

# Responding to Alleged Abuse/Neglect

## A Practical Guide for Ministries

**Designed to help ministry leaders, staff, and volunteers respond swiftly, responsibly, and lawfully to abuse or neglect allegations involving individuals under their care.**

- While laws vary by state, ministry personnel are often legally obligated to act.
- Regardless of legal mandates, ministries should respond promptly and appropriately to advance their Christian mission.

### **Learn how to:**

- Respond immediately, including clear steps to follow in the hours thereafter.
- Establish protocols and train staff/volunteers.
- Ensure legal compliance and protect the ministry.

### **Recommended responses in four phases:**



**Important:** This information is intended to be helpful, but does not constitute legal advice and is not a substitute for the advice from a licensed attorney in your area. We strongly encourage you to regularly consult with a local attorney as part of your risk management program.

# Responding to Alleged Abuse/Neglect



Guidance for ministries

**When a ministry worker (employee or volunteer) has reason to believe that a person is the victim of abuse/neglect:**

**IMMEDIATELY**

## Alert Ministry Leadership

The worker reports the matter to a designated response team or point person responsible for evaluating all such reports.

**WITHIN 12 HRS**

## Alert Authorities\*

The team/point person determines whether there is a legal and/or moral duty to notify state authorities.

**If yes,** notify the appropriate state authorities and move to next step.

**If no,** move to next step.

**WITHIN 48 HRS**

## Alert Insurance Carrier

The team/point person determines whether the alleged abuse/neglect could expose the ministry to liability.

**If yes,** notify the ministry's property and liability insurance company and move to next step.

**If no,** move to next step.

**WITHIN 72 HRS**

## Address the Situation

The team/point person determines appropriate next steps, consulting with local legal counsel if needed.

### Potential next steps may include:

- Conducting an internal investigation
- Removing the perpetrator from their ministry position
- Revising the ministry's policies/procedures
- Connecting the victim with support resources
- Informing additional parties (e.g., the victim's relatives, staff members, and/or the congregation)

**\*Legal duties, including mandatory reporting laws, differ by state. See RAINN's State Law Database (free to use), Church Law & Tax 50-State Child Abuse Reporting Laws Survey (requires a paid subscription), or contact a local attorney for guidance.**

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# Using the Ministry Response Guide

## Alleged Abuse/Neglect

Each of the four steps in the guide is described in more detail below.

IMMEDIATELY

### Alert Ministry Leadership

Ministry workers should report any suspected abuse/neglect to a designated response team or point person. This ensures that ministry leadership is aware of the situation and equipped to execute its responsibilities. A centralized response protects confidentiality, maintains compliance with internal policies, and provides a clear record of the incident and its aftermath. Reporting to a team (rather than an individual) is recommended to avoid oversights and to prevent miscommunication.

WITHIN 12 HRS

### Alert Authorities

The response team or point person must determine whether there is a legal or ethical obligation to report the matter to state authorities or other interested parties. Since legal duties vary between states, it may be necessary to consult local legal counsel to clarify requirements. Notifying the state's child protective services division or law enforcement ensures that professionals can investigate and intervene where warranted.

WITHIN 48 HRS

### Alert Insurance Carrier

If an incident carries potential liability for the ministry, the response team or point person should notify the ministry's property and casualty (P&C) insurance carrier. Prompt notification allows the insurer to assess risks, offer guidance, and prepare for any legal or financial consequences. Failing to notify the insurer quickly could jeopardize coverage.

WITHIN 72 HRS

### Address the Situation

In addition to external reporting, ministries must look inward to respond effectively. Potential next steps could include launching an internal investigation, suspending an alleged perpetrator from ministry duties, updating policies to prevent future incidents, and providing support to victims.

In some cases, multiple steps must be taken simultaneously to ensure a comprehensive response.

# Example Scenarios:

The following two example scenarios are intended to help provide some context around when and how to respond to alleged abuse or neglect.

## Scenario 1: Abuse Occurs Off Church Property

IMMEDIATELY

**Alert Ministry Leadership Example:** A teen confides in their youth group leader that they are being abused at home. The leader immediately reports the matter to the ministry's designated response team.

WITHIN 12 HRS

**Alert Authorities Example:** The team reviews state mandatory reporting laws and confirms the need to contact the state's child protective services division. They file a report within the required timeframe, satisfying legal obligations.

WITHIN 48 HRS

**Alert Insurance Carrier Example:** Since the abuse did not occur on church property or during church-sponsored activities, the ministry's risk of liability is low. The team decides not to notify the insurer.

WITHIN 72 HRS

**Address the Situation Example:** The ministry connects the teen and their family with rehabilitative resources and refines its policies to better support members facing domestic abuse.

## Scenario 2: Abuse Occurs During a Church Event

IMMEDIATELY

**Alert Ministry Leadership Example:** At a church retreat, a chaperone is informed that a child was intentionally struck by an adult volunteer. The chaperone immediately relays this information to the ministry's response team.

WITHIN 12 HRS

**Alert Authorities Example:** The team determines that the incident should be reported to law enforcement and submits the report within the required timeframe.

WITHIN 48 HRS

**Alert Insurance Carrier Example:** Since the incident occurred at a church-sponsored event, there is potential liability exposure. The team informs the insurance carrier to secure coverage and legal assistance.

WITHIN 72 HRS

**Address the Situation Example:** The ministry suspends the accused volunteer, conducts an internal investigation, and offers counseling services to the child.