



The Role of Clergy & Domestic Violence: *Frequently Asked Questions*

I don't know my legal responsibilities regarding reporting of abuse.

Mandated reporting is required for some groups in cases of child or elder abuse under the age of 18 or over 65), and vulnerable adults (individuals deemed to be incapable of making decisions for themselves or unable to defend themselves). There are no laws in MA requiring mandated reporters to report domestic abuse of competent adults. Physical and sexual abuse is against the law, but domestic violence advocates recommend that, for safety and autonomy reasons, the survivor self-report.

It is difficult to discern the truth in these situations; I don't want to take sides.

The role of the clergy is to provide support, resources and information. Survivors often don't come forward for fear they will not be believed. Domestic violence advocates recommend to start from a place of believing. However, it can be difficult to discern who is causing the harm from who is surviving the violence through a small snapshots of a relationship. A single incident doesn't tell the full story and it's important to leave it to the experts and consult a domestic violence organization.

My congregation has limited material and financial resources to help with the substantial needs of abuse survivors.

Fortunately, there are a number of public and private agencies whose primary role is to help individuals in domestic violence relationships. These agencies already have educational materials and staff dedicated to this purpose. To find the domestic violence and/or sexual assault organization that serves your members you can visit janedoe.org and enter the survivors zip code.

I confronted a suspected abuser who then left the religious community.

Religious teachings model universal respect for humanity and reverence for life. Every individual needs and is entitled to these. Individual choices may conflict with these values. While it is important to set a zero tolerance environment for domestic violence, it is not always safe or the best practice to confront the abuser. Consulting with the survivor to understand their safety and wishes is most important.

No one in my congregation has come forward with domestic abuse issues.

There is no question there are survivors of domestic violence in every segment of the community; socioeconomic, cultural and spiritual. Statistics proving these are overwhelming. Creating an environment which is safe for survivors will result in individuals coming forward for help and support. Being sensitive to the signs, creating a zero tolerance environment in the parish and making information available to all parishioners breaks the silence and opens the door, encouraging individuals to come forth.

I have not had training in counseling domestic abuse survivors and fear I may do more harm than good.

Knowledge of the dynamics of domestic violence is key to taking appropriate steps. All members of the spiritual community can help immensely through simple measures which include making affirming, supportive statements and providing resources and options. Couples counseling is never an effective intervention for domestic violence and can often put the survivor at greater risk by setting up a temporary and false sense of security. Consider reaching out to your local domestic agency for support and training.

I am concerned that our religious text conflicts with my role in circumstances of domestic violence.

While various faith communities have different precepts upon which they structure family, there are some basic human rights values which must underwrite family dynamics. Our culture and community has clearly taken a position that physical and sexual violence is against the law. Our faith communities teach respect for life and peaceful, respectful interactions for all human life.

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