

# Preventing Physical Abuse

**Definition of Physical Abuse:** “Means the willful action of inflicting bodily injury or physical mistreatment.

*Physical abuse includes, but is not limited to, striking with or without an object, slapping, pinching, choking, kicking, shoving, prodding, or the use of chemical restraints or physical restraints unless the restraints are consistent with licensing requirements, and includes restraints that are*

*otherwise being used inappropriately.” RCW 74:34*

**Potential for abuse increases when you support people who must depend upon others for physical assistance and support as well as those who have behavioral challenges.** Services are often provided in isolation where oversight is limited, and there may not be others present who witness the abuse. Allegations are often difficult to prove when there may not be physical injuries and the victim has problems communicating what occurred.

**Although preventing abuse is difficult, there are actions that employers can take to reduce the likelihood of abuse.**

- 1) **Screen your employees prior to hiring.** Check references of previous employers and look for any gaps in employment. Be sure to conduct your mandatory background checks, and don't allow new staff to work alone with clients until you have the check completed.
- 2) **Observe how your employees interact with consumers.** Being “gruff” may be someone's interpersonal style, but it is not an appropriate characteristic for a paid provider. Watch for people who are easily angered or who might be experiencing personal hardships. Be mindful of employees who want to control what the person does. This type of behavior often leads to abusive situations.
- 3) **Ensure that your staff have the tools to do their job.** Ongoing training and communication are so important. Remember, if direct support staff are not provided with solutions to everyday problems they face, they will come up with their own. **Regular training**, along with supervisors who are checking staffs' application of this training, needs to be ongoing for recognizing, reporting and preventing abuse.

- 4) ***Be mindful of staff who are regularly working excessive hours***, or are not relieved on time, or in situations where staffing numbers are low. This can be a source of frustration or anger that gets directed towards consumers.
- 5) ***Supervisors should be taught good skills in communicating and confronting improper situations***. Supervisors should conduct “drop in visits” frequently. Are staff applying the standards for how people are to be treated? Agencies should consider ways for staff to “step back” from a situation when they feel they are losing control.
- 6) ***The standard on how people are treated needs to be clear to all who work in the agency***. Talking about difficult situations with agency supervisors and administrators should be encouraged.
- 7) ***Freedom to report must be embraced by the agency***. Staff should never have any reason to be concerned about retaliation for honest reporting.
- 8) ***Encourage routine family or friend involvement*** in the lives of individuals. The more involvement of people whom the person knows and trusts will result in additional observers and participants in seeing that the person is safe from physical abuse.
- 9) ***It is critical for direct service employees to know and be able to identify signs and symptoms of abuse*** in order to obtain immediate assistance for the consumer.
- 10) ***When abuse occurs, remember to take care of not only the physical injuries, but also the emotional injuries*** that occur. Ensure the person is safe from future harm.

**Reminder:**

**All DDD employees and licensed, certified or contracted providers are mandatory reporters. If you witness physical abuse, you must report it immediately. Failing to make a report when you know, or should have known, that the failure would result in a substantial risk of harm could result in loss of a license, decertification or contract.**