

# Elder Abuse:

## Opportunities to Make a Difference

In the past several decades, remarkable strides have been made in addressing the devastating issue of interpersonal violence—both child abuse and neglect, as well as intimate partner violence. Over the years, funding from public and private sources has created a variety of prevention and intervention strategies that produced dramatic shifts within public health, policy, and criminal justice systems. The perception of this violence has changed: it is seen as less of a “family problem” that is just accepted or hidden and more of a societal issue that demands intervention and resolution. There is increased awareness of the problem and enhanced ability to make a difference.

Sadly, however, the issue of elder abuse lags behind these advances. Mistreatment of the elderly is a complex issue because of the varied forms it takes and because of the growing number of vulnerable seniors and caregivers both at institutions and in community settings. The Environmental Protection Agency’s Aging Initiative reports that approximately 40.3 Americans were age 65 and older in 2010 and projects that this figure will grow to more than 72 million by 2030 (EPA 2011). Prevalence data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest that between 1 and 2 million U.S. residents age 65 or older have been abused, neglected, or exploited (CDC 2012a; CDC 2012b).

Grantmakers have already been addressing this issue for many years. The Elder Justice Act within the Affordable Care Act (ACA) creates a new stream of funding to leverage, and a fresh platform for policy change. Over \$700 million is allocated to improve supports and services that address elder abuse. These funds, however, are not yet appropriated, and outcomes of the pending U.S. Supreme Court case on the ACA may greatly change its future implementation and funding opportunities. Although no one can predict the outcomes of these situations, the opportunity for philanthropy to engage in this critical topic is both timely and urgent.

### FORMS OF ABUSE

The ACA defines elder abuse as “the knowing infliction of physical or psychological harm or the knowing deprivation of goods or services that are necessary to meet essential needs or to avoid physical or psychological harm” to a vulnerable older adult. Although there is some similarity to the forms that child abuse and domestic violence take (physical, emotional, sexual, and abandonment), elder abuse can be unique, particularly in situations of financial exploitation.

### NEW OPPORTUNITIES IN THE ELDER JUSTICE ACT

- Elevates elder justice issues to national attention.
- Improves the quality, quantity, and accessibility of information.
- Increases knowledge and supports promising projects.
- Develops capacity and expertise in forensic pathology.
- Supports the creation of “safe havens” and victim assistance programs for at-risk and victimized seniors.

Source: The Elder Justice Coalition 2011

Financial exploitation includes “illegal taking, misuse, or concealment of funds, property, or assets of a vulnerable elder” (NCEA 2011a; NCEA 2011b). The National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (2012) states that older adults can be targets of this kind of abuse because “persons over the age of 50 control over 70 percent of the nation’s wealth” and have varying levels of sophistication regarding finances, especially in an era of on-line banking and electronic communication. The prevalence of senior financial exploitation is on the rise and can range from predatory lending practices to coercing a senior relative into changing their will.

The National Elder Mistreatment Study found that 11 percent of elders reported experiencing at least one form of mistreatment in the past year (Acierno et al. 2009). The victimization rate was higher for those seniors who also lived in poverty, did not work, had issues with their health, or had a general lack of social support. Additional research suggests that as few as 1 out of 23 abuse cases are self-reported by seniors and that only 16 percent of abusive situations are referred for help (Lifespan et al. 2011; Bonnie et al. 2003).

### WHAT FUNDERS CAN DO

There are a variety of strategies foundations have undertaken to address this critical issue.

- **Awareness and Prevention** – Foundations invest in training and education, providing technical assistance, and disseminating information about abuse prevention strategies. Some examples include: expanding the pool of

qualified caregivers and guardians; increasing experts' ability to investigate abuse allegations; expanding the number of professionals who can identify and report abuse (clergy, bank tellers, medical personnel, police officers); and communicating the risk signs and abuse red flags (for families, seniors, service agencies, and long-term care facilities).

Communications efforts occur at both the community and national levels. One national example is the "Join Us" Campaign conducted by the National Council on Aging (NCOA), which promotes Annual World Elder Abuse Awareness Day on June 15 by providing fact sheets on abuse and guides to becoming involved in the campaign. NCOA is supported by The Atlantic Philanthropies, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, MetLife Foundation, The SCAN Foundation, California HealthCare Foundation, AARP Foundation, Archstone Foundation, The Retirement Research Foundation, Wallerstein Foundation, The Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The John A. Hartford Foundation, and Margaret A. Cargill Foundation.

- **Direct Services and Interventions** – Foundations support many direct service programs that provide assistance to seniors who have experienced or are at-risk of maltreatment. One such initiative is the Weinberg Center for Elder Abuse Prevention, funded in part by the Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation. It is a unique model in which an emergency victim shelter operates within an already existing long-term care facility, with a full range of services such as basic needs assessments, legal advocacy, and counseling.

Foundations also invest in shoring up external supports, such as senior groups or organizations that reduce social isolation. Programs that focus on caregivers and guardians can screen for stress, build coping skills, and provide education about appropriate care. One example is The Caregiver Initiative of The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation in which 14 nonprofit organizations in nine states were granted a total of \$8.1 million (with matching requirements of an additional \$3.3 million) for innovative and evidence-based community projects with the purpose of supporting caregivers of older adults.

- **Policy Analysis and Advocacy** – Foundations are interested in creating systemic change to address elder abuse by supporting improved abuse reporting and response systems, increasing system coordination and capacity of the often fragmented and under-resourced Adult Protective Services, analyzing policy and legislation at the state and national levels that affect victims, and supporting advocates who can promote change and increase awareness about the problem.

Foundations also invest in collaboratives and multidisciplinary

teams that tackle this issue. One example of this approach is the NYC Elder Abuse Center, which has received grants from multiple foundations to provide professionals with the information and tools they need to assist victims. The project enhances collaboration and coordination among critical stakeholders from government and nonprofit agencies to create a streamlined and rapid response to elder abuse cases in New York City.

- **Research and Evaluation** – Foundations recognize that if this issue is to be addressed on the policy, education, and intervention fronts, it is very important to collect better, frequent, and more current data. Increasingly, many are interested in outcomes-based research that defines the success of the intervention in reducing the occurrences of elder abuse, increasing the number of people who can identify and intervene in abuse situations, and enhancing quality of life for the victims.

The Archstone Foundation's Elder Abuse and Neglect Initiative incorporates the development of evidence-based programs founded on outcomes-based research along with the evaluation of foundation-funded initiatives. Investments under this initiative included: researching effective forensic center models; supporting fatality review investigations for data collection; evaluating improvements to the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program; and determining the effect of the Home Lending Protection Project, focused on preventing financial exploitation. The results of this five-year project culminated in a report of the evaluation findings and next steps. Since 2005, the Archstone Foundation has supported over 75 elder abuse projects, with funding levels exceeding \$10 million.

## CONCLUSION

Only 2 percent of all the federal funding dedicated to abuse and neglect prevention is devoted to elder abuse (National Council on Aging 2011). This crisis touches lives in both very public and very personal ways. Grantmakers can continue to advance the field by identifying elder abuse prevention as a priority, drawing on the successful models of what has already been accomplished, and making strategic commitments to ensure that this issue is not forgotten.

## SOURCES

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