation
- *Adults presumed to have capacity to consent but may be compromised due to certain situations (like manipulation, coercion) or incapacity (like cognitive or developmental impairment, intoxication)*

Legal and Reporting Requirements

- Abuse of children is criminal offense in most if not all jurisdictions with legal mandates requiring reporting to authorities
- *Depends on jurisdiction and nature of relationship between victim and offender for adults, laws not as universally implemented or enforced*

Offender Characteristics

- Often known to the victim like family members, caregivers, authority figures
- *May include intimate partners, acquaintances, strangers, professionals in positions of trust (i.e., healthcare, clergy)*

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Misconceptions that Impede Safeguarding Measures

Sense of Trust

Prevailing belief that human service organizations are inherently safe and trustworthy environments

Professionals intended to provide essential services and support with compassionate care

May lead to complacency and failure to recognize warning signs or address concerns effectively

Power Dynamics & Vulnerability

Misconception that abuse primarily occurs in overtly coercive or abusive relationships

Increased opportunity when individuals are dependent on caregivers or service-providers for assistance, support, decision-making power

May exploit authority or trust to engage in abusive behavior that is unrecognized or unaddressed

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Misconceptions that Impede Safeguarding Measures

Stigma and Shame

Real or perceived barriers to reporting or seeking support due to fear of retaliation, disbelief, or shame

Assumption that such incidents of abuse against adults are rare or unlikely within professional or human services settings

May lead to underreporting and perpetuate misconceptions about prevalence of abuse against adults

Lack of Awareness or Education

Overreliance and sense of confidence that skills acquired through academic preparation, licensure, years of field work equips them for managing abuse risk

Training often focuses on identifying and reactively reporting signs or symptoms of abuse, not prevention

May be ill-equipped to identify or address high-risk behaviors or situations of misconduct

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Shared Lived Experiences

Staff and volunteers may also be vulnerable due to their own lived experiences:

- Similar life circumstances to that of program participants
- Previously were clients of the same organization
- A member of certain minority groups that exist in societal systems of majority

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- The Power and Control Wheel is a visual model that illustrates the tactics used by abusers to gain and maintain power and control over their victims.

- The inside of the wheel makes up subtle, continual behaviors over time, while the outer ring represents physical and sexual violence.

- Abusive actions like those depicted in the outer ring reinforce the regular use of the other, more subtle methods found in the inner ring.

Created by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth, MN

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Power and Control Wheel: Intersection of Abuse in Organizational Settings

Coercion and Threats: manipulate into engaging in unwanted behavior, coercion through the denial of opportunities, blackmail, threats

Intimidation: instill fear to silence victims, assert aggression, seek compliance to demands through intimidation

Emotional Abuse: manipulation, gaslighting, psychological manipulation to undermine confidence and self-worth of victim

Isolation: limiting access to support network, resources, or outside assistance, controlling access to information

Minimizing, Denying, and Blaming: shifting blame onto victim, downplaying severity of misconduct, victim may internalize and feel hesitant to report due to shame or self-doubt

Leveraging Family Members/Children: threatening to harm loved ones, creating additional barriers to leave or seek help if fearing safety or well-being of family

Economic Abuse: exerting control over financial resources, employment opportunities, access to supportive services, withhold wages or sabotage advancement on program goals

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Community Grooming

Process through which individuals or groups within a community are **manipulated** or **influenced** to **accept, tolerate, ignore, or participate** in abusive or harmful behaviors, often through gradual or subtle means.

Community grooming can create an environment where inappropriate or abusive behaviors are **overlooked, excused, or even endorsed**, making it **difficult** for individuals **to recognize or report** such behaviors as problematic or concerning.

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Community Grooming: Barriers to Reporting

Normalization of Abuse: Repeated exposure to inappropriate or abusive behavior can desensitize individuals. Initially recognized as unacceptable behavior may gradually be perceived as normalized and less likely recognized to report.

Social Pressure and Group Dynamics: May fear social repercussions or ostracization if they speak out against behaviors, particularly when perpetrated by influential or respected members of the community. Pressure to conform to established norms or expectations.

Fear of Retaliation: Offenders use position or influence to intimidate or retaliate against those who attempt to report them. Victims or witnesses may not come forward with experiences, as fear losing job, reputation, resources, or social standing.

Lack of Trust in Reporting Mechanisms: When reporting systems are perceived as ineffective, biased, or unresponsive, individuals are hesitant to report incidents. May stem from previous negative experience or belief reporting will not lead to meaningful action or justice.

Cultural or Institutional Disregard: Collective denial towards prevalence or severity of abuse within a setting, due to cultural attitudes, organizational practices that prioritize reputation over accountability, or reluctance to acknowledge systemic issues enabling harmful or unsafe behavior.

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Safeguarding Examples in Different Program Settings

1. **Nursing Homes and Long-Term Care Facilities**
Example: A nursing home implements strict background checks and crisis de-escalation training for staff to prevent incidents of physical abuse and neglect against elderly residents. This ensures that vulnerable adults receive respectful care and are protected from mistreatment by caregivers.
2. **Mental Health Facilities**
Example: A mental health facility adopts policies that prioritize informed consent and confidentiality to protect adult patients from psychological abuse or breaches of privacy. This safeguards their dignity and rights while receiving treatment.
3. **Group Homes for Adults with Disabilities**
Example: A group home establishes protocols for regular observation, monitoring, and reporting of staff conduct to prevent instances of financial exploitation or neglect against residents with developmental disabilities.
4. **Community Support Programs**
Example: A community center providing support services to parents and families establishes clear guidelines for respectful communication and behavior among staff and volunteers. This reduces the risk of emotional abuse and promotes a supportive environment where adults feel valued and safe.
5. **Rehabilitation Centers and Addiction Treatment Facilities**
Example: A rehabilitation center implements comprehensive safety measures, such as restricted access to medications and regular supervision, to prevent substance misuse and exploitation among adults recovering from addiction. This protects their recovery process and overall health.

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Safeguarding Examples in Different Program Settings

5. **Domestic Violence Shelters**
Example: A domestic violence shelter implements strict security measures, such as confidential entry procedures and surveillance cameras, to protect adult survivors of abuse from further harm by their abusers. This ensures their physical safety while they receive support and counseling to rebuild their lives.
6. **Home Care Services**
Example: A home healthcare agency provides curriculum and education to patients regarding appropriate and safe examination, procedures, and personal care assistance so they know what to expect and can identify outlier behavior by a caregiver.
7. **Job Training Programs**
Example: A vocational training program for adults with intellectual disabilities establishes individualized support plans and regular progress evaluations to ensure participants are empowered and protected from exploitation or discrimination in the workplace.
8. **Legal Aid Clinics**
Example: A legal aid clinic serving low-income adults implements policies that prioritize confidentiality and informed consent during legal proceedings. This protects vulnerable adults from coercion, exploitation, or misinformation, ensuring they receive fair representation and access to justice.

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What Puts Professionals At Risk

- ✔ Not thinking you're at risk
- ✔ Overidentifying with a client
- ✔ Not recognizing when (not if) you have "favorites" or when (not if) there is an attraction
- ✔ Is overly protective of a client
- ✔ Stress
- ✔ Experiencing anxiety or depression
- ✔ Facing rejection or disappointment
- ✔ Coping with personal loss
- ✔ Loneliness
- ✔ Feels unappreciated and unrewarded for hard work
- ✔ Drug and excessive alcohol use
- ✔ Lack of peer and supervisor support
- ✔ Lack of supervision or oversight
- ✔ Working with clients with poor boundaries
- ✔ Working in a secluded area
- ✔ Does not accept support or feedback

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How to Take Care of Yourself and Peers

Yourself

- ✔ Know your limits
- ✔ Never work in isolation
- ✔ Seek support when...
- ✔ Accepting support
- ✔ Meet your needs outside of work
- ✔ It's ok to vent
- ✔ If you cross the line or think something you did could be misinterpreted: SELF REPORT and DOCUMENT

Peers

- ✔ Watch out for others' limits
- ✔ Offer support by...
 - Allowing others to vent
 - Listening for needs
 - Advocating for needs
 - Offering encouragement
- ✔ Give honest feedback
- ✔ Communicate to other administrators

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Next Step Opportunities and Reflections

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GOOD STEWARDSHIP

Some questions
to consider as a
client or
stakeholder

- How does the organization **screen its employees and high-access volunteers** (i.e., application, interviews, reference checks, criminal background checks, etc.)?
- What are the **minimum training requirements** for staff/high-access volunteers on the topics of **professional boundaries, abuse prevention, and mandated reporting**?
Consider: Content, frequency of delivery, method of delivery
- Does the organization **publicly acknowledge its commitment** to preventing abuse and responding to **all** allegations? What values statement and supporting information (policy, handbook, etc.) is publicly available on the website, and what is distributed to clients?
- What is the process by which a client or other stakeholder can **make an internal report** to the organization? Who is the primary point of contact?

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GOOD STEWARDSHIP

Some questions to consider as a **client** or **stakeholder** (continued)

- How does the organization provide **support** to staff and **supervision** over programs and services?
- What are the organization's written procedures for **responding to** and **documenting**:
 1. Policy violations?
 2. Inappropriate behaviors?
 3. Incidents or allegations of abuse?
- How does the organization **invite** and **receive feedback** from stakeholders? Are there systems designed to identify trends or patterns of increased risk or safety concerns?
- Is there a **governance body** or an **accrediting body** to whom the organization reports to or is held accountable to meeting certain standards?



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GOOD STEWARDSHIP

Some questions to consider as an **employee** or **high-access volunteer**

- How frequently have I participated in training on **professional boundaries, abuse prevention, and mandated reporting**? Do I retain that information well? Do I feel supported by my team to **proactively act** and **err** on the side of safety?
- What **written guidelines** and **behavioral expectations** are articulated in the employee handbook, and how frequently are these topics revisited in **all-team meetings**? When was the policy/handbook last reviewed or updated?
- Does the organization **publicly acknowledge its commitment** to preventing abuse and responding to **all** allegations? What values statement and supporting information (policy, handbook, etc.) is publicly available on the website and provided through staff orientation?



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GOOD STEWARDSHIP

Some questions to consider as an **employee** or **high-access volunteer** (continued)

- Does the organization have gaps where “word of mouth” process (i.e., “This is how it’s always been done”) **deviates from** or **effectively replaces** written process? Are there procedures that only live in memory or practice that have not been formalized into procedure?
- If I have a concern as a staff member or high-access volunteer, **to whom do I report** (internally/externally)? Is there a mechanism for **anonymous reporting**?
- How does the organization **communicate with** and **inform** staff, clients, and the community in the wake of abuse allegations? What additional support and resources are provided?



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Consultation with Partners

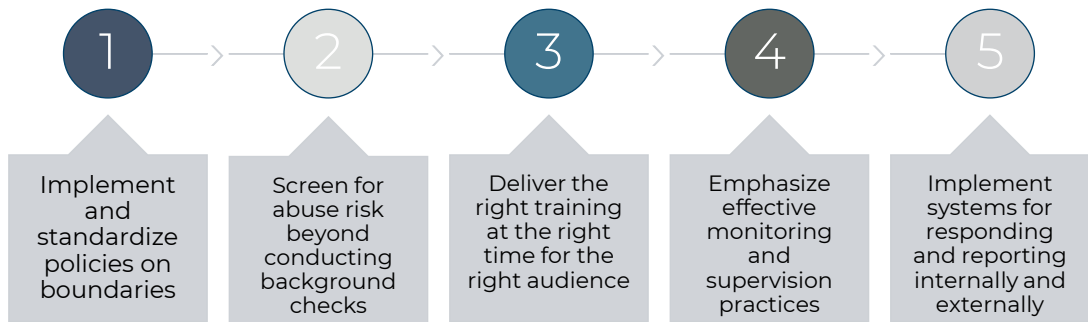
- Document analysis and policy review/development
- Emergency or crisis response to incident
- Exploration of dynamics between domestic and international teams
- Article development for information sharing
- Guided conversation about daily operations & possible gaps
- Custom training opportunities (bilingual in Spanish)
- Funder referrals (various reasons)



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OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN SAFEGUARDING EFFORTS

Minimum Expectations
Designed to Mitigate Risk and Prevent Abuse



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Creating a Culture of Safety



Leadership is committed and vocal



Standards are clear and enforced



Everyone knows safety is part of their job



Everyone takes warning signs seriously



Everyone reports their concerns



Employee engagement is high



Quality is institutionalized

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2024

WEBINAR
SERIES

PILLAR

Hiring
Thoughtfully:

Best Practices
for Employee &
Volunteer
Screening

WEDNESDAY,
SEPT. 11

SPECIALIZED

High-Reliability
Organizations:

Inspiration for
Fostering
Cultures of
Safety

WEDNESDAY,
NOV. 6

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What can I find on the website?

safeguarding.fadica.org



Checklists, Templates, and Policy Models

Find inspiration for building out your organization's written policies and best practices.



Custom Webinar Recordings

Explore the archive of recently recorded safeguarding webinars, curated with direct-service/nonprofits in mind.



Collaborative Consulting Opportunities

Schedule a discovery call with FADICA and Praesidium to help discern next steps in your safeguarding journey.

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