

# Where Faith and Safety Meet: Faith Community and Service Provider Partnerships to Strengthen Support for Elder Abuse Victims and Survivors

By Bonnie Brandl, National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life  
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**B**onnie Brandl and Deb Spangler of the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life and Anne Marie Hunter and Alyson Morse Katzman of Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence have collaborated since 2008 on an Elder Abuse and Faith project funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women. The project involved focus groups with service providers and advocates, victims and survivors, and faith leaders, and subsequent resource development. Focus group participants articulated many perspectives on elder abuse, but they agreed on the common values that ground the work: safety, peace, hope, compassion, wellbeing, justice, and respect.

*This is the story of the collaboration and how it has moved the conversation about elder abuse and faith forward. Resources that have grown out of the partnership are reviewed. Also, the critical need for faith communities and service providers to work together is explored. The mandate to work with faith communities comes from victims and survivors, for whom faith is often a critical resource, a pillar of identity and community, and a key element in decision making and healing.*

## A Meeting of the Minds

My name is Bonnie Brandl, and I am the Director of the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life, a project of the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WCADV). I have worked in the battered women's movement for more than 25 years, and at WCADV for almost 20 years. I have specialized in working with older victims since 1994.

When I started working on elder abuse back in the mid-1990s, older survivors often talked about the importance of faith and spirituality in their lives. Many discussed how their faith leader or someone in their faith community was the only person they trusted. Others described how they reached out to clergy or lay leaders. While many older victims received help, some were frustrated or angry about the messages they received from their faith communities.

Over time, I learned that faith is critically important to the survivors of elder abuse. One survivor recently said to me, "What has been most violated are intangibles: love, faith, trust, and hope. The result is spiritual suffering and a serious sense of loss and powerlessness." However, I did not have regular opportunities to engage with faith leaders until I met Anne Marie.

I'm Anne Marie Hunter. I am the Director of Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence and I've been working at the intersection of faith and domestic violence since 1991. While Bonnie was providing national leadership on abuse in later life, or elder abuse, during the 1990s, I was serving as pastor of a small congregation in Massachusetts. During my six years as pastor, one of the older members of the congregation was shoved roughly to the floor by an adult grandson, who had broken into her apartment. Tragically, her wrist and two ribs were broken.

Another older parishioner disclosed 50 years of control, emotional and sexual abuse, and terror, but only after her husband died. Another older congregant was financially exploited by her nephew. These are just a few of the situations that I encountered.

Looking back on it now, I can see two important things. First, as pastor, I was perfectly located to detect elder abuse. I heard about what was going on in people's lives. I visited older congregants in homes, hospitals, nursing homes, and assisted living facilities. I knew when someone who had been consistently active in the community was suddenly absent, or when their habits suddenly changed. But I also realized that I was completely unprepared to respond effectively. I knew something about domestic violence, but nothing about elder abuse. Although I was seeing it, I couldn't name it. I didn't know how to respond or who to call for help.

When Bonnie and I met, we realized that we each held, for the other, the "missing puzzle piece." Bonnie knew the critical information about elder abuse that I, and all faith leaders, need in order to respond more effectively to the needs of older congregants. I brought an understanding of faith and spirituality to the table, as well as ideas about how faith communities might partner with advocates to support older victims and survivors.

## The Critical Need to Address Elder Abuse

Because elder abuse is an emerging issue, there are few studies of prevalence, incidence, or causation. However, what we do know is compelling. One 2009 study involving almost 6000 older adults who live in their homes and answered their phones found that 1 in 10 reported being abused in the prior year.<sup>1</sup> They often identified the perpetrator as a spouse or partner, but offenders also included adult children, grandchildren, and others. Sometimes, there were multiple offenders.<sup>2</sup> A study by Dr. Mark Lachs found that older abuse victims were three times more likely to die prematurely than their counterparts who had not been abused.<sup>3</sup> The critical need for this work will increase over the next few decades as the population ages. The number of persons 65 or older was 37.3 million (12.4%) in 2006 and will increase to 71.5 million (20%) by 2030.<sup>4</sup>

Older Americans are a diverse group and will become increasingly so. Elder abuse affects men and women regardless of education, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, physical ability, activity level, language, or country of origin. Services for older adults must also take into account the spectrum of aging. While many older adults may be active, vibrant participants in their communities, others may be frail, have physical disabilities, cognitive challenges such as dementia, or health conditions. Social isolation, some illnesses, and disabilities that result from aging may make an older adult more vulnerable to abuse.

## A Working Definition of Elder Abuse

There is no universally accepted definition of elder abuse. Most definitions include physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, financial exploitation, and neglect. Some state laws also include abandonment and/or self-neglect. State statutes differ on the age at which one is considered an "elder."<sup>5</sup> Some definitions focus on abuse within ongoing relationships while others include self-neglect and "stranger crimes" such as financial scams. The term "abuse in later life" is sometimes used by domestic violence advocates as a subset of elder abuse, and is meant to denote those cases in which there is an ongoing relationship or expectation of

trust. Within the wider community, however, “abuse in later life” is not well understood.

We chose to focus on elder abuse perpetrated by a person with whom there is an ongoing relationship or an expectation of trust. The definition that we agreed to use is this:

Elder abuse occurs when an older adult is willfully neglected or abused. Elder abuse may be physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, spiritual, or financial. People who abuse older adults include family members, intimate partners, caretakers (paid or volunteer), friends, neighbors, bankers, lawyers, a person in a position of authority, or a person with whom there is an expectation of trust. Most abusers are intimate partners and family members, and most abuse happens in the home. There may be multiple abusers. Victims may live in private dwellings or in facility settings. The victims are primarily women, but men are also abused. Elder abuse usually occurs because the perpetrator wants to attain some benefit, such as money, a place to stay, free labor, access to prescription medication, or sexual gratification. The abuser may use isolation, threats, manipulation, violence, or other tactics of control.

### Older Victims Need Domestic and Sexual Violence Services

In any effective community-based response to elder abuse, the role of domestic and sexual violence service providers is critical. Because the dynamics of power and control are often present later in life, services such as hotlines, emergency housing, legal advocacy, safety planning, individual counseling, support groups, and other services provided by domestic and sexual violence programs can make a significant difference in the lives of victims. There are no other agencies that offer the same array of services or perspective. Services that investigate abuse but do not include an analysis of power and control may miss an important piece of the picture.

Unfortunately, many older victims do not seek services. They may consider domestic or sexual violence something that affects only young people. They may be unable to access services due to physical or mental conditions. They may not know about services, or they may be unwilling to seek help. They may have difficulty relating to young shelter staff, participating in programs that prioritize child care or job training, or coping with a shelter stay if there are many children present. They may be protecting family members. They may have religious or faith-based concerns that preclude reaching out for help.

### A Victim-Centered Approach

For any victim across the lifespan, a victim-centered approach is most effective and empowering. Listening to victims, focusing on their strengths, challenges, and needs, and offering options is an excellent framework for providing services to older survivors as well. An empowerment approach that focuses on what the survivor is doing well and her natural support system can help the survivor restore control over her life, break out of the isolation, and improve her quality of life. For many older victims, the faith community is an important facet of their natural support system.

### Faith and Elder Abuse: Bridging the Divide

Faith community affiliation is significant for many Americans,<sup>6</sup> and faith communities are already being called upon to respond to

violence against women. The 2009 *Georgia Domestic Violence Fatality Review* comments: “. . . 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.”<sup>7</sup> A 2003 study of Canadian women suggests that older survivors are particularly likely to be faith affiliated and to turn to faith communities for help: An Ontario study of the shelter needs of older Canadian women found that older women would seek help from a place of worship if they experienced abuse. Thirty-three percent of respondents under the age of 76 identified a place of worship, compared with 52% of those over 76-years-old.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, faith leaders may not always know how to respond effectively. They may minimize the violence, silence or blame the victim, or suggest dangerous interventions (such as couple’s counseling). By developing partnerships with local faith communities, advocates gain opportunities to provide the education and resources that faith community leaders need to respond effectively and make referrals. Service providers gain critical information about the communities they serve, improve access to and effectiveness of services, and strengthen a multidisciplinary response. Survivors receive the faith-based support and community referrals they need to embrace both faith and safety. Podnieks says of faith communities: “this important social support for seniors is not well tapped.”<sup>9</sup>

One strength of the faith community lies in the connections among members and leaders. Both clergy and lay leaders visit homes, nursing homes, hospitals, and assisted-living centers regularly, and know older members well. How many survivors could be heard, supported, and referred for services if faith community members and leaders knew what to look for?

But the most important reason for including faith communities and leaders in responses to elder abuse comes from survivors themselves. During the course of this project, we talked to survivors to gather their input and wisdom. They told us that the abuse affects them on all levels: body, mind, and spirit, and that faith is critical to their identity and healing. One survivor said, “Wherever clergy are trained, abuse should be at the top of the list.” The mandate from survivors is clear.

Some of the reasons that faith is so important to victims and survivors have to do with the nature of abuse itself. While abuse isolates victims and survivors, faith or spirituality can connect them to their community, history, family, traditions, language, etc. Abuse is “crazy-making,” and victims sometimes feel off-balance or disoriented. Faith can help keep a victim grounded and oriented by marking particular directions, seasons, times of day, and traditions that are the same today, tomorrow, and forever. Survivors lose so much: home, family, friends, jobs, money, life, freedom, relationships. Faith may provide strength and resources that the survivor carries within her. Faith may be the one thing she has left. Faith may help her grieve and heal.

Of course, not everyone is affiliated with a faith community. However, all survivors need to be heard and affirmed, and will struggle with issues such as suffering, justice, healing, wholeness, safety, forgiveness, grief, new beginnings, and peace. All are searching for the love, trust, and hope that the victim mentioned earlier described as violated.

Whatever their faith, language, or culture, many older victims of abuse agree that faith is critical to their identity, their understanding of abuse, their decisions, and their healing. As a

result and as Podnieks states: “Faith communities can play a critical role in the prevention of elder abuse and neglect by fostering heightened public awareness of elder mistreatment, as well as providing services to abused elders in the community.”<sup>10</sup>

## Faith Community Partnerships

Partnerships between faith communities and service providers can be helpful in many ways.

- Intervention can be more effective. One domestic violence service provider called Safe Havens for help after they interviewed their clients and discovered that the most prevalent reason for not following up on safety plans was faith considerations.
- Intervention can happen earlier. Faith leaders are seeing things that concern them long before police are called or the situation is in crisis.
- Survivors have an additional avenue to learn about and access services. One rabbi not only referred a victim to the local shelter, but brought her kosher food every day.
- Survivors have an additional avenue for healing.
- Faith communities are a good place for education and prevention. Heightened community awareness could lead to more support for the agency and for survivors.
- Service providers have another way to reach victims in rural, low-income, immigrant and refugee, religious and ethnic minority, and other underserved communities.

We’re not the first ones to think of this, of course. As one advocate pointed out, “The faith community can be huge in addressing [abuse]. We just need more time, more money, and less stigma.” We can’t hand out money or time, but we have been working over the past two years to develop resources that we hope will save service providers and advocates some of both!

## Where Faith and Safety Meet: Faith Communities Respond to Elder Abuse

We’ve put all the resources in a toolkit called “Where Faith and Safety Meet: Faith Communities Respond to Elder Abuse.” It can be downloaded from the Safe Havens website ([www.interfaithpartners.org](http://www.interfaithpartners.org)) or the NCALL website ([www.ncall.us](http://www.ncall.us)). Or, you can contact Safe Havens (617-654-1820 or [info@interfaithpartners.org](mailto:info@interfaithpartners.org)) and we’ll send you a copy. The toolkit includes resources for service providers and faith community leaders.

## Resources for Advocates and Service Providers

For advocates and service providers, we have provided support regarding faith community outreach. We’ve developed two checklists that are inspired by the bestselling book *The Checklist Manifesto*, by Dr. Atul Gawande.<sup>11</sup> The first checklist includes things you will want to consider before you begin. This is the time to inventory and learn about your local faith communities.

We’ve also developed a checklist for a first visit. After you have made the appointment, arrive well prepared to state how faith community leadership is critical to your work. One hospital training about domestic violence was an overwhelming success because it said to faith community leaders: “your work is as important to the healing of our patients as our work.”

Bring resources, but also arrive prepared to listen. The goal is a deep and mutually respectful partnership. This is long-term work that begins with respect. Although they may not have received training about elder abuse, many faith leaders are credentialed and well-regarded leaders. They know their congregants and bring invaluable context and history. Honor the community connections, expertise, and credibility that they bring to the table.

The toolkit also includes an outreach guide. Building partnerships with faith communities is rewarding, but it can be challenging as well. Most faith leaders, like most people in the general population, have not learned about abuse. They are also, like advocates, very busy. We’ve listed challenges service providers may encounter, and strategies that may address those challenges.

The partnerships that service providers build with local faith communities mirror the partnership that is the foundation of this project. We had to learn to trust one another. We had to learn about each other’s work and perspective. We had to learn a common language. It’s been an amazing journey of growth and learning. Both service providers and faith leaders hold critical pieces to the wider puzzle of keeping older adults safe. We need each other! The better able we are to work together, the safer victims and survivors will be.

## Resources for Faith Community Leaders and Members

We’ve also developed resources for faith leaders and faith-based organizations. The first is a letter that introduces the faith-based resources. This letter is downloadable from our websites, and service providers can edit it to fit their community, add their contact information and a list of their services, and print it on their stationery.

The faith-based resources in the toolkit represent three levels of depth and complexity. On the most basic level, we developed a bookmark to make the essential facts and resources on elder abuse widely available. We’ve had lots of these printed, so hand them out liberally.

The next resource is a brochure for faith leaders that explains what elder abuse is, includes some “red flags” to look out for, suggests appropriate responses, and, again, gives resources. There is room on the brochure to put a sticker with local contact information.

Finally, we developed a 24-page booklet, entitled “Where Faith and Safety Meet: Faith Communities Respond to Elder Abuse.” This is meant for faith leaders who may be responding to an individual victim or addressing elder abuse within the congregation and community. Included are warning signs, how to find out more, safe and effective responses, and places to learn more and turn for help. We have also included basic and necessarily general information about mandated reporting, safety planning, and hotlines and referrals. We’ve asked faith leaders to work closely with local service providers on questions about reporting and safety.

Faith communities and faith leaders are, like everyone else, on a continuum when it comes to understanding and responding to elder abuse. At one end, there are those who have not received any training. On the other end, there are those who are already leaders in the community in responding to elder abuse. Everyone is somewhere on that continuum. The point is not to judge, but to provide the skills, support, and resources to move forward. It is

the “empowerment model” writ large. The partnerships we develop can help keep elder abuse victims and survivors safe.

#### Author’s Note

Bonnie Brandl is the Director of the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life, a project of the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence in Madison, Wisconsin. Anne Marie Hunter is founder and Director of Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence in Boston, Massachusetts. This innovative partnership has been funded by a grant from the Department of Justice’s Office on Violence Against Women.

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<sup>1</sup> Acierno, R., Hernandez-Tejada, M., Muzzy, W., & Steve, K. U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice. (2009). *National elder mistreatment study* (NCJ 226456). Rockville, MD: NCJRS Photocopy Services.

<sup>2</sup> Acierno, R., Hernandez-Tejada, M., Muzzy, W., & Steve, K. U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice. (2009). *National elder mistreatment study* (NCJ 226456). Rockville, MD: NCJRS Photocopy Services.

<sup>3</sup> Lachs, M., Williams, C., O’Brien, S., Pillemer, K., Charlson, M. (1998). The mortality of elder mistreatment. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 280(5): 428-432. doi: 10.1001/jama.280.5.428.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration on Aging. (2011, June). *Projected Future Growth of the Older Population*. Retrieved from [http://www.aoa.gov/AoARoot/Aging\\_Statistics/future\\_growth/future\\_growth.aspx#aging](http://www.aoa.gov/AoARoot/Aging_Statistics/future_growth/future_growth.aspx#aging).

<sup>5</sup> While state statutes may define elder abuse as starting at age 60 or 65, domestic violence service providers often consider women over 50 eligible for elder abuse services. This is because service providers have found that women 50 and above often have difficulty accessing or benefitting from services that have been developed to respond to the needs of younger survivors.

<sup>6</sup> Of study participants, 78.4% identify as Christian, 1.7% Jewish, 0.7% Buddhist, 0.6% Muslim, 0.4% Hindu, 2.8% other faiths (including Unitarian Universalist, New Age, and Native American), and 16.1% unaffiliated (The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. (2008, February). *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey - Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic*. Retrieved from: <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>).

<sup>7</sup> Georgia Commission on Family Violence and Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence. (2009). *2009 Georgia Domestic Violence Fatality Review Annual Report*. Retrieved from: <http://gcadv.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Fatality-Review-Annual-Report-20092.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Podnieks, Elizabeth, EdD, RN and Wilson, Sue, PhD. (2003). Elder abuse awareness in faith communities: findings from a Canadian pilot study. *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect*, 15(3-4), 121-135. doi: 10.1300/J084v15n03\_08.

<sup>9</sup> Podnieks, Elizabeth, EdD, RN and Wilson, Sue, PhD. (2003). Elder abuse awareness in faith communities: findings from a Canadian pilot study. *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect*, 15(3-4), 121-135. doi: 10.1300/J084v15n03\_08.

<sup>10</sup> Podnieks, Elizabeth, EdD, RN and Wilson, Sue, PhD. (2003). Elder abuse awareness in faith communities: findings from a Canadian pilot study. *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect*, 15(3-4), 121-135. doi: 10.1300/J084v15n03\_08.



Since 2003, The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) has been extremely fortunate to work with [The Body Shop](#) on their *Stop Violence in the Home* campaign. This partnership has created awareness, raised critical program funds for NCADV, and built partnerships between local domestic violence programs and The Body Shop stores throughout the country. Those local partnerships have also raised funds for direct services and provided donated products for residents of emergency shelters. To date, over **\$1.5 million** dollars has been raised through their efforts. Ask for the Stop the Violence in the Home products in your local Body Shop and help continue the support.



The mission of the [Makers of Memories](#) Foundation is to bring positive, transformational change to children who experience domestic violence.

Makers of Memories is partnering with NCADV for Congressional Hearing on The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children this October on Capitol Hill. The hearing will include briefing papers and testimony from leading experts who will educate members of Congress and their staff about the many ways that domestic violence impacts the emotional, psychological, social, physical and cognitive development of children, with consequences that can last a lifetime.