Preventing elder abuse

Introduction
According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, elder maltreatment (abuse) is a significant public health problem. Each year, hundreds of thousands of adults over the age of 60 are abused, neglected, or exploited. In the United States alone, over 500,000 older adults are believed to be abused or neglected each year. These statistics are likely an underestimate, as many elders become more physically frail, they are less able to stand up for themselves and fight back if abused. Often they are unable or afraid to tell the police, family, or friends about the violence.

There are generally six types of maltreatment that occur in people over the age of 60. They include:
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Neglect
- Abandonment
- Financial abuse

This risk management article will focus on physical and sexual abuse prevention strategies that adult serving organizations can use to reduce the risk of elder abuse within their own organization. It is based upon strategies published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the publication listed below along with other resources utilized and listed at the end of this article.

Physical abuse is the non-accidental use of force against an elderly person that results in physical pain, injury, or impairment. This can include not only physical assaults such as shoving and hitting but also the inappropriate use of drugs, restraints, or confinement. Signs and symptoms of physical abuse can include:

- Unexplained signs of injury such as bruises, welts or scars, often appearing symmetrically on two sides of the body
- Dislocations, sprains, or broken bones
- Report of drug overdose or apparent failure to take medication regularly
- A prescription that has more remaining than it should
- Broken eyeglasses or frames
- Signs of being restrained such as rope marks on wrists and/or ankles

Sexual elder abuse is the contact with an elderly person without the elder’s consent. It can involve physical sex acts but can also involve such activities as showing an elderly person pornographic material, forcing the person to watch sex acts, or even forcing the elderly person to undress. Signs and symptoms of sexual abuse can include:

- Unusual self-withdrawal or change in personality
- Bruises around breasts or genitals
- Unexplained venereal disease or genital infections
- Unexplained vaginal or anal bleeding
- Torn, stained, or bloody underclothing

As an adult-serving organization, it is one of your responsibilities to provide an environment wherein the adults that you serve are not intentionally harmed in any way while they under your care. Two of the risks that you face in working directly with older adults are physical and sexual abuse. As such, it is paramount that you create a culture where elder physical and sexual (and other forms of) abuse are talked about, focused on, and prevented. By doing this you can embrace strategies to help prevent this type of abuse and protect the adults you serve, your organization, and its reputation.

This article will provide you with building blocks (or strategies) you can review and use as appropriate in your own adult-serving program. They are by no means all inclusive, merely strategies identified by a panel of experts as prevailing practices that have proven helpful for other organizations.

(For additional information, please refer to the document below.)
Building Block One

Screening and selecting employees (and volunteers)

As an organization serving adults, it should be one of your goals to choose the best employee (and volunteer) for your positions and screen out any undesirable individuals who have abused in the past or are at risk to abuse in the future by their past history.

Before you begin using this strategy, you will need to:

• decide how screening information will be used to determine employee/volunteer suitability
• identify who will make the final decision
• define the area(s) of concern to be screened
• (Markel has partnered with Intellicorp to provide a background check at a discounted price for our insureds. You can reach them at: https://www.intellicorp.net/marketing/branding/markel/default.aspx
  - Or you can reach them by calling (800) 539-3717 to discuss your areas of concern and any jurisdictional requirements for screening.
• develop a consistent and systematic policy/process for screening and selection
• consult with both an HR professional and legal counsel to confirm your methods do not violate any legal requirements or discrimination laws

Who should you screen?

• All applicants (both employee and volunteer who will have positions that will have contact with adults
• For those who do not have work history and criminal background information available, you may want to consider a more in-depth application and interview process
• For anyone who may have more autonomy as an employee or volunteer, utilize a rigorous screening process
• Make no exceptions (previous employees/volunteers or people you may know)

Important strategies to consider:

1. Education about your organization and its adult-protection policies
2. Written application
3. Personal interview
4. Reference checks
5. Criminal background checks
6. Cross check against internal records
7. Internet search

Building Block Two

Guidelines on interactions between individuals

As an adult serving organization, you should strive to ensure the safety of all of the interactions between the adults that you serve and your employees and volunteers. Their dealings with each other should be nothing less that cordial and professional.

Your guiding principles on how this will be accomplished will be primarily determined by your organization’s mission and activities but should aim to achieve a balance between encouraging positive interactions and discouraging inappropriate and harmful interactions. Your interaction guidelines will in all likelihood be different for one-on-one activities vs. group activities. Your strategies should be tailored to the age, maturity, and cultural context of the population being served.

Critical strategies:

• Identify appropriate/inappropriate/harmful behaviors – appropriate and positive interactions among adults and your employees and volunteers are essential in supporting a holistic and nurturing environment. It helps the adults you serve feel valued and provides the caring connection so needed in providing a protective atmosphere.

• Ratios of employees/volunteers to adult – the goal in setting ratios is to ensure the safety of the adults you serve. There is no standard ratio for every situation; you will have to do this by determining the mental status of the adult in conjunction with the risk of the activity.

• Be cognizant of (and as possible, limit) one-on-one interactions – as your organizational mission and adult care needs allow. Minimizing one on one care in private rooms is important to avoiding accusations of inappropriate behavior.

• Assess the risks of interactions between adults – your organization needs to assess interactions among adults in addition to monitoring interactions between employees and volunteers and adults. Identify any situations where unmonitored adults could potentially abuse other adults. Additionally, develop guidelines to deal with bullying and sexual abuse so that positive exchanges can be promoted while at the same time recognizing that some interactions are unacceptable.

• Be aware of out-of-organization contact – be aware of interactions that occur between adults under your care and your employees and volunteers outside of the scope of your organization, as well as interactions with people not affiliated with your organization. Develop a system to monitor the comings and goings of all adults who enter and leave your facility (such as signing in and out).
• Caregiver information and permission – your organization should obtain address and contact information for adults, relatives, and caregivers. This information should NOT be released to unauthorized individuals. You should also obtain permission from the adult’s caregivers for permission to participate in activities such as field trips, late-night activities and away trips. Inform caregivers about the itinerary of each trip and allow the caregivers to have input on what activities they are comfortable with for the adults they are responsible for.

• Responsibility for adults – your organization should define when it is (and when it is not) responsible for the adults under its supervision along with when caregivers are responsible. Communicate this with caregivers and require they sign an acknowledgement that they have read and understand the policy.

• Identify additional ways to monitor interactions to prevent isolation – consider implementing methods such as a buddy system to prevent isolation and peer monitoring.

Building Block Three

Monitoring behavior

Any planned approach towards preventing elder abuse should strive to prevent, recognize, and quickly respond to inappropriate and harmful behaviors and to bolster appropriate behaviors. The key to good monitoring involves witnessing interactions and responding fittingly. This includes elder-elder, adult and employee, and volunteer interactions. You should define areas for monitoring based on your organization’s activities and your organization’s mission. In order to do this, your organization should have already established interaction policies that have defined “the boundaries” so that you know when someone has gone beyond what is appropriate. Some of these potentially inappropriate behaviors might include showing favoritism, giving gifts, and seeking out time alone with elders.

Some steps you can take:

• Your organization must be prepared to respond to interactions.
  - Develop a monitoring protocol so that your employees and volunteers are clear about their roles and responsibilities. All of your employees and volunteers should understand how and be prepared to immediately respond to risky or inappropriate behaviors, potential boundary circumstances, and to possible risk situations.
  - Enforce your protocols so that supervision redirects inappropriate actions towards promoting positive behaviors. As defined, supervision should also deal with and report inappropriate and harmful behaviors as necessary.

• Roles and responsibilities. All of your employees and volunteers should be held responsible for monitoring behavior and interactions within your organization. Everyone should know how and what to monitor. This can be defined within each job and volunteer description by specifying what they need to do from the beginning and your training needs to include how this is to be done.

• Organization reporting structure
  - Your organization should have a clearly defined reporting structure so that everyone knows who they should contact if they believe they have observed an inappropriate or harmful behavior.
  - Your employees and volunteers should be required to immediately report any behaviors that have crossed the line.
  - Your reporting system should have both direct-line reporting and alternative reporting for any incidents that involve the observing employee or volunteer’s direct supervisor.
  - Foster an environment that encourages everyone to question any confusing or uncertain behaviors and practices.

• Observation methods and contact with employees/volunteers
  - Utilize multiple monitoring methods to get a clear picture of how individuals within your organization are interacting with one another.
  - Use formal supervision that includes regular evaluations.
  - Use informal supervision that includes both random and regular observations and maintain frequent contact with employees and volunteers that interact with adults off-site.

• Documentation
  - Given the dynamic nature of most adult serving organizations, it is often a challenge to be sure adequate monitoring is occurring. Implement HR procedures that documents your monitoring has occurred. This emphasizes to employees and volunteers that it is an essential – and nonnegotiable – part of your organization’s elder abuse prevention initiatives.
    ○ Use written records
    ○ Provide reinforcement when good supervision occurs.
Building Block Four

Ensuring safe environments

Your organization should strive to keep the adults that you serve away from situations in which they are at an increased risk of abuse. Your environmental strategies will vary greatly depending on your organization and on whether or not you have a physical site – such as a day center or school, if you have multiple sites, and whether or not your space is leased – such as gathering and social locations. Regardless of the physical space, the risk of environment (your physical facilities and how they are arranged) should be considered. If your organization does not control the space it’s using, then back-up plans should also be used to ensure that monitoring is accomplished.

Some steps you can take to ensure safe environments:

- **Visibility**
  - Whenever you can build or utilize spaces that are open or observable to multiple people, you create facilities where people inclined towards abusive behaviors do not feel comfortable abusing. To increase visibility, consider:
    - Landscaping with open spaces without areas of concealment
    - Clear lines of sight throughout
    - Having windows in doors
    - Instituting a “no closed door” policy (as much as your mission will allow)
    - Having bright lighting in all areas

- **Privacy when toileting, showering and changing clothes**
  - As much as is feasible based on your organization’s mission, you should develop policies and procedures for reducing risk during activities such as toileting, showering and changing clothes that not only reduce the risk of employee and volunteer abuse but also the risk of inappropriate or harmful contact among elder adults.

- **Access control**
  - Your organization should know who is present (and not present) at all times.
  - Develop policies and procedures for admitting and releasing employee and volunteers and adults served entering or leaving your building so their whereabouts are always known.
  - Also develop policies and procedures for monitoring which people outside of your organization are allowed in and under what circumstances.

- **Off-site activity guidelines**
  - Your organization should define and communicate its on-site and off-site physical boundaries.
  - Decide and communicate when and where your organization is responsible for the adults it serves. This is particularly important in a multi-organization facility and on field trips.
  - Develop environmental policies for field trips and any other off-site activities, such as how to handle off-site bathroom breaks and any use of public transportation.
    - Your organization should also define who is responsible for transporting adults to and from regular activities and any special events – such as field trips.
    - Decide how you will answer the following questions:
      - When is your organization responsible for transportation?
      - When are caregivers responsible?
      - Can an adult ride in a car with an employee or volunteer? If yes, under what circumstances? Can they be alone in a car with an employee or volunteer?
      - What are pick-up procedures and the end of a day or the event?

- **Additional steps to consider:**
  - **Territoriality** – the goal here is to send a message that your program is cohesive and not susceptible to threats. You take responsibility for the area you manage and have programs in place to protect all those being served.
  - **Monitoring devices** – by using devices such as video cameras you send the message that there is an oversight function behind the monitoring devices. When using these, be sure to have the infrastructure in place to support that implied promise.
Building Block Five –

Responding to inappropriate behavior, breaches in policy, and suspicions of abuse

The ultimate goal of your abuse prevention strategy should be to prevent abuse from ever occurring. This can be bolstered by having methods in place to quickly (and appropriately) respond to any (a) inappropriate or harmful behaviors, (b) infractions of your elder abuse prevention policies, and (c) evidence or allegations of elder abuse. In order to do this, your organization must clearly convey what it and its employees and volunteers need to do if policies are violated or if elder abuse occurs. It is wise to partner with an attorney to ensure your reporting policy is appropriate and in line with any related legal requirements.

Some strategies you can utilize:

- **Determine what to report internally and what to report to authorities.**
  - It is often very difficult to determine the balance between being watchful and protective of the adults you serve and being so much on alert that the positive parts of your program (such as the valuable relationships between your employees and volunteers and elders) are lost. Finding this balance involves recognizing the pressure between under-reacting and over-reacting. By determining how to properly respond by developing your policies – before any inappropriate behavior occurs - you can set reasonable expectations for responding. To do this:
    - Define the range of appropriate, inappropriate and harmful behavior.
    - Outline what behaviors you will respond to within your organization and what behaviors will be reported to authorities.
  - Directly act on any breach of your organization’s abuse prevention policy. The consequences of violating policies should be specific and violations should be addressed without delay. However, if actual abuse is expected, it should be reported to authorities immediately.
  - Report when an employee or volunteer witnesses or learns about abuse of an elder by any of the following:
    - A volunteer or employee
    - Another elder within your organization
    - Someone outside of your organizations – such as a caregiver or relative
  - Tailor strategies and policies for each type of abuse and identify to whom the reports are made. This can vary by state, so consult experts such as police, your local rape crisis center, etc., to assure you are incorporating any applicable state guidelines in your policies.

- **Reporting process**
  - If evidence of elder abuse has surfaced or an allegation has been made, a formal report needs to be made in accordance with your policies. Learn who must report and to whom to report. Again, it may be wise to consult with an attorney to assure you are in compliance with any state legal requirements. In most situations, the head of your organization may be professionally and legally accountable for ensuring that all cases of abuse are reported to proper authorities.
  - Every state in the U.S. has at least one toll-free elder abuse hotline or helpline for reporting elder abuse. In most states, the first agency to respond will be Adult Protective Services. Their website (and link to your state resources) can be found at the end of this article.
  - You can also either call the Elder Abuse Hotline at 1-800-677-1116, or visit their website http://www.ncea.aoa.gov/Stop_Abuse/Get_Help/State/index.aspx They can help you by referring you to a local agency.
  - Consult with protective service agencies, law enforcement, and/or elder advocacy centers as many of them work with law enforcement, social workers, lawyers and mental health professionals to determine how (or if) reporting an allegation is appropriate and who should most appropriately conduct the investigation.

- **Internal records**
  - In some instances, your organization should not investigate an allegation of abuse in lieu of reporting them to the authorities. Even so, you should develop a system to track allegations and suspicions of abuse.
  - Include both physical and sexual abuse as categories on your general incident reporting forms for physical injuries. These reports should be completed by the employees or volunteers who first learn of the abuse either through hearing an allegation or making an observation.
  - The appropriate supervisor should then review the general incident reporting forms.
  - Refer abuse reports to a higher-level individual for the purposes of doing an incident review to examine your organizations procedures to determine what went wrong and how a similar situation can be prevented in the future. (Was a portion of a policy not followed? Can a policy be modified to prevent another occurrence?)
  - Record the resolutions of the abuse cases.
• Confidentiality policy
- Because of the potential sensitive nature of abuse cases, your organization should decide in advance what information remains private and what information can be made public.
- Ensure your confidentiality is consistent with any state legal requirements.
- Decide whether to inform the community that an allegation has been made.
- Contain the names of the potential victims, the alleged perpetrator, and the people who made the report to the authorities.

• Strategy for responding to the press and the community
- Your organization should decide on how (and when) it will respond to the press and the community before an allegation has been made.
- Assign a spokesperson for answering questions and inquiries.
- Train your employees and volunteers on how to deal with the press and community if appropriate. (They can refer them to your designated spokesperson.)

• Employment/continuation of association with alleged offender
- Remember that an allegation of abuse does not equate to guilt. The person alleged to have engaged in abusive behavior should not be labeled as an offender or abuser. However, once a suspicion or allegation has been communicated, it needs to be reported to the authorities, and your organization must take certain steps to protect the elder adults under its care.
  - A decision must be made whether to suspend employment or volunteer privileges.
  - Suspend employment or volunteer status immediately after reporting the abuse or put the alleged offender on probation until the case is resolved legally. Have an appeal process in which people found not guilty of perpetration in court may apply to return to their former positions in the organization.
  - Develop policies on how to deal appropriately and responsibly with alleged or convicted offenders if your organization decides that it may not be appropriate to revoke employment. Because these organizations need to manage circumstances in which alleged victims and offenders may be together, a well-constructed policy can help deal with this difficult situation.
  - Require limited access agreements in which alleged or convicted offenders can attend an activity or a worship service or other event that does not involve the victim. These individuals may also be required to attend permitted services and activities with a “buddy” or another adult who has agreed to stay with them at all times.
  - Require informed supervision. Make sure at least one staff member is informed of the abuse and is instructed to supervise vigilantly the accused adult or volunteer in his or her interaction with the program and/or organization.

• Additional steps you can take:
- Employ restorative practices such as providing support for the victims and their families to help them cope with the abuse.
- Adapt strategies to demonstrate that steps are being taken to deal appropriately with the situation such as providing support groups and having forums to discuss the topic and to answer questions.

Building Block Six
Training about abuse prevention
The quality of your elder abuse prevention program will only be as good as the knowledge and proficiency of your staff and volunteers. This will be a reflection of the effectiveness of the training your provided and how well your program fits in with your other strategies.

Your abuse prevention training program should be integrated into your organization
1. Your training content should be modeled by everyone in your organization - from top management to employees and volunteers
2. Your performance measures (and evaluations) should be reflective of the abuse training content
3. Blend together elements of your mission and philosophy statements with your abuse prevention training
4. Your training program should create an environment where trainees feel comfortable in raising questions and concerns. Your organization should be receptive to questions so that you can reduce barriers for employee and volunteers to coming forward, reporting and being proactive about preventing and responding to elder abuse.
5. To ensure that any communications about abuse are communicated consistently, designate an individual (or a group) point of contact for concerns or questions.

6. Make it perfectly clear that everyone is responsible for preventing and responding to elder abuse.

**Who needs training? What should training include?**

**1. Employees and volunteers**

a. This will in all likelihood include individuals with access or supervision over the elder adults being served, people responsible for enforcing abuse prevention policies, and management and leaders within your organization along with new and current employees and volunteers.

b. Your employees and volunteers should be trained on all of the policies and procedures your organization has chosen to adopt.

c. In order to prevent elder abuse, your employees and volunteers need to know general information about it. Provide a definition of elder abuse and the continuum of appropriate to inappropriate and harmful behaviors as defined by your organization.

d. Describe risk and protective factors for victims and perpetrators.

e. Emphasize the importance of preventing elder abuse and that they are an integral part of your organization’s efforts to create a safe and respectful environment.

f. Your organization may also want to train employees and volunteers on how to properly conduct themselves with the elder adults served as well as with the other employees and volunteers.

g. Help your employees and volunteers understand that elder adult serving organizations such as your exist in order to provide a healthy and safe environment. Help them learn to maintain a balance between providing a nurturing and caring environment and working to prevent elder abuse.

h. Train your employees and volunteers so they are able to respond appropriately and report allegations, suspicions, and disclosures the authorities as defined in your organizations policies.

i. Your employees and volunteers need to know whether they are immune from civil or criminal liability when making a required or authorized report of known or suspected abuse. Check with the laws governing your organization to find out if they are immune and share this information with your employees and volunteers.

j. Reassure your employees and volunteers that they will be supported by your organization and your management in their efforts to protect the elders under your care.

**2. Caregivers**

a. The two critical areas to convey to caregivers in elder care are:

i. Information specific to elder abuse

ii. Information about your organization’s elder abuse prevention policies and procedures

b. You should consider providing training about:

i. What constitutes elder abuse and the continuum of inappropriate to inappropriate to harmful behaviors

ii. The warning signs and what to watch for

iii. How to talk about abuse

iv. Their responsibility to respond if they witness or hear about inappropriate behaviors

v. Where to go for help

vi. What resources are available

c. You should inform caregivers about your organization:

i. What it does (i.e. mission)

ii. What policies and procedures are in place to prevent abuse

iii. How responsibilities are delineated for the caregiver and your organization (i.e. define who is responsible for transportation)

iv. Encourage them to participate and attend sessions as they can so they know that policies are in place to protect their elders

**3. Elder adults**

a. Understanding that a broad spectrum of elder adults needs may be served at any one time, elder abuse training and education should be cognizant of and appropriate to the adults developmental, emotional and skill level.

i. As in all previously mentioned training, general information should be provided about abuse and what constitutes appropriate, inappropriate, and harmful behaviors.

ii. Convey to them the importance of reporting abuse and to whom they can report anything inappropriate or harmful.

iii. Reach out to other organizations that have already created personal safety programs for advice and lessons learned as you are implementing your own program.

iv. Help elders help themselves with strategies such as the bystander approach they can use to intervene or tell someone whenever they see harmful interactions occurring.
Conclusion
Implementing any abuse preventions program and making the organizational changes necessary to protect the adults you serve are not easy undertakings. Your organization needs to have a strong infrastructure to serve as the foundation in order for you to take on the varied strategies you will need for such a program.

Steps you can take:
• Create an open, safe environment (to the extent that your mission allows) where employees and volunteers feel comfortable discussing abuse.
• Set clear goals for your abuse prevention program so you can identify the most appropriate strategies, policies, or practices to adopt.
• Create a process for developing your program (such as):
  - Obtain buy-in from all levels of your organizations
  - Gather a group of stakeholders to develop the policy
  - Review and approve the policy (assuring all applicable laws are met)
  - Adopt and Implement the policy
  - Measure your success and track any abuse allegations
  - Track outcomes
  - Regularly evaluate your program to determine if your goals are being met.
  - Make changes/adaptations to your program based on your evaluations.

Resources:
“Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations”
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

“Elder Maltreatment Prevention”
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
http://www.cdc.gov/features/elderabuse/

“Elder Abuse and Neglect”
Warning Signs, Risk Factors, Prevention, and Help
HELPGUIDE.org
http://www.helpguide.org/mental/elder_abuse_physical_emotional_sexual_neglect.htm

“Preventing the Abuse of Elders”
NCPEA – National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse
http://www.preventelderabuse.org/

National Center on Elder Abuse
Department of Health and Human Services
http://www.ncea.aoa.gov

NAPSA
National Adult Protective Services Association
http://www.napsa-now.org/get-help/help-in-your-area/