[Date]

Dear [Rabbi, Rev., Dr., Fr., Imam, Sr]:

We have tremendous respect for your faith community’s support of and concern for the safety, dignity, and autonomy of older men and women. We, too, are concerned about the wellbeing of our community’s older adults. Right now, these older adults need help. Every year, 11% of older Americans experience elder abuse,1 which includes willful abandonment or neglect as well as physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual, and financial abuse.

Elder abuse devastates older adults. Because elder abuse is most often perpetrated by family members, it undermines families and weakens communities. In addition, elder abuse and self-neglect shorten the lives of older adults2 and undermine or destroy quality of life.

Many elder abuse victims and survivors turn to their faith communities for help. This may mean talking to a member of the choir, mentioning the abuse to a long-time friend from the women’s or men’s group, or asking clergy or other leaders for help. For many older victims, faith is an invaluable resource, a pillar of identity and community, and a critical element in options, decisions, and healing.

As a clergyperson, faith leader, parish nurse, or member of a faith community, you know older members and their families, visit nursing homes, homes, and hospitals, and are in a unique position to identify elder abuse. You may be the first person to notice something amiss in the life of an older adult because you know him or her so well. You may notice something during a home or care facility visit that raises concerns, or you may notice that an older individual who used to attend services regularly is now sporadic or absent. An older victim might ask you for help because you have been present and helpful during other life crises. In any of these scenarios, you are on the front lines in responding to elder abuse.

[Insert information here about your agency and the work you are doing in your local community for elder abuse victims.]

We have just received newly available resources that we hope will support you as you recognize and respond to victims and survivors of elder abuse. These materials are called “Where Faith and Safety Meet: Faith Communities Respond to Elder Abuse.”3

These materials are designed specifically for faith community leaders and members. The goal is to provide information that will enable you to:

* Recognize the signs of elder abuse,
* Offer support, information, and referrals to victims and survivors,
* Know where to turn for assistance.

We have enclosed these resources for you, and we hope to discuss ways we can partner with you to provide support to elder abuse victims and survivors in your faith community. These victims and survivors have many complex needs. A partnership between our agency and your faith community can help them find safety and supportive community services.

We will be in contact in the next few days to schedule an appointment at your convenience. We look forward to speaking with you.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

[your agency representative]

*“”. . . during a trauma, victims are five times more likely to seek the aid   
of clergy than any other professional. Clergy are people they know and trust.” 4*

Citations

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

2 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.

3 National agencies, Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership and the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life, have collaborated to develop resources that support faith communities and service providers through Grant No. 2008-TA-AX-K052 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

4 Helen P. Bradley is Director of the Victim-Witness Assistance Program in Chatham County, Georgia. Georgia Commission on Family Violence and Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2009 Georgia Domestic Violence Fatality Review Annual Report, p. 33.