

Advocacy Tips for Supporting Victims in the Amish/Plain Community

Legal Outreach

Amish & other Plain communities believe that protection orders, legal separation, and legal representation are within the discretion of church leadership. Victims must be educated and encouraged to understand that they have the same rights as all United States citizens and may avail themselves of those rights as needed for their safety

Victims over 18 years may not realize they are legally independent adults

All Amish/Plain communities are faith-based and conservative. Rules, customs, and practices vary greatly among them – as established by the bishop of each church community. Following are generalizations, meant to share typical beliefs and practices.

Church/Community Involvement

Support Team – The Church assigns a support team (one or multiple couples) to each spouse in an abusive situation. The abuser may even be temporarily placed in the home of one of the support couples. The team's goal is reconciliation at all costs, which may lead to lack of transparency and attempts to manipulate victims, church pressure, community pressure, familial pressure, harassment, stalking. Connecting with the support team could be an important advocacy strategy

*Assess who the victim's chosen support team is and encourage the victim to ask for emotional and logistical support with defined safety planning strategies

Forgiveness – Church and community encourage the abused that forgiveness of the abuser and moving forward is important - "Forgive and forget" or "Turn the other cheek." The Plain Community believes that forgiveness means silence, and that speaking of abuse is more harmful than the abuse itself. Abusers are thought to have "morally stumbled"

Spiritual Abuse – Abuse can stem from multiple sources at the same time: within the home, the church and community

Excommunication – Church rule (the Ordnung), and how strictly it is applied, dictate things like whether the victim may be allowed to attend church and amount of contact with church members. They cannot participate in the Church meal

Restoration Team/Conservative Crisis Intervention (CCI) Team – A group of Amish men/women who put a plan in place for the court to handle the abuser post-sentencing. They are notified if abuse is reported, and they separate the couple. These team members typically have an 8th grade education and are not certified to counsel the abuser

Cultural Norms

Photographs – Always ask prior to taking a photo of a Plain community individual. Generally, Mennonites are not as hesitant to be photographed

Family Planning – Views on condoms, the birth control pill, breast feeding, and other methods of pregnancy prevention vary among churches. Often an individual's practice is based on both family and church decisions

Beliefs about sex – It is expected that individuals remain “pure” until marriage. No physical contact is permitted while dating, and many churches mandate that a chaperone be present on dates of unmarried couples. The appropriate age to begin dating varies

Medication – Prescribed medication and blood transfusions may be permissible. HIV/AIDS/Sexually Transmitted Infections are not discussed, and the community is largely unaware of them and of prevention methods. Alternative medicine is often utilized, both for traditional reasons and because of cost concerns regarding prescription medication

Self-care – This concept is foreign to the community. Vacation is permissible primarily to visit family/friends. Reading, shopping, and crafting (knitting/needlework/crochet) are permissible

Joining the Church – An individual must be “saved” to join the Church. Age to join may range from 9 to middle – upper teens. There is typically pressure by family and community for an individual to join. Membership may determine employment opportunities, as many community businesses require that an employee be a “member in good standing” to be hired. In some churches, an individual that is not a member of the Church is not permitted to date or have medical bills paid by the church. The process for becoming a member involves instruction class, bishop and/or church approval, and baptism

Communion – Frequency varies by church but typically occurs twice per year, preceded by a council meeting where individuals proclaim they are at peace with God, their fellow man, and that they obey all church rules. Women and children may take communion, if members



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Cultural Norms

Physical Touch – Expressions of affection or positive regard through physical touch are not a cultural norm. A handshake is preferable to a hug, for instance. The concept of “safe touch” is not taught to children. Clothing may hide signs of physical abuse – bruising, scars, wounds. Victims may not know to disclose these signs if not directly asked

View of the “English” world – The prevalent belief is that the outside world is sinful. A victim must have less fear of outsiders than the internal community to disclose abuse to a member of the “English” community. An advocate must expect that any interaction may be the only or last one because of potential interference from within the community

Beliefs Around Sexual Assault – Sexual assault is viewed as the woman’s fault, or mother’s fault in cases of assault on children, because she did not uphold the marriage bed properly. Perpetrators are believed to have “morally stumbled” or “struggles with lust”

Provision of Clothing Post Forensic Exam -- Each church has its own clothing guidelines - including colors, material, and fastenings, making provision of appropriate clothing for after sexual assault exam unlikely

Terminology – Common phrases for expressing sexual abuse include “sin of lust,” “use of the child,” “devil’s work,” “being dirty,” and “bothering”

Physical Abuse – Physical punishment is viewed as discipline for perceived transgressions. One form of punishment is spanking, which may occur with adult children or spouses

Taking Sides – If the Church supports the abuser, the victim and victim’s supporters (family, friends, silent mentor, etc.) may be penalized by not being allowed to participate in certain activities or to patronize community-owned businesses. In return, the community may not patronize the victim’s/supporters’ businesses

Guidance – Victims often use lay counselors and ministers in the church community for insight into the situation

View on Trauma – Church leadership often doesn’t believe in PTSD or lasting trauma from abuse. Trauma is largely not understood or treated

Access to Resources/Identification – It is common that victims have little to no access to resources, such as money. They may not have a birth certificate or ID. Community members do not have Social Security Numbers

Insurance – Medical and car insurance are provided through a church pool of funds. Qualification for access to the funds requires church membership “in good standing”

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Resources

“Doorway to Hope” by The Sewing Circle, stories drawn from domestic violence victims from IN, OH and PA; belief that suffering on Earth will be rewarded after death.

“Tears of the Silenced: An Amish True Crime Memoir of Childhood Sexual Abuse, Brutal Betrayal, and Ultimate Survival” by Misty Griffin

“Behind Blue Curtains: A True Crime Memoir of an Amish Woman's Survival, Escape, and Pursuit of Justice”

by Molly Maeve Eagen and Lizzie Hershberger

“The Plain People’s Podcast”

<https://theplainpeoplespodcast.libsyn.com/>

A Better Way

<https://www.abetterway.org/>

The Misfit Amish

<https://www.themisfitamish.com/>

Interpretation Unlimited –

PA Dutch

<https://www.interpreters.com>

Additional Information

Education – Most Amish attend Amish schools where they receive an 8th grade education that does not include any form of health or science education. All educational materials are approved by the church. The requirement to be a teacher is to be a member of the church in good standing. An ordained minister, deacon or bishop receives no further education and is elected to his position.

Counseling – All types of counseling options approved (AOD, Sexual Assault, Mental Health, DV, etc.), typically residential counseling in another state at Plain Community non-licensed private facilities provided by church members with 8th grade education – aimed at rehabilitating sex offenders and domestic violence abusers

Personal Business -- News spreads quickly within the community, and is viewed as sharing essential information, not gossip

Pressure – Victims commonly experience significant pressure to forgive and/or return to abuser from the community and family members through written communication (letters)

Community Questions – It is common for community members to call into an agency and ask questions about terminology and/or abuse that are not in the client’s best interest

LGBTQ – Because of religious beliefs, victims may have reservations about working with service providers who identify as LGBTQ.

Outreach – The community embraces educational meetings on awareness topics. Public meetings are held where the speakers are men and topics discussed are explained through the lens of church doctrine



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Accessibility/Safety

Phones – some victims may own a cell phone, share a cell phone, or have access to a phone or black box at an outside location (work, neighbors, etc.). If a phone isn't in the home, sometimes children are asked to run to make a phone call to get help

Language Barrier – Although victims likely speak English, frequently check in for understanding of terminology/phrasing and seek interpretation if needed
(See Resources on page 4)

Transportation – If clients don't live close to your agency, they may need assistance with arranging transportation. They may hide their intentions by running errands before or after their appointment. Ensure your agency has a place for parking horse and buggies.

Silent Mentor – someone from the English community (landlord, employer, business owner, etc.) that assists with communication, transportation, and legal pursuits in addition to moral support

Courtesy – Ensure that your agency has a place for men to hang their hats and for women to place their bonnets, jackets, and shawls

Legal Action

Citizens – Plain Community members are American citizens, and are subject to the law

Divorce – Divorce is typically not an option within the church. Client may consider or be more open to legal separation

Decisions – Protection orders, legal separation, legal representation, etc., are endorsed at the discretion of church leadership

Child Support – Often resistant to filing for child support (don't want the entanglement/feeling of not deserving husband's money)

Court – Typically not able to "swear" into court (against God) but can "affirm" into evidence. Respondents frequently appear in court with a large group of community supporters

Personal Property – Husbands are entitled to the property of the wife. Transferring ownership of a horse or having a support system



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