



## Responding to Vulnerability

Every person is at risk or vulnerable at some time, and we all have safeguards in our lives, even if we don't call them safeguards.

Safeguards are thought out actions to help decrease the risks a person or family might face because of their vulnerabilities.

## Responding to Vulnerability

Everyone is vulnerable at times. Being vulnerable means you are at risk of being harmed or having bad things happen to you. Harm can come in many forms. It can be physical harm, like falling down or being beaten up on the street. It can be emotional harm like being yelled at, called names, or not having your choices taken into account. It can be financial harm, like not having enough money to live a good life, or having someone steal your money. Being vulnerable can also mean that people don't have good things in their life that others take for granted.

### **THINGS THAT CAN MAKE PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES MORE VULNERABLE**

- ❑ Not having a job or enough money
- ❑ Not having friends or family in your life
- ❑ Not belonging to clubs or groups
- ❑ Not taking part in community activities
- ❑ Not knowing your rights or how to recognize if your rights are violated or you have been taken advantage of
- ❑ Not participating in roles you want as a citizen
- ❑ Only spending time with other people with disabilities or with people who are paid to support you
- ❑ Discrimination at work or school
- ❑ Disrespect and negative attitudes from other people
- ❑ Difficulty communicating what you need
- ❑ Having challenging behaviours
- ❑ Not being listened to
- ❑ Not being taken seriously

Safeguards are things or actions that help reduce someone's vulnerability. Safeguards can help people manage their vulnerability themselves. They can help protect things that are good in people's lives. They can also help prevent or reduce the impact of things that are bad or unsafe.



**"People with disabilities share the same vulnerabilities as everyone else in society; with even less power to deal with them.**

**No one has the power to control all the threats to safety and well-being. But people with disabilities typically have a much smaller area of power over the environments they live in than the rest of us."**

**(John O'Brien et al)**

# Defining Safeguards

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**Vulnerable people need intentional safeguards in their lives – things that they and others do on purpose to reduce vulnerability.**

**There are different aspects to intentional safeguards:**

**Community safeguards** are for everyone in a vulnerable group or community.

**Personal safeguards** are specific to one individual or family.

**Formal safeguards** result from laws or policies.

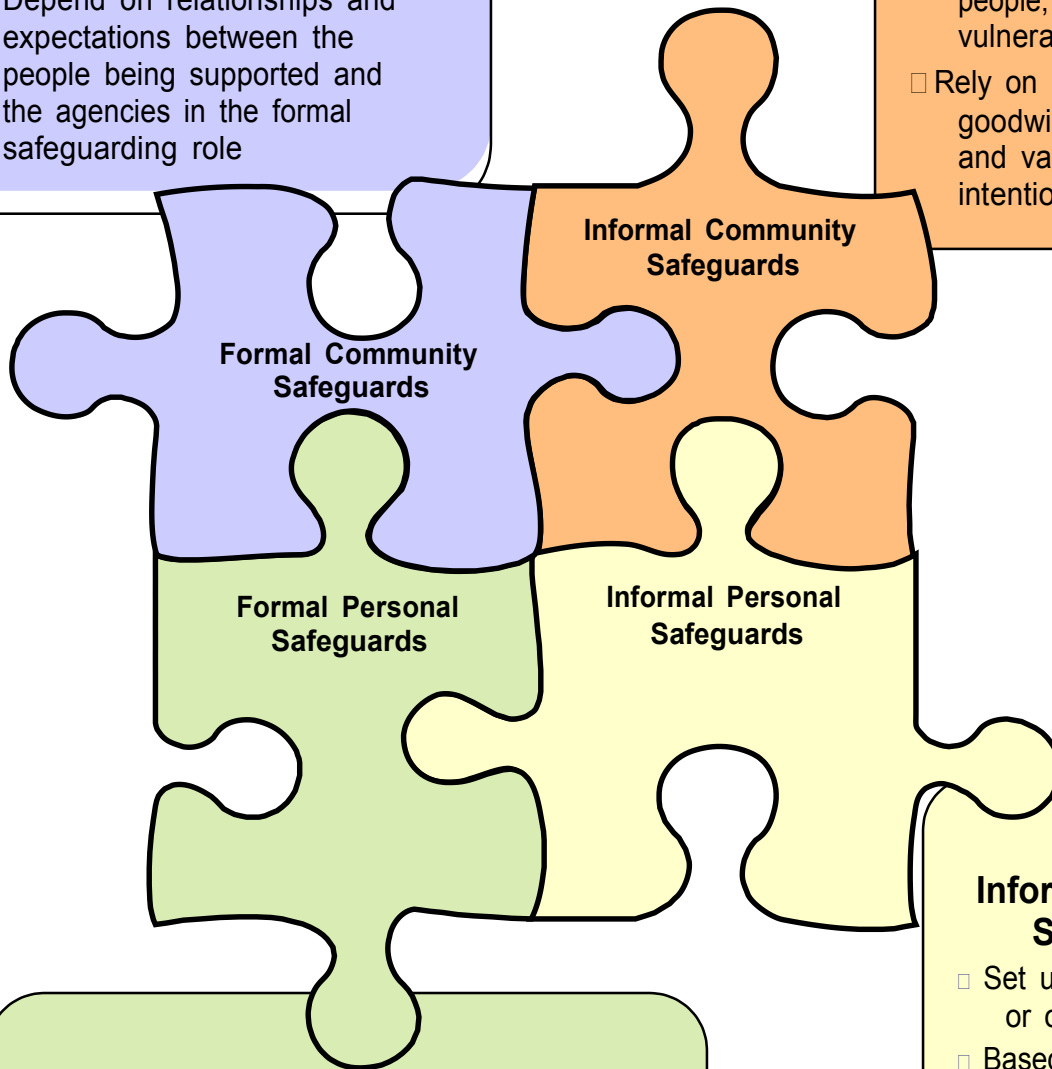
**Informal safeguards** are based on caring connections between people.

## Formal Community Safeguards

- Law, regulation, or policy/standards designed to reduce the vulnerability of everyone, or of a group of people
- Depend on relationships and expectations between the people being supported and the agencies in the formal safeguarding role

## Informal Community Safeguards

- Set up by concerned or ordinary citizens
- Involve valuing all people, or a group of vulnerable people
- Rely on people's goodwill, creativity, and values-based intentions



### Formal Community Safeguards

### Informal Community Safeguards

### Formal Personal Safeguards

### Informal Personal Safeguards

## Formal Personal Safeguards

- Based on a law, regulation, or policy/standards, but designed to reduce the vulnerability of one person or family
- Often take the form of a contract, protocol or individualized plan
- Can be tailored to address a person's unique vulnerabilities

## Informal Personal Safeguards

- Set up by concerned or ordinary citizens
- Based on trust and caring personal relationships - listening, valuing and knowing an individual
- Provide opportunities for creative and unique responses to individual situation

## Four Types of Safeguards

Vulnerable people need a mix of all four types of safeguards in their lives. The safeguards should overlap each other. The people involved should understand, respect, and support the different types of safeguards. They should all work together to reduce the person's vulnerability. Here are some examples of the four types of safeguards.

	Formal	Informal
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Accessible recreation centres</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Audible cross walk signals</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Anti-bullying programs at schools</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Fire drills in agencies</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Licensing for group homes or child care centres</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Reporting a crime like abuse</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Neighbourhood that invites local group home residents to the block party</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Self-advocacy groups</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> A church that makes accommodations in their Sunday School for children with special needs</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Awareness campaign about people with disabilities</li> </ul>
Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural support plan for an individual</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Representative for someone who needs help with decisions</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Foster family</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Person-centred plan with a risk assessment</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Health Services for Community Living protocol for someone with medical needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The trust a family has in a caregiver</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Staff at a coffee shop who know an individual and watch out for him</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Friends and neighbours who check in with each other</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> A circle of friends at school</li> </ul>

We are starting to use the word safeguard when talking about ways to reduce the vulnerability of people with developmental disabilities. Other vulnerable groups, like seniors, are also starting to use the word. It is a way to discuss the concept of vulnerability that everyone can understand. It can also bring more public awareness to the issues affecting people living in community.

**Safeguards** help reduce the risks a person or family might face because of their vulnerabilities.

**Safeguards** can be things that a person does for themselves, or things that other people or agencies do with or for them.

**Safeguards** can prevent something bad from happening, make something better, create something positive, or help a person be better prepared.

There are four roles for QVSS in contributing to better safeguards:

### 1. Formal Safeguard Initiatives

These safeguards take the form of policies, standards, or direct services that affect individuals and families. Some examples are:

- Helping people develop person or family-centred plans that include safeguards designed to address the vulnerabilities that a person may have.
- Monitoring services, including identified risks and personal safeguards that are part of a person's plan.
- Quality service reviews if there are complaints about a service, or a serious incident such as an unexpected death.
- Developing program standards that promote quality of life and safety.
- Strengthening policies in areas that have to do with safeguards – like behavioural intervention support, monitoring, and critical incident reporting.
- Investigating critical incidents and allegations of abuse.
- Working in cooperation with the Advocate for Service Quality, who helps people with concerns that cannot be resolved directly with QVSS or a service provider.

## **2. Internal Safeguards**

QVSS also does some things internally to help safeguard itself. Reducing the vulnerability of the organization helps safeguard the services that people rely on. Some examples of these internal safeguards are:

- Health and safety procedures to reduce risks to QVSS staff, offices and services
- Providing support and resources for developing and sustaining regional Community Councils
- The Advisory Committee to the Board, which gives feedback from self-advocates, families and others on how well the system is working
- Satisfaction surveys asking for feedback from individuals, families and other stakeholders

## **3. Working in Partnership with Others**

There are some things that QVSS cannot do by itself, but only in partnership with other organizations. These are usually formal safeguards or things that are a mix of formal and informal safeguards. Examples are:

- Facilitating development of community-based crisis response capacity
- Working with Health Services for Community Living to support people with health care needs
- Working with Mental Health Teams to support people with challenging behaviours or mental illness
- Working with service providers to meet contract expectations, including accreditation and program standards
- Establishing Community Councils to provide feedback, strengthen local partnerships, and help develop personal support networks
- Hiring a Self-Advocate Advisor to work with self-advocates and agencies to ensure that issues faced by self-advocates are central to QVSS's work

## **4. Supporting Informal Safeguards in the Community**

There are some safeguards that QVSS cannot do, and which must be done by other people. These are informal safeguards that rely on the interest, caring and goodwill of concerned citizens and organizations. QVSS is committed to providing support and leadership to help these kinds of informal safeguards. We need to hear about the best ways to help improve informal safeguards in community.



In all of these roles, QVSS promotes an organizational and community culture that is focussed on safeguards - this is called having a **safeguarding mentality**. It means that people think about safeguards in all aspects of what they do. It also means that lots of different people and organizations are engaged in thinking about and planning ways to improve safeguards.

## **Informal Safeguards in Community**

Lots of different people and organizations can participate in improving informal safeguards.

**Concerned people** can get more actively involved, including:

- People with developmental disabilities themselves
- People who care about them – families and friends
- People who are paid to provide support like caregivers, respite workers and other service providers

**Ordinary people** who may come into contact with people with developmental disabilities can take an active interest, including:

- Clerks at the grocery store or coffee shop someone uses
- Next door neighbours
- Co-workers or classmates
- People who take the same bus regularly
- People who go to the same church or fitness class

**The things that can keep people safe are really the same things that are needed to have a good life – caring relationships, opportunities for participation, and power over the conditions of your daily life.**

# More Thoughts About Safeguards

## Be Wary of Good Intentions

Some things in the past have been done with the best of intentions – like creating institutions for people with disabilities, which was done in part to keep people safe. We now know that, despite honourable intent, institutions were not the right thing to do and often didn't stop bad things from happening. Good intentions are welcome and needed. People are often motivated to become involved in informal safeguarding because they care about someone. But make sure you examine the value of your actions and motivations in practice – and any unintended negative results you have not thought about. Make sure people are motivated by caring, and that the safeguards are actually doing what they are supposed to.

## Values Are Important

The values of the person or family should be at the centre of safeguarding. This includes personal values around issues such as risk-taking, as well as cultural values around things like the role of the family. It is important not to let other people's values drive decision-making. Sometimes an individual's personal values conflict with their cultural values. Family members may not always share the same values. People may not be sure what their values are, because they have been denied such personal expression in the past. Recognizing different cultural and personal values is important in designing and implementing safeguards.

## Getting Relationships Right

Relationships between people using supports and those providing supports are very important. Informal safeguards can offer ways to make the relationships between people served and service providers more equal. For example, a strong personal support network that supports an individual or family can help balance the perspectives of the formal system. Personal support networks can also usually respond more quickly than formal services when things go wrong or change. Ask yourself about the relationships you are creating and supporting in informal safeguards.

## **New Possibilities for Partnerships**

The new vision of community living requires that we broaden our thinking about who we partner with, and how we do it. Changing the attitudes and economic conditions that affect the lives of people with disabilities is a very big job. Success requires that we find new partners and allies who share some of the same values. Who are the people and organizations in your community who might be interested in working together – even if they are not connected to people with developmental disabilities? How might you change some of the traditional relationships you are involved in?

## **Personal Support Networks**

Having people in your life who care about you is the most important informal safeguard. Just knowing there are people around for support can help people reduce the bad things that happen and create positive things in life. Many families and advocates are actively involved in creating networks of support around the people they care about. There are many people who do not have families or friends in their lives. There are lots of opportunities for people to become involved in personal support networks.



**“Positive attitudes and perceptions about the role and place of people with disabilities in society make people much safer.”**

**(Role of Informal Community-Level Safeguards by Brian Salisbury & Dan Collins)**

## **Balancing Self-determination and Risk-taking**

Exercising self-determination is a key part of citizenship and living a good life in a welcoming community. For people who are vulnerable, making choices that involve risk taking may be a great concern to those around them. Finding the right balance between protection and choice is an important thing to think about when creating safeguards around yourself or someone you care about. Make sure you are not stifling someone's right to live their own life by trying to protect them too much.

## **Age Matters**

Safeguards look different for people at different stages in life. People have different kinds of vulnerabilities and different levels of family involvement. Parents carry a large responsibility when their children are under age 19. They may be less able to keep their children safe as their child grows more independent and they themselves get older. It is important to respect the different ages and stages in life, for individuals and for their families.

## **How Formal and Informal Safeguards Work Together**

Everyone needs both formal and informal safeguards in their lives. Remember how the puzzle pieces work together to make a whole picture? Here are some things to think about to help that happen:

- Formal safeguard systems should not interfere with the flexibility and creativity of informal safeguards
- Formal safeguards should be able to respond to concerns raised by people in informal safeguarding roles.
- The people involved in formal and informal safeguards should understand and respect each other's roles
- Everyone involved in safeguarding should be open to evaluating how safeguards are working, and changing things that are not going well

**Some risk, some suffering, is integral to our common humanity. It's impossible to defend against it without destroying the fabric of human life. But without vigilant and vigorous protection, people with disabilities are far too often neglected and abused. This is the dilemma we face: How do we collectively protect people without patronizing them or destroying their opportunities?"**

**(John O'Brien et al**

