

Understanding Self-Determination and Self-Neglect

What Is Self-Determination?

Self-determination is the power or ability to make decisions about one's life without outside compulsion. This means that all older Vermonters have the right to direct their own lives as they age. Whatever services, supports and protections are offered, older Vermonters deserve dignity and respect, must be at the core of all decisions, and have the right to accept or refuse.

What Is Self-Neglect?

The term 'self-neglect' means an adult's inability, due to physical or mental impairment or diminished capacity, to perform essential self-care tasks including (A) obtaining essential food, clothing, shelter, and medical care; (B) obtaining goods and services necessary to maintain physical health, mental health, or general safety; or (C) managing one's own financial affairs. This definition *excludes people who make a conscious and voluntary choice* not to provide for certain basic needs as a matter of life style, personal preference or religious belief and *who understand the consequences of their decision*.

This means that an older Vermonter who is capable of making decisions and understanding the impact of their decisions may choose to live in a way that negatively impacts their well-being. That is their choice, and they are not self-neglecting.

What Is the role of the Area Agency on Aging?

The Area Agency on Aging (AAA) receives referrals from organizations and community members concerned that an individual may be self-neglecting. It is the responsibility of the AAA to reach out to that individual to learn more about their specific situation to better understand if they are truly suffering from self-neglect or instead exercising their right to make their own choices. Often, it takes multiple calls or visits with a person to gain their trust and thoroughly understand the situation.

If the AAA determines that an individual is self-neglecting and struggles not by choice, then the AAA will work with that individual to identify their goals towards improved well-being, barriers to those goals, and strategies (including potential services and supports in the community) to overcome the barriers and achieve their goals. Often this effort, led by an experienced case manager, is a multi-year process.

What Is the role of the community?

Communities have an important role to play in supporting self-neglecting residents. Often self-neglect is coupled with other challenges, including social isolation, lack of family/friend support, financial insecurity, mental illness and/or the onset of dementia. Community

members can help by knowing their neighbors and reaching out periodically. In this way, it is easier to observe if something changes with a neighbor, i.e. they have always kept a clean house and comport and are now suddenly not bathing and the house is very dirty.

It is also important for neighbors to know who to call in different scenarios. **The AAA Helpline is a good place to start: 1-800-642-5119.** Their experienced staff can help identify others who should be called.

Finally, communities can help by strengthening the networks of organizations and service providers who understand the complexity of self-neglect and who work collaboratively to support individuals to access services and supports. In addition to the AAAs, this includes designated mental health agencies, home health agencies, public safety and law enforcement agencies and more. A robust network of agencies working closely together are more likely to be able to respond quickly and effectively to older Vermonters' changing needs for aging well.

This handout was created by the State Unit on Aging in collaboration with the Area Agencies on Aging.

To download a copy of this handout, visit: www.asd.vermont.gov/services/self-neglect.