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Better together to provide awareness, support and prevention of elder abuse in our rural communities

Maree Montgomery

Seniors Rights Service/Albury Wodonga Health

Synopsis

Elder abuse is a silent yet pervasive tragedy occurring daily within our communities, a grim topic enmeshed in a rich context of family, culture, tradition, expectation, finance and familial law.

Elder abuse has a prominence within our communities with 5-10% of older Australians (180,000–360,000) experiencing abuse, often at the hand of a person they trust, 28% of those reporting abuse are currently living with their abusive adult child. (SRS, 2018)

An imbalance of power and infringement of the basic human rights, elder abuse encompasses neglect, isolation, violation and dispossession.

The national agenda for elder abuse has recently quickened its much needed pace in order to; provide for the safety of older individuals, review current social policy and frameworks, instruction of prevention strategies and responses, and the recognition of the unique circumstances and perspectives of elder abuse (SRS 2018; Warren & Blundell 2018)

These factors are abetted by the formation of a national body, Elder Abuse Action Australia (EAAA) and additional research funding to investigate and afford recommendations, rights frameworks and law reform (SRS, 2018;OPAN, 2018).

An essential component of planning, defining and generating a rights framework and law reforms concerning abuse of the older person is to inaugurate the crucial work of undertaking the complex conversations with all Australians around abuse of our elderly, and thereby providing a platform to bring the issue out of the shadows. It is in the telling these stories, the committing of voice, that will allow our communities to understand and address the issues that face older Australians.

Project

The Community Empowerment by Education and Innovation project is specifically aimed at generating discussions on elder abuse in our communities across NSW and is a direct action outcome of the Seniors Rights Service 5th National Elder Abuse Conference and Elder Abuse Action Australia agenda July 2018.

The project aims to provide via the utilisation of recorded interviews by Ellen Fanning with key peak bodies and stakeholders, a platform for discussion and dissemination of information with our community leaders, stakeholders, health providers, councils, individuals and groups such as and not limited to, Probus, Rotary, Men's Shed, Country Women's Association, LGBTI, Indigenous and Diverse Communities across regional and remote New South Wales.

The project and resources are designed to guide the conversation of elder abuse. The interviews provide unique perspectives of abuse, conveying topics including ageism, banking and financial abuse, vulnerability of older LGBTI peoples and the barriers experienced for indigenous peoples and diverse communities, to the floor.

The interviews provide a scaffold and gently unpack the at times difficult subject, allowing the topic and insight of the interviewer to initiate the intended 'spotlight' on the mistreatment of our older Australians, now, together within our rural and remote communities.

The hope is together we can 'better' empower communities to begin conversations about the abuse of our older people, and to share experiences, awareness and skills among community members. To lead and facilitate further discussions and ensure referral pathways to existing services are understood, that communities share a strong voice and demonstrate the way forward into the prevention of elder abuse.

Attendees and evaluations

The project has undergone a midpoint evaluation and the overall outcomes and discussions indicate the importance and urgency of having an opportunity to deliberate and 'owning voice' on such a topic, improving awareness of elder abuse within our communities especially throughout regional NSW.

Many attendees within the 8 NSW towns indicated the necessity for, including assistance with, interactive and supportive networks ranging from health, (myGov, myDr) ageing in place, legal and home care packages/services, and power of attorney advice. Many patrons state the lack of personal computer knowledge and Internet trust heightened their feelings of separation. These services, even if on an intermittent basis would provide a connectedness as they felt isolated through a number of factors: geography, lack of personal and public transportation, limited face to face services, concerns with regards to computer literacy and resources and privacy concerns. (Warren & Blundell 2018)

Other times during the discussions, attendees were extremely brave and vulnerable in sharing their personal experiences, communicating their fears and trade-offs for family inclusion often jeopardising connections and time with loved grandchildren and the shame of 'being in this situation'. The respite in the acknowledgement of a hotline number for elder abuse assistance resonated in many a patron's evaluation.

However on a positive note the attendees discussed the 'traditionally rural' communities have found the inverse to also to be true owing to the close-knit nature of the community and that this afforded support and connectedness.

Power of attorney was a strong discussion topic with many having had personal experience in the role-both experiencing and voicing the positive and negative aspects experienced, and deliberating on the difficulties at times to assist the older family member (due to internal family perspectives) on one hand and the ease at which another may exploit and defraud the elderly on the other.

All of these features highlight the sensitive nature of these discussions and conceivably the requirement of an on call counsellor and solicitor by phone available to attendees during and or post the event.

The discussions, albeit only a few in number, are of such an important nature the continuing opportunities for 'voice' is pivotal. Suggestions range from; a NSW roving service to meet many differing community needs, a national campaign ad to highlight the services and referral pathways or simply the continuation of opportunities such as this project to continue awareness and education.

References

Seniors Rights Service (2018) 5th National Elder Abuse Conference, Sydney Australia.

Warren, A., & Blundell, B. (2018) Elder Abuse in Rural and Remote Communities: Social Policy, Prevention and Responses. Perth, WA: Curtin University and Older Person's Advocacy Network

Presenter

Maree Montgomery has been nursing for 32 years, within metropolitan regional, remote areas and abroad. She has worked in acute, emergency and intensive care sectors. She has a Bachelor Science (1991), Grad Cert Critical Care (2002), Grad Dip Education (2008) and Masters Critical Care (2014). Currently she is Project Manager Community Empowerment Seniors Rights Service. Maree's interests include patient justice, especially in the vulnerable peoples within the acute health sectors.