

Diocese of Rapid City

Keeping God's Children Safe

A Safe Faith Environment Newsletter

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This month our focus is on those working with vulnerable adults.

The "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" advises that certain adults are also protected in the same manner as minors; it is not age as a criteria as much as the use of reason. The Diocese of Rapid City decided to include under this umbrella of protection, not only the young people and adults that are mentally challenged, but also adults that may be vulnerable to abuse from others due to physical, mental, and/or emotional occurrences. The diocese looks at vulnerable adults, and even temporarily vulnerable adults, to include: dependent adults, nursing home residents, hospital patients, homebound or those recently bereaved, separated or divorced. Some people have asked to include others, such as returning Catholics that may be temporarily vulnerable adults in their spiritual life; there may be other times, other groups, that would be considered "vulnerable."

"I don't work with minor children; I only take communion to the homebound. Why do I have to take all this training?"

This question has been asked as the Rapid City Diocese promotes efforts to keep all vulnerable adults safe from abuse. In changing our diocesan program this year from a Safe Environment Program to a Safe FAITH Environment Program, questions have come forth, which is a welcoming sign. It is all a part of gaining an understanding of not only the program, but of our important role within it as a Catholic Christian.

Many of the goals presented in the Adult Safe Faith Environment Training apply not only to keeping young people (minors) safe, but also vulnerable adults, and truly in the end – all people; we are all God's children. What started with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in 2002 as an endless effort to stop sexual abuse of minors by priests and clergy, has become for us today not only this ongoing effort, but as Catholics, our duty to promote education and safety for all, and seek to stop all abuse.

ADVOCACY

In the diocesan Safe Faith Environment Training, the seven main themes of Catholic Social Teaching were presented: The Life and Dignity of the Human Person; The Call to Family, Community, and Participation; Solidarity; The Dignity of Work; Rights and Responsibilities; The Option for the Poor and Vulnerable; and Caring for God's Creation. While all seven are necessary components of our faith environment, several of these relate to all interactions one has with others, including vulnerable adults.



Those who come in contact with our vulnerable adults are asked to be an advocate for the people you visit! Use your senses:

- When you enter their home, room, space – What do you SEE? Is it quite different from the last time you were there? How does the individual appear? Do you see bruises, cuts, bandages? Do they move around as well?
- What do you HEAR? What do they hear? Any changes noticed since the last visit that they are having a more difficult time communicating, expressing their ideas, speech patterns? As you listen, what are they telling you about what has been happening since the last time you were there?
- What do you SMELL? Are there odors that may be gas leaks or sewer smells? Are there other bad odors that were not there before?

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Diocese of Rapid City Safe Environment home page:
www.rapidcitydiocese.org/WP/safe_environment_home

Our goal is to be committed to keeping vulnerable adults safe from harm and exploitation and to uphold their rights; that is, always acting in their best interests and with their consent.

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- Using your observation of their sense of TOUCH, are they comfortable? Do they keep moving, shifting, as if unsettled? Do they have a back or joints that are hurting that did not before, or increased pain levels?

Remember also from the training, the general signs of distress applies not only to young people, but also vulnerable adults. Signs one may notice include: expressing fears and anxieties, sleep related difficulties, personality/behavior changes, behavioral regression, loss of pleasure in enjoyable activities, bodily aches and pains, withdrawn, and difficulty concentrating.

Most often, one will find things are fine. If a time comes; if they tell us, or through our visit, we believe they have needs for assistance, what can we do? You can encourage them to contact the Adult Services and Aging through the Department of Social Services. You could carry cards that have that information and phone number with you on your visits. The case workers will need to visit with the adult to determine what services may be needed that they can provide. They also have listings of other resources in the community that may be available to assist them with their needs. The individual or the parish may have a contact number for a care taker, or family member that can be contacted. Share with them your concerns for their loved one, and offer them the contact information for the Adult Services and Aging.

As stated in the training, "It is not the assumption that we are all would-be perpetrators, but rather that we all could be rescuers of a child." Not our silence, but speaking up is how we may rescue another, including the vulnerable adult. Helen, my aunt's cousin and power of attorney, called me to relay that the nurses were saying my aunt was slipping and showing more dementia. I had visited her two weeks earlier over a weekend. Listening to the concern, along with my recent past experience of visiting my aunt, I asked Helen to visit with the doctor to review her medications – and please remind him that she was an adult weighing 98 pounds. An adjustment in the dosage of her medications was made, and soon she was improved and more alert. I am grateful Helen called and shared her concern!

Sometimes the awareness can enable one to help another by a suggestion. My father in his 90s, had difficulty calling long distance numbers. By the time it took him to look at the number, dial part of it, look back, dial some more numbers, the phone call had disconnected. Writing the names and numbers on a large poster board with a marker, and cutting the strips apart gave him back independence in this area. Now he can pull out the strip of the one he wants to call, concentrate on the one number and seeing it easily, is able to complete the call and visit his friends!

Everyone can relate how it is the little things that can upset us at the moment. In the same way, it is the little things done by a compassionate person that means the most to us when we are in need.

SAFETY

Just as we try to keep others safe, including our vulnerable adults, we must also feel and be safe. There may be times we encounter a situation, a person, or a request made by a person that makes us feel uncomfortable. It is not that one needs to be in real danger, but even uncomfortable about requests made by the one we are visiting. We are there to pray and offer the individual Holy Communion as a fellow parishioner. We may visit with the person and see how they are doing. Then we may be asked to stay longer, take the person to appointments, do errands, help in other ways. You do not need to feel obligated to do more than your purpose of the visit.

Again, remember the Adult Safe Faith Environment Training. The same things we learned to tell our young people apply to us as well. We need to listen to our "gut," our instincts; if we are uncomfortable, we need to leave and seek help. Explain to the individual that you are on a schedule and have others to see that are expecting you at a certain time. You may ask them if they have someone else they would like to contact to help them with other needs. You may offer the number for the Adult Services and Aging mentioned above to possibly help the individual.

We may need to talk to someone at the parish about our feelings and the situation; we can also inquire if there are resources to help the individual that the community can provide. You may prefer to go on visits as a pair, and not by yourself. The training talked of safety in numbers, and using caution in one-to-one contacts. A partner can give other perspectives and ideas for situations. The parish may consider establishing clearly defined expectations for the visits that may assist those in this ministry area. May we continue to work together for safety in all our faith environments!