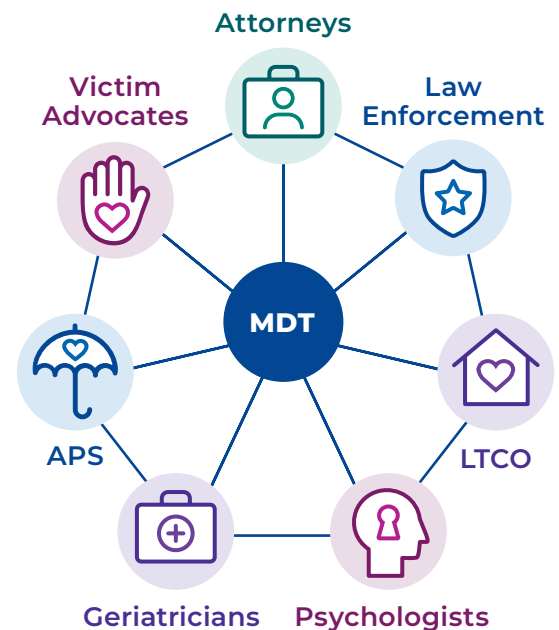


# Faith Communities and Multidisciplinary Teams

## Elder Abuse Multidisciplinary Teams

Elder abuse multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) are an evidence-based, interdisciplinary intervention to address cases of elder maltreatment. Professionals from different sectors facilitate case review, discussion, coordination, and resolution through regular meetings and shared insights. Participating MDT members discuss their respective recommendations for relief and collaboratively identify alternatives to optimize outcomes for elders who experience mistreatment. Team members vary based upon local community needs and available resources, but often include Adult Protective Services (APS), Long-Term Care Ombudsman (LTCO), victim advocates, law enforcement agencies, geriatricians, psychologists, and attorneys.



## Individualized Case Discussion

Usually, cases are brought to MDTs by agency members like APS, the LTCO, or law enforcement. While MDTs discuss issues involving older adults who have experienced abuse, the survivors themselves are typically not present at case discussions. As a result, their preferences and values are less likely integrated into MDT recommendations. Teams often respond to the imminent legal, social service, financial, and medical issues presented, with safety and protection at the foreground. Sometimes, these considerations do not correspond with survivor goals and wishes.



**Integrating the survivor's values and preferred remedies into case review, is a better practice for meaningful and potentially more durable case resolution. One way to facilitate this objective into the MDT framework is through alliances with faith communities.**

# Faith Communities and Multidisciplinary Teams

Over 85% of older adults are faith-affiliated, and many are deeply engaged in the lives of their congregations. The American Psychological Association reports that 50% of older adults are active in their faith communities on a weekly basis.<sup>1</sup> In many communities, faith is particularly central and vibrant, and faith leaders are deeply trusted.



**MDT alliances with faith communities may help to ensure that older adults receive comprehensive physical, emotional, social, and spiritual support.**

Faith communities can play a vital role in recognizing possible abuse, discussing suspected abuse with congregants, and providing information, support, spiritual guidance, and referrals to older survivors of abuse and their family/chosen family and friends. Faith supports may also provide a pathway for the survivor's voice to be heard through MDT partnerships.

## Faith in the Lives of Older Adults

When responding to people experiencing abuse, MDT members and service providers are encouraged to consider the survivor's culture and their support systems. For many older adults, that support system is their faith or spirituality and their faith community. For these people, faith is a critical resource, a pillar of identity and community, and an essential element in decision-making and healing. For them, faith cannot be "checked at the door."

Faith leaders and members of the congregation are often deeply respected and trusted. Trust is significant for those who have been survivors of abuse because the abuse itself, especially if it is perpetrated by a family member, teaches the survivor not to trust. Research shows that older adults are likely to seek help from a place of worship if faced with abuse.<sup>2</sup>

Because they have recurrent interactions with older adults over time, and visit in homes and long-term care facilities, faith leaders are well located to recognize and respond to older adults who are experiencing abuse.

As partners, faith communities can work with older people and MDTs to help ensure that case resolution supports the survivor's preferred goals while also meeting legal mandates. Given the trust that older people place in their faith leaders, the faith community can work collaboratively with survivors and MDTs to achieve better outcomes for those who have experienced mistreatment. Through faith partnerships, MDTs may gain credibility in the community, increase coordinated survivor access to services, and strengthen the effectiveness of the MDT response. Faith leaders can be important allies in elder mistreatment interventions.

For older adults who may be reluctant to engage with institutions and systems, faith communities can provide a trusted bridge to formal resources and supports. "Respondents, especially minorities, often indicated that their 'first stop' would be a member of the clergy if they were to discuss their [domestic violence] with anyone."<sup>3</sup>

1 American Psychological Association. (2016). Older adults' health and age-related changes. Retrieved August, 22, 2016.

2 Podnieks, E., & Wilson, S. (2012). Elder abuse awareness in faith communities: Findings from a Canadian pilot study. In *Elder Abuse* (pp. 121-135). Routledge.

3 Richard Beaulaurier, Laura Seff, and Frederick Newman, "Barriers to Help-Seeking for Older Women Who Experience Intimate Partner Violence: A Descriptive Model," *Journal of Women and Aging*, Vol. 20(3/4) 2008

# Looking at Elder Abuse through the Lens of Faith

For elder abuse survivors who are religious, spiritual, or affiliated with a faith community, faith can be a tremendous resource, and at times an obstacle to safety.



## Faith as a Roadblock

Silence within faith communities may isolate survivors. Expectations (for example, to not speak ill of anyone) within faith communities may impact an older adult's choices. Some survivors may continue living with an abuser or decide not to report abuse due to particular teachings of their faith. Most faith leaders have not received training on abuse and their responses to elder abuse may be uneven or uninformed. This may leave those experiencing abuse without sufficient guidance or support. In some cases, survivors may feel that they have to choose between their faith and their safety.



## Faith as a Resource

At the same time, faith can be a tremendous resource. A survivor's faith community may be an island of respite, a place of support, and a source of strength. In the midst of isolation, faith may help older adults experiencing abuse stay connected to their country and language of origin, family, traditions, culture, and values. In the midst of losses, faith may be one resource to hold onto and to help grieve the losses. In the midst of confusion, faith may help a survivor regain their balance and focus. In the midst of desolation, faith may give an older adult hope. Some survivors may return to a faith community or explore becoming involved as part of their healing process. Faith may be central to a survivor's response and recovery.<sup>4</sup>

## Partnering with Faith Communities



**Including faith leaders and faith communities in the response to elder abuse can minimize the ways in which faith is an obstacle to safety and maximize the ways in which faith is a resource.**

Faith communities bring significant community-based expertise to the table, just as the MDT does. By working together, they can increase safety for older adults who are experiencing abuse and more effectively respond to their complex needs. Part of partnering with faith leaders and communities includes providing an understanding of elder abuse, resources for faith leaders, and information about community services. Collaboration can improve the lives and outcomes of the many older people who experience abuse.

4 Satchell, J., Dalrymple, N., Leavey, G., & Serfaty, M. (2023). "If we don't forgive, it's like holding on to them": A qualitative study of religious and spiritual coping on psychological recovery in older crime victims. *Psychological trauma: theory, research, practice, and policy*.

## Tips for MDT Outreach to Local Faith Communities

- ☐ Learn about faith-based communities in your area. There may be houses of worship, denominational groups, ministerial alliances, and others who can get involved.
- ☐ Nurture partnerships with faith communities and increase access to the services of your agency and MDT.
- ☐ Meet every congregation and spiritual community “where they are” in understanding abuse. This will take time; trusting relationships don’t happen overnight.
- ☐ Educate members of faith communities that abuse happens in all communities – including faith communities. We all have a collective responsibility to help increase safety and wellbeing in the community.
- ☐ If meeting at the place of worship, observe appropriate etiquette. For example, do you need to remove your shoes or cover your head? If you are greeting the faith leader, is a handshake an appropriate form of greeting?
- ☐ Discuss faith communities’ concerns and ideas for partnership as well as your own.
- ☐ Work collaboratively with faith communities to support the objectives and values of survivors.



For more information, visit [Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership.](#)



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