switchboard

Foundations of Mandatory Reporting

August 5, 2026

Today's Speaker

Maya Wahrman, LSW, MSW

Training Officer, Switchboard

Learning Objectives

By the end of this introductory session, you will be able to...

Describe

key principles of mandatory reporting and reportable situations such as abuse and neglect of children and vulnerable adults

01

Identify

who may be a mandatory reporter and possible steps of the reporting process

02

Integrate

special considerations for working across cultures with newcomers in the mandatory reporting context

03

Apply

client-centered and trauma-informed principles to maintain client confidentiality and trust while upholding mandatory reporting responsibilities

04

Abuse, Neglect, and Mandatory Reporting

Defining Basic Terms and Principles

01 02 03 04

Abuse and Neglect Do Not Discriminate

- **All clients are susceptible**— violence exists in all communities and social sectors
- **Abuse can be inflicted by anyone**— not just a person responsible for the child's or vulnerable adult's care, custody, and control

“Mandated reporters have an individual duty to report known or suspected abuse or neglect relating to children, elders, or dependent adults.”

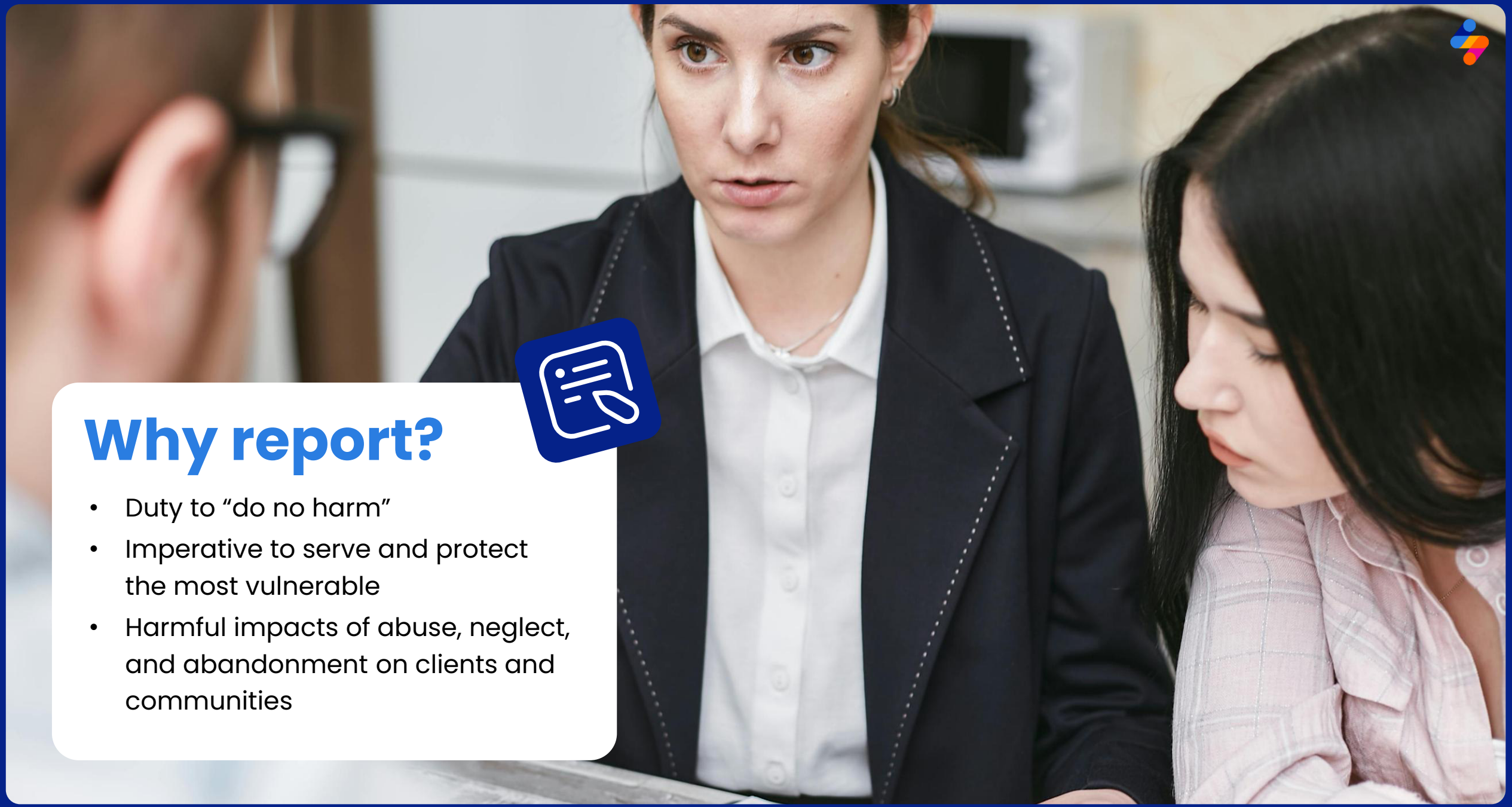
National Association of Mandated Reporters

Network of Mandatory Reporting Professionals

About whom might you be reporting?

- Depends on your **state laws**
- **General guidelines:**
  - Children (under 18)
  - Vulnerable adults of any age: i.e., those with any emotional or physical impairment to self-protection and self-determination
  - Elderly adults (65+)
- **Any** child or vulnerable adult, not just clients

Note: Any person can report, even if not a state-mandated reporter



Why report?

- Duty to “do no harm”
- Imperative to serve and protect the most vulnerable
- Harmful impacts of abuse, neglect, and abandonment on clients and communities

Abuse

Any **physical**, **sexual**, or **emotional injury** inflicted on another person, other than by accidental means

Neglect

- When a caregiver **consistently fails to meet the basic needs** of a child or vulnerable adult, such as adequate food, shelter, clothing, medical care, or supervision
- The absence of resources due to poverty does not constitute neglect

Defining Disclosure

- A client **tells you directly** about abuse or neglect
- Can be **on purpose** or **accidental**
- Can be about **themselves** or **another person**
- You may **witness abuse** or neglect directly or identify other **indicators**

Potential Indicators of Abuse

- Physical Abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Emotional or Psychological Abuse
- Neglect
- Online Abuse
- Human Trafficking

General Mandatory Reporting Guidelines

Roles, Laws, and Process

01 02 03 04

Who is a mandated reporter?

- In most states, **refugee resettlement direct service workers** are mandated reporters
- Some states also include any staff or volunteer that provides organized activities for children

Service Provider's Role

- ✓ Mandated Reporter
- ✗ Investigator
- ✓ Support Person
- ✓ Connector

Case Scenario: Malik and Amira

Malik, 5, and Amira, 7, are siblings in a family from Sudan that arrived one year ago. The family has completed their initial resettlement services, including their cultural orientation. You are running an after-school program at your agency, and you have enrolled Malik and Amira. When they come to their first session, you notice each of them has a few visible bruises on their arms and legs. When you ask about the bruises, Malik stares at you and cries silently, while Amira says, “it’s nothing,” and avoids your gaze.

What would your next step be in this case?

Mandatory Reporting Process

Determine
if you have reasonable suspicion to make a report.

Make a report
with your local/state abuse and neglect agency.

Follow up
with authorities and support the clients—when able.

Step 1

Determine

if you have reasonable suspicion
to make a report.

When is a mandated reporter legally required to report?

- You have **“reasonable cause to suspect”** child abuse or neglect
- You **observe** a child being subjected to circumstances reasonably resulting in abuse or neglect
- Report must be **direct and immediate** to the child abuse and neglect agency or hotline in your state/municipality
- If there is immediate/imminent danger**, call 911 before making a report**

Note: You do not need all the facts; indicate clearly if you do not know an answer

Determine reasonable suspicion

Responding to Disclosure: I CARE

I	**Information**	Gather information, but do not investigate; do not make someone repeat disclosure
C	**Calm**	Take a breath, listen, and answer all questions honestly
A	**Assure**	Remind clients that you can handle the information; be proactive; have a script
R	**Report**	Contact the appropriate agency or hotline directly and immediately
E	**Encourage**	Support policies and environments that prioritize client safety

Determine reasonable suspicion

Step 2

Make a report

with your local/state abuse and neglect agency.

Determine reasonable suspicion

To whom do I report? How do I find state resources?

- **Child Welfare Information Gateway,** searchable by state
- **National Adult Protective Services Association (NAPSA),** state-by-state guidance
- Search your state's **Department of Human Services** mandatory reporting resources
- Look for **free training** in your state by searching [your state's name] + "free mandatory reporter training"

Protections for Mandatory Reporters

- **Safeguards:** Employers cannot prevent or discourage reporting, nor retaliate
- **Immunity:** Mandated reporters are legally protected
- **Confidentiality:** Reporter identity and report content remain confidential, known only to investigators

Make the report

What to Expect When You Call

The agency or hotline worker will likely ask:

- Name of the child or vulnerable adult (client)
- Name of the parent(s)
- Name of the alleged abuser
- Where the client can be located
- Other concerns or helpful information (e.g., the child is a refugee)

You do not need every detail to make a call. Provide the above information to the best of your ability.

Make the report

Step 3

Follow up

with authorities and support the clients—when able.

Make the report

Your Role During and After Reporting

- **Document the report, and safeguard sensitive information**
- If you have a release of information, **follow up** with the appropriate agency for updates or next steps
- **Support the client** with referrals, ongoing assistance, advocacy, and safety planning if needed

Follow up

What happens next?

- **The investigating agency will examine the report and screen for urgency and severity;** investigators will likely visit within 1–3 days
- **Agency may determine there is no need for further investigation** but will keep a record of the report
- **Note: reporter information is never shared** with the alleged perpetrator or family members of the child(ren)

Follow up

Special Considerations

Working Across Cultures with Newcomers

01 02 03 04

What are some considerations in mandatory reporting with refugee clients from different cultural backgrounds?

Wordcloud Poll 49 responses 28 participants

Newcomer Risk Factors

- Differences in child welfare and other government systems
- Lack of resources/poverty
- Isolation, societal marginalization, lack of community support
- Prior trauma experiences
- Unfamiliarity with U.S. laws, culture, language

Serving Clients from Different Cultures

- Culture shapes the way children or family members are raised and treated
- Identify and nurture the cultural strengths, beliefs, and practices of the individuals and family
- Integrate that knowledge into your plan to protect the child or vulnerable adult

If the cultural practice falls within the legal definitions of abuse or neglect, it must be reported

Case Scenario

You are taking a recently arrived Venezuelan family to a local Spanish-speaking church to connect them to their community. As you drop off the family, their eight-year-old son is not listening to his parents' requests to get out of the car. The situation escalates, and you witness the father strike the child's cheek with his hand.

The church's pastor also witnesses the interaction. As the family enters, he takes you aside and asks that you not report the incident, citing cultural norms and explaining that the family is new to this country.

How might you respond to the pastor?

Case Scenario

You thank the pastor for his perspective. When you return to your office, you make a report and later schedule time to speak to the family to educate them on disciplinary practices that are accepted in the U.S.

The next time you drop the family off at the church, the pastor confronts you, upset that the family was reported. The report was anonymous, but the family told him they were contacted by the local child protective services.

How would you navigate this situation?

How can you continue to support the family?

Distinguishing Poverty from Neglect

When the caregiver **does not have the resources** to provide for the need

When the caregiver has the resources but **chooses not to provide** for the need

Interaction with Authorities/Child Welfare

- Many refugees are unfamiliar with or have **deep fears of law enforcement and authorities** (specifically child welfare authorities)
- In many refugees' cultural contexts, exercising one's rights with authorities is unfamiliar or fear-inducing

Stay Impartial When Reporting

- Recognize stereotypes and untrue assumptions you have
- Identify strengths; do not solely examine risks
- Keep practicing cultural responsiveness

Maintaining Client Confidentiality and Trust

Through Mandatory Reporting

01 02 03 04

Mandatory Reporting as Client Support

Shared Goals of Safety and Wellness

Caring for the family's welfare

Strengths-Based

Ability to learn and change

Cultural Adjustment

Learning new norms

When to Discuss General Mandatory Reporting with Clients

01 In initial client meetings and rapport-building

02 With client rights and responsibilities

03 With notices of privacy practices

04 Via ongoing reminders if needed

Case Scenario: Johanna

Johanna and Gert are an Afrikaner couple with three children: Willem (6), Marike (3), and Jaco (1).

Gert works long hours far from home. One of your volunteers has been asked to pick up Johanna for her employment intake at the agency office. As the volunteer and Johanna leave the house, Johanna reminds the kids that the neighbors will be keeping an eye on them until she returns. The volunteer feels uncomfortable leaving the children behind, but she does not have appropriate car safety seats to bring them along. When the volunteer brings Johanna to the office, she tells you about the kids at home, so you decide to take Johanna home after the appointment to see for yourself. It is after dark and the kids are home alone.

What are some steps you could take?

Involving Clients in Reporting if Safe/Possible

Advantages

- Can empower clients and dispel fears about child welfare and any involved authorities
- Can show authorities the client is looking for help and is non-adversarial

Disadvantages

- Can be dangerous to caseworker and/or clients; can create antagonism and mistrust
- Can be against state protocols or agency practices, depending on the situation

Note: clients may always decline involvement in reporting

After Reporting

- Reporting can make a situation temporarily **more dangerous** for the client
- Help the **client stay safe and stable**
- You still have a duty to serve the client; **remain professional and supportive**

Note: if you feel unsafe because of your reporting, get support from your agency or supervisor

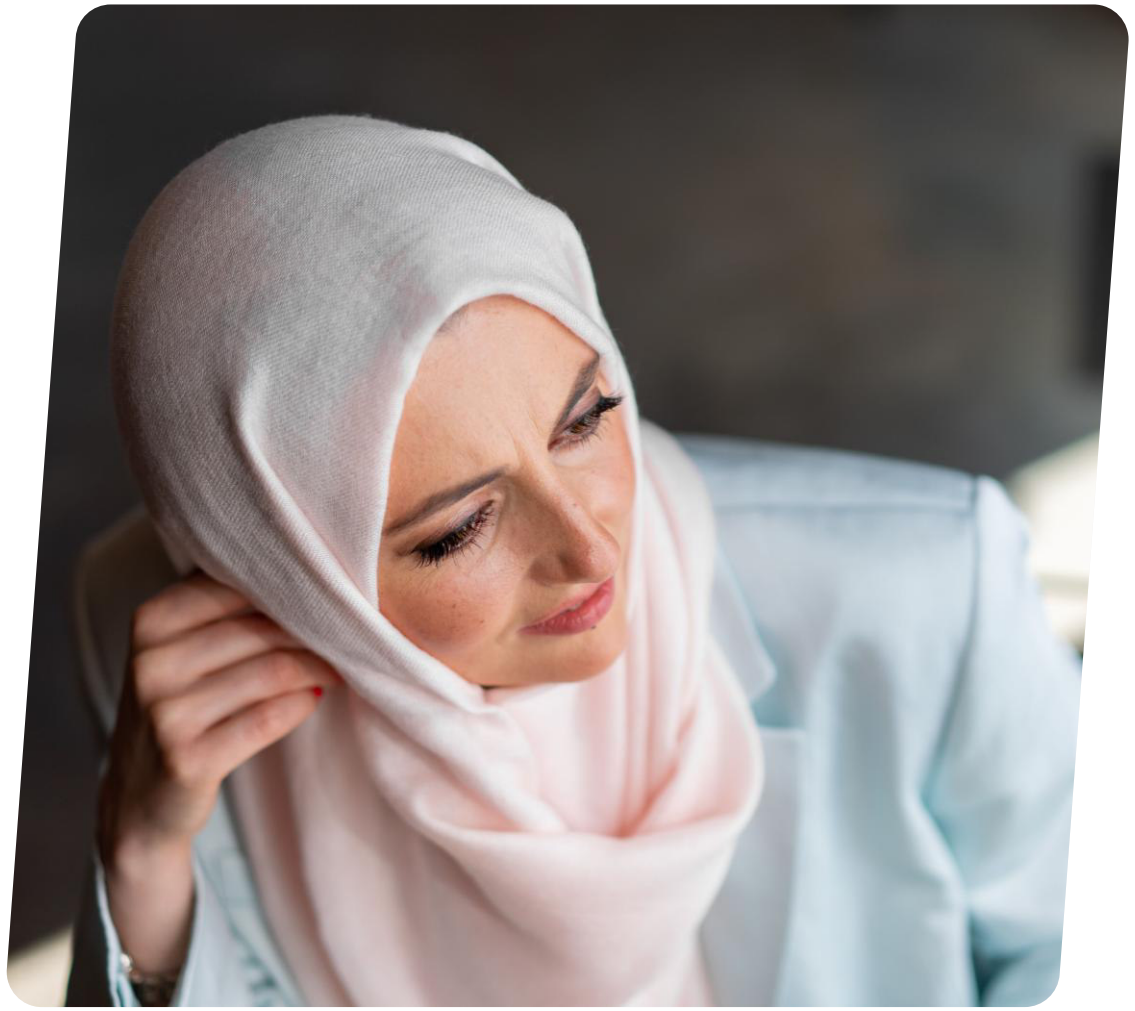
Safety Planning

Safety planning may be warranted when…

- There is **ongoing** or **increased risk** to a client's safety
- Both victim and offender are clients
- Office workers could be endangered, or they feel less safe in their community

Case Scenario: Farzana

Farzana is a woman from Afghanistan who has recently arrived and moved in with her cousin, who is also her U.S. tie. In your most recent home visit, Farzana tells you privately she cannot stand how her cousin and his wife treat their adult son with disabilities. She says the parents often punish their son for urinary incontinence by locking him in the closet or withholding his dinner. She says she has never seen the family physically strike him, but he sometimes cries and moans from the closet. Farzana reports otherwise feeling safe and comfortable in the home.



How can you support Farzana, as well as the family (even though they are not your clients)?

Questions?

Type your question in the Q&A

Learning Objectives

Now you are able to

Describe

key principles of mandatory reporting and reportable situations such as abuse and neglect of children and vulnerable adults

01

Identify

who may be a mandatory reporter and possible steps of the reporting process

02

Integrate

special considerations for working across cultures with newcomers in the mandatory reporting context

03

Apply

client-centered and trauma-informed principles to maintain client confidentiality and trust while upholding mandatory reporting responsibilities

04

Recommended Resources

Switchboard

- Toolkit: Mandatory Reporting with Refugees and Newcomers: Sample Scripts and Additional Resources for Refugee Service Providers (2026)
- Guide: Fundamentals of Mandatory Reporting: A Guide for Refugee Service Providers in the U.S. (2024)
- Guide: Family Violence: Core Concepts for Refugee and Newcomer Serving Organizations (2025)
- Archived Webinar: Family Violence: Core Concepts for Newcomer Serving Organizations (2025)
- Template: Family Violence Safety Plan (2025)


switchboard
connecting resettlement experts

Fundamentals of Mandatory Reporting: A Guide for Refugee Service Providers in the U.S.

Refugee service providers play important roles in supporting newcomer clients' safety and wellness. This includes being knowledgeable about mandatory reporting of abuse and neglect of children and vulnerable adults. This information guide explains what mandatory reporting entails—providing guidelines on who is considered a mandated reporter and how to make a mandated report. Because bias, cultural differences, and poverty can influence your suspicion of abuse and neglect, this guide also describes considerations for determining whether to report a specific incident or suspicion. Note that this guide is general and should be supplemented with review and implementation of your state's policies and laws.

What Terms Do I Need to Know?

Mandatory reporting is the process of telling officials at a designated government agency about known or suspected abuse, abandonment, neglect, or exploitation of a child (under the age of 18) or vulnerable adult when required to do so by law.

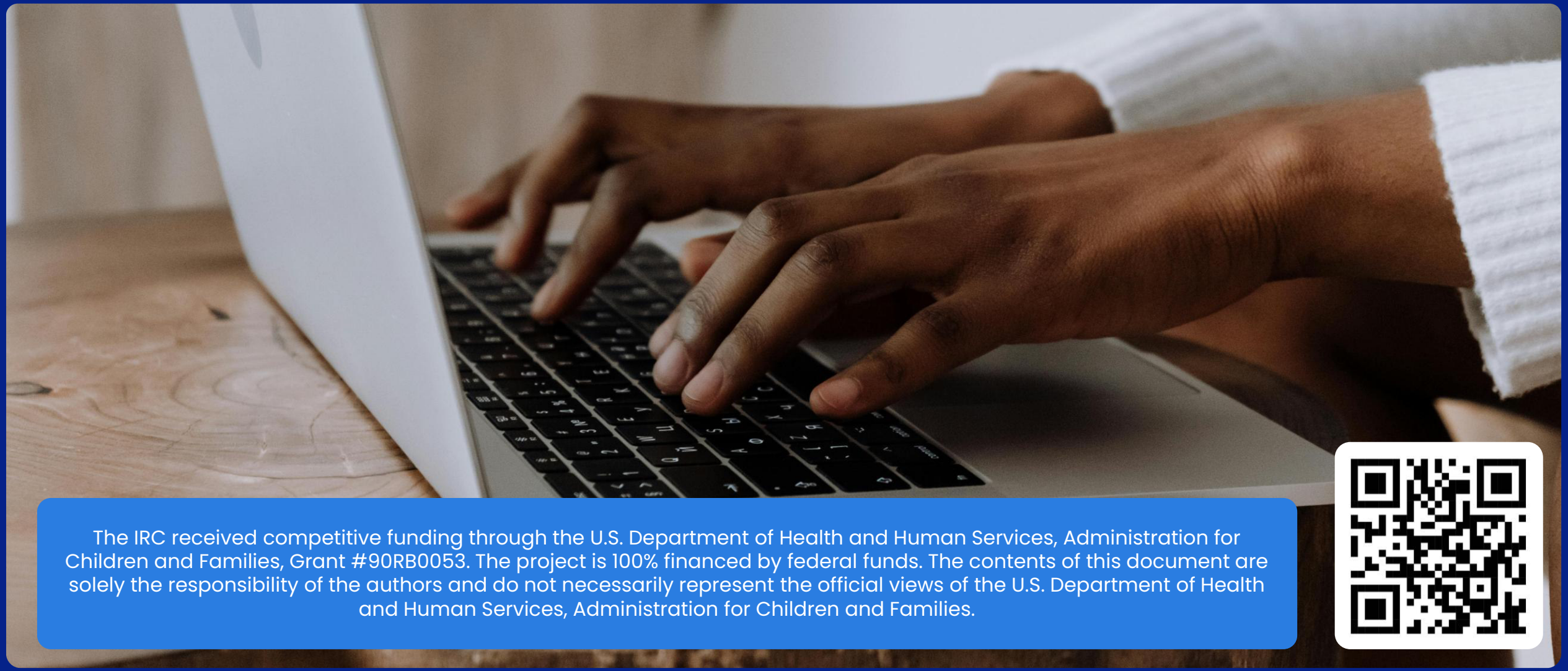
Terms related to mandatory reporting include:

- **Child:** A person under 18 years of age
- **Vulnerable Adult:** A person 18 years of age or older who is unable to protect themselves from abuse, neglect, or exploitation due to a physical or mental impairment
- **Abuse:** Includes physical, sexual, and emotional/psychological abuse, and neglect
  - **Physical abuse:** Non-accidental physical injury (ranging from minor bruises to more severe injury or death)

1

Stay Connected

Switchboard@Rescue.org
@SwitchboardTA
www.SwitchboardTA.org
@SwitchboardTA



The IRC received competitive funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant #90RB0053. The project is 100% financed by federal funds. The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.