Guidelines for Evolving Practice
Responding to the Victimization of Vulnerable Adults

The West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WVCADV) convened the Disability/Later Life Task Force in 2004 by combining efforts made through the WVCADV Disability and Later Life Advisory Councils (formed in 1999), and the WVCADV Access Workgroup (formed in 2001).

Disability/Later Life Task Force 2004 goals include:

Research – Explore what is working and not working in WV through Task Force discussions of scenarios and surveys to community members.

Analyze – Assess policy, practice and training issues from Task Force discussions, surveys and trainings.

Train – Host learning forums that address the basic dynamics of responding to vulnerable adults using the multidisciplinary team approach.

Recommend – Publish policy, practice, team development, public awareness and training guidelines for improving the WV response to the victimization of vulnerable adults.
Understanding the Victimization of Vulnerable Adults

“Vulnerable adults” are defined as people with disabilities and/or people in later life who are more at risk to victimization due to their age and/or disability. The definition affirms the autonomy of vulnerable adults while acknowledging that due to specific circumstances some adults require focused assistance in making informed decisions regarding their safety and wellbeing.

“Self-determination” is defined as the right to manage one's own affairs, make one's own judgments/decisions, take responsibility for one’s actions and provide for oneself with consideration of one’s capacity to do so.

“Victimization” includes intentional and harmful physical, emotional, psychological, sexual and financial abuse/exploitation done to a person. Exploitation includes exerting coercive control by using additional tactics of isolation, threats, intimidation, destruction and/or control of personal objects, use of children, and use of privilege. While many of these tactics are criminal acts, some are not but seen as a whole they contribute to a pattern of power and control over the person being victimized and are both physically and psychologically damaging.

A differentiated coordinated community response is necessary to address the victimization of vulnerable adults.

A coordinated community response is an organized systems’ response bringing together administrators, staff of a variety of agencies, community members and consumers to close the gaps in services, coordinate multiple interventions, evaluate intended and unintended consequences of interventions, and develop interagency agreements and protocols for responding to the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child victimization.

A differentiated response meaningfully responds to the safety of multiple victims within a family through a community system of services that encompass a range of voluntary and mandated interventions that are culturally competent, offered to victims respectfully and without blame, and available as soon as needs are identified.

“An effective response” empowers people to speak for themselves.

“Person-centered practice” respects the dignity of the individual and involves the individual in all aspects of decisions made about them.
**Action Vision**

**For Responding to the Victimization of Vulnerable Adults**

Provide multidisciplinary training on the mandates, policy, referrals, practice and goals for intervention with vulnerable adults to respond in a safe and effective way.

Develop methods to balance a person’s right to self-determination with professional mandates to report abuse and neglect of vulnerable adults.

Develop methods to educate the public on balancing a person’s rights to self-determination and societies responsibility to protect vulnerable adults.

Respond to vulnerable adults with respect and belief about their victimization. Consider their rights to make decisions even when capacity is questionable. Respect limitations and empower ability to engage in their own safety planning.

Focus accountability, responsibility and consequences of the abuse on the abuser—not the victim.

Seek guidance for assessing if abuse is occurring, the context of the abuse (i.e. domestic violence, self-neglect, financial abuse, etc) and how to respond in a way that effectively meets the needs of vulnerable adults.

Develop local differentiated coordinated community response teams that includes law enforcement, Adult Protective Services, domestic violence advocates, prosecutors, attorneys, medical staff, communities of faith, financial institutions, the business community, emergency services, community advocacy groups, senior centers, community services providers, and vulnerable adults to:

- Develop a coordinated response plan across disciplines for responding to vulnerable adults; and
- Discuss and develop policy/practice that facilitates a safe and effective criminal justice response and prosecution of crimes against vulnerable adults.

Utilize “person-centered practice” in policy development and daily practice when responding to vulnerable adults.

Respect others. Advocate with care. Incite hope.

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