



Healthy Relationships

Discussion Guides for Working with Adults with Disabilities

Mandatory Reporting

What is “Mandatory Reporting”?

Mandatory reporting refers to people in the community who are required by law to make an official report about potential abuse, neglect, or exploitation of **vulnerable adults**. Generally, this means any people who have direct access to older adults or adults with disabilities, including healthcare providers, nursing staff, mental healthcare providers, social service providers, teachers, or any residential facility staff or volunteers. Some professional roles, such as clergy or attorneys, are not considered mandatory reporters under certain circumstances^{1,2}.

Definition of “vulnerable adults”:

Someone 65 years or older, or

Someone 18 years or older who has a mental or physical disability that affects their ability to

- Protect themselves
- Perform activities of daily living
- Manage their own resources
- Understand the danger of being in an abusive situation³

State Requirements

Each state in the U.S. has its own definition and requirement regarding mandatory reporting⁴. In the state of Utah, anyone is expected to make a report if they have reason to believe someone is being or has been abused or neglected. This could include physical, sexual, verbal, or emotional abuse, caretaker neglect, self-neglect, or financial exploitation¹. **If there is reason to believe one or more types of mistreatment has taken place, a report should be made.** It is important to familiarize yourself with the laws and regulations of your own state, if you are outside of Utah.

When Should I Report Something?

A report should be made **immediately** when a person makes a discovery that suggests potential abuse or neglect. It is important to know that anyone who makes a report about abuse or neglect in good faith is protected from being sued or charged with a crime because of the report. Likewise, if a provider knowingly fails to make a report, there may be legal consequences¹.

How do you know if you have reason to believe abuse or neglect is happening? As you talk with a vulnerable adult, they may make comments that cause you to suspect abuse has happened, or there may be signs suggesting abuse that you can observe⁵.



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Signs of Abuse	
Physical or Sexual Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Multiple bruises, injuries, or broken bones with no explanation• Diminished self-esteem or self-determination• Withdrawn attitude
Emotional or Verbal Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Diminished self-esteem or self-determination• Withdrawn attitude
Caretaker Neglect: When the person responsible for providing basic care for a vulnerable adult fails to do so.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Abandoned or left unattended inappropriately• Dehydrated or malnourished• Inappropriate medication use (or lack of)• Lack of appropriate dress, personal aid items glasses, dentures), or personal hygiene
Self-Neglect: When a vulnerable adult is no longer able to take adequate care for themselves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dehydrated or malnourished• Inappropriate medication use (or lack of)• Lack of appropriate dress, personal aid items glasses, (dentures), or personal hygiene• Social isolation• Missing medical appointments
Financial Exploitation: Misuse of a vulnerable adult's financial resources or property.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unwanted sale of home or changes in will• Unwanted changes in control of finances• Insufficient funds for necessities or social activities• Home environment is not sufficient for needs• Personal items going missing• Overly expensive home repairs

How Should I Make A Report?

Reports about abuse, neglect, or financial exploitation are submitted to **Adult Protective Services** (APS) either by phone M-F 8am – 5pm at (800) 371-7897, or anytime using their [website](#). Reports can also be submitted to a peace officer or law enforcement agency, if needed, which would then send the report to Adult Protective Services. It is always preferable to contact APS directly.

Starting the Conversation

It may be difficult to talk about potential abuse or neglect with vulnerable adults. Here are some suggested questions or phrases to use, specifically when communicating with adults with disabilities ⁶.

- **Inform them of your role as a mandatory reporter:** “You have told me that someone is hurting you. Part of the law in Utah says that I cannot keep this a secret. I don’t have to tell anyone in your family, unless you want me to. I do have to tell Adult Protective Services. I will call them on the phone, and then also fill out



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a form on their website. You can be with me when I tell them, if you would like. I will tell them the same thing you told me.”

- **Let them know as much as you can about potential outcomes:** “After we tell Adult Protective Services, I don’t know what exactly will happen. Someone may want to talk to you more about what happened. That does not mean you’ve done anything wrong.”
- **Help them understand you can help them with the process and encourage them:** “I am proud of you for being brave enough to share this with me. Would you like me to help you [set up an appointment with your doctor, make a plan to get you safe, find some community resources to get more support, etc.]?”
- **Use a trauma-informed lens to communicate about their experience:** “This is not an easy thing to talk about. I want you to know that this is a safe space. You have not done anything wrong, and I am here to help you.”
- **Use clear and simple language that anyone can understand:** “When I say I must report this to APS, what I mean is I need to call an organization called Adult Protective Services, a group that helps investigate and support people when bad things happen. My job is to make a report and tell them what happened. Can you tell me how/when it started?”
- **Ask about the person you’re helping to build a connection and get a feel for their communication level and style:** “Tell me what your home is like? What are some things you enjoy doing?”
- **Avoiding leading questions or questions that you expect the answer to be yes repeatedly:** Instead of, “Did they hurt you?” you could ask, “How did you and your body feel when this happened?”

It can be challenging to be in a mandatory reporting position, but you have the ability to make people feel safer, prevent additional abuse from happening, and support the person who trusts you enough to tell you about a situation of concern.



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Sources

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Additional Resources

Utah Department of Health & Human Services, Division on Aging & Adult Services. *Questions*. <https://daas.utah.gov/questions/>

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