FAQs from the Field

Frequently Asked Questions About How To Change How We Talk About Elder Abuse

❶ What is the Talking Elder Abuse project about?

In 2016, the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) partnered with the FrameWorks Institute—an organization that conducts research to improve communications on important social issues—to better understand public perceptions of elder abuse and to enhance public discourse accordingly. During the first phase of research, FrameWorks found that the public lacks awareness and understanding of the societal causes and effects of elder abuse, as well as knowledge of needed solutions.

To meet this challenge, FrameWorks worked with the NCEA to develop the *Structure of Justice* narrative: an evidence-based communications strategy that demonstrates how we can restructure our communities to prevent and address elder abuse. Importantly, this narrative generates a sense of collective efficacy among the public, leading to the belief that we have the collective capacity to create needed change. In May 2017, the NCEA and FrameWorks published *Talking Elder Abuse,* an online toolkit that shows advocates and experts how to apply the *Structure of Justice* narrative to the practice of elder abuse communications. A leading source of information about elder abuse, the NCEA is overseeing a nationwide effort to promote this framing strategy to spark a more informed public and political discourse about the issue.

❷ When applying this framing strategy, which audience(s) should we target?

This framing strategy is intended for use with *all* segments of the American public. Targeting the broadest base possible will convey that everyone in our society has a role in addressing this issue. Remember, even people with little or no knowledge of elder abuse care about justice and improving the social welfare of our nation. That said, this strategy can be tailored to reach audiences with varying levels of expertise, such as:

- Older adults who have been affected by abuse and are therefore interested in it
- Journalists who cover older people, aging, and other social issues
- Advocates working on related issues, such as environmental justice, sexual abuse prevention, women's rights, child abuse prevention, etc.
- College students and others studying social movements

3 Is this communications strategy *really* more effective? Will it garner more attention than a strategy that uses images of people who have experienced abuse?

This strategy is more effective at fostering a collective understanding of the causes of and solutions to elder abuse. It aims not merely to grab attention through images of injury or harm but rather to mobilize the public to make more informed decisions that will prevent and address elder abuse. It is a long-term strategy for major social change, not a short-term one for gains on the margins.

4 We often use brochures and presentations as educational materials. Can we feature signs of abuse—or refer to it—to educate the public without violating this communications strategy?

We know that some words and concepts are difficult to avoid. A framing strategy navigates around these difficult words and concepts. The public holds both productive and unproductive patterns of thinking that we can strategically emphasize or deemphasize. Because the public doesn't fully understand elder abuse—and often focuses on the vulnerability of individual victims and the moral failings of individual perpetrators—it is best to avoid language and images that reinforce these tendencies. Deemphasizing unproductive patterns in thinking creates more space to emphasize productive ones, such as proposed solutions and images that portray older people as empowered participants in our society. Or course, it's ok to mention "vulnerable" individuals or "perpetrators," but it's best to assign these concepts a supportive rather than starring role in your communications.

5 Does this communications strategy take cultural differences into account?

Yes. Participants in this research were recruited by a professional marketing firm and were selected to represent variation in ethnicity, gender, age, residential location, educational background (as a proxy for class), political views, religious involvement, and family situation. The sample included 9 women and 11 men. Eleven of the 20 participants self-identified as "white," six as "Black," one as "Asian," and two as "Hispanic." Eleven participants described their political views as "middle of the road," six as "liberal," and three as "conservative." The mean age of the sample was 46 years old, with an age range from 28 to 67. One participant was a high school graduate, seven had completed some college, nine were college graduates, and three had postgraduate education. Ten of the 20 were married, and 13 were the parent of at least one child.

6 How will people who experience elder abuse be able to identify with materials that use this strategy when we don't show or discuss their traumatic experiences?

The concept of justice appeals to our society's shared values and activates a civic action mindset when it comes to abuse. The public, as well as those who experience elder abuse, believe in the value of justice; as such, advocates should use it to appeal to all audiences. It may feel disingenuous to avoid terms like "vulnerability," "victims," or "perpetrators." But broadening the public's image of older people and people with disabilities who have experienced abuse helps members of those communities by communicating that all people—regardless of age or ability—deserve justice and community participation.

7 In our state, reporting, investigations, and support services require that victims meet a legal definition of vulnerability. How can we remove the word "vulnerable" from our materials and still meet reporting guidelines, cooperate with investigations, and determine who is eligible for adult protective services?

We understand that some words and concepts, such as "vulnerable" and "vulnerability," can't be entirely avoided. The point is to make sure these evocative words don't overshadow your broader message—as they often do in elder abuse communications. FrameWorks' research shows that the dominant image of older people, including those with disabilities, is of a "dependent" and "deteriorating" group of people. This fuels the perception that elder abuse is inevitable and lacks realistic solutions.

The public even borders on blaming victims of abuse. Many research participants referred to victims as "children" and "objects of care"—not people with dignity who are capable of participating in and contributing to society. To avoid reinforcing this mindset, steer clear of words like "vulnerable." When such words must be mentioned, they should not steal the material's larger focus. One solution is to restructure the content. Mention important information, like causes and solutions, and then include a definition of the concept of vulnerability later on.

8 Are the communications recommendations and suggested edits only for print materials or can we apply them in presentations?

This communications strategy can be applied to all types of educational, promotional, and other public-facing communications materials, such as presentations, talking points, social media posts, web content, annual reports, community events, op-eds, event flyers/ posters, letters to the editor, journal articles, media inquiries, newsletters, in-person conversations, press releases, etc.

9 What if my communication focuses on one type of abuse? Is this strategy applicable?

Yes. In fact, providing details about the work you do, as well as specific examples of programs or policies that are needed, will help build public understanding of this issue. However, keep in mind that focusing on acts of abuse or on individuals who experience it reinforces unproductive associations about the "kinds" of people who either inflict or suffer from elder abuse. To prevent unproductive thinking and build support for systems-level change, emphasize the structural causes of the specific type of abuse you work to prevent.

10 I would love to adopt this communications strategy, but my organization does not have the funding or capacity to change our public awareness materials right now. What are some quick tips that are easy to implement?

This strategy does not require an all-or-nothing approach. The more you apply its components to your communications, the more potent its effects will be. But no step is too small when you're getting started. One first step is to introduce the value of *Justice* at the beginning of your existing communications. This will orient your audience to the message that follows and increase its overall impact. Also, watch out for alternative values, like empathy or affection; they don't have the same proven ability to build public understanding and demand for change. Replace those values with an appeal to Justice.

All framing recommendations can be implemented on their own, but they achieve greater impact when combined with others. Whichever frame element you incorporate first, remember that changing the national conversation on elder abuse is a major undertaking that will take time— and lots of practice. Don't feel the need to implement every recommendation, or every piece of the *Structure of Justice* narrative, at once. More important is that we all work toward social change, one message at a time.