

Safe Ministries: Vulnerable Populations

Many Episcopal organizations do admirable work with vulnerable populations. Your organization may serve meals to homeless and/or hungry people. Or you may offer a space for at-risk youth to do homework and play games after school.

These efforts are incredibly important. But interacting with vulnerable populations can carry some risk. Here are some ways you can continue doing good work while managing the risk and keeping those you serve, volunteers, and employees safe.

1. Create and communicate policies.

No matter what type of program you undertake, organizational leaders should meet to discuss and create policies and protocols related to that ministry.

These guidelines should be program-specific. For example, when you invite new people onto your organization's premises for a meal, you may wish to outline behavioral rules, such as prohibiting raised voices and limiting physical contact to appropriate displays of affection, such as handshakes.

Make sure everyone—both those serving and those being served—are aware of these policies. That way, it is less likely that anyone feels obligated or slighted.

2. Train volunteers and staff appropriately.

Many types of training may be appropriate for volunteers and staff, depending on the ministry you have selected. For example, if people within your organization will be working with children, it is necessary for them to be trained in preventing sexual misconduct.

Here are the model policies for working with children and youth

<https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/21313>

Here are the model policies for working with vulnerable adults

<https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/21314>

These model policies contain a wealth of information, including behavioral standards, responding to concerns, and implementation of protocols.

3. Limit access to property.

Keep people in the areas where the event takes place; limit their access to other areas. That may mean closing and locking doors that lead to unused areas or periodically dispatching pairs of volunteers to ensure that no one has wandered away.

This can help keep everyone safe. For example, theft is less likely to occur if people don't have access to places where no one else is around or where valuables are stored. Conversely, it is less likely for someone who stayed in the appropriate venue throughout the event to be accused of theft.

4. Keep relationships professional.

Kind-hearted, well-meaning volunteers—and even staff—may find that they are tempted to help people beyond the scope of your organization's ministry. For example, volunteers who visit the elderly or people confined to their homes due to illness may make strong connections and want to reach out to these folks independently.

Encourage volunteers and staff to keep relationships professional. Although their intentions may be pure, volunteers or staff may find themselves enmeshed in complicated situations if they develop separate, personal relationships with those your organization serves.

Make sure to address relationship guidelines in your organization's policies and protocol.

5. Communicate with your insurance representative.

If your organization is embarking on a new ministry, take a moment to communicate with your insurance representative. Tell him or her your plans, talk over the risks, and make sure your current policy provides adequate coverage. Your representative may have ideas that will help you better protect your organization and those who work within it.