

Sample Communications

Pamphlet for Caregivers

A Caregiver's Guide to Preventing and Addressing Elder Abuse



As a caregiver...
What do I need to know about elder abuse?

Elder abuse can be prevented when we understand the conditions that cause it. A just society preserves the safety and dignity of all its members, across the lifespan, but we don't yet live up to that ideal. Elder abuse is an injustice that erodes older people's safety and dignity by subjecting them to verbal or physical abuse, neglect, financial exploitation, or sexual assault. Working toward a truly just society means eradicating elder abuse in all forms. We can do that by creating the conditions that prevent elder abuse.

Think of it this way: Our society is like a building. If the foundation and structure are strong and stable, then people inside can go about their daily lives free from harm or worry. If the foundation is weak, or if the support beams are in disrepair, then people inside are not secure. Improving and reinforcing our society's "support beams"—for example, by making sure older people are not isolated from their communities and that systems are in place to spot problems and intervene to fix them—is the best way to prevent elder abuse. With strong support structures in place, we can all participate in our communities and live free of neglect and abuse as we age.

Pamphlets like this one, which is intended for caregivers, are good opportunities to effectively frame elder abuse.

Appealing to the tested value of **Justice** is an effective way to convey that elder abuse is an issue that matters to us all.

The **Support Structure** explanatory metaphor can be used creatively to help the public understand that contextual and conditional factors—rather than individual behaviors alone—can help protect a community against elder abuse.

What role do I play in preventing elder abuse?

Our capacity to care for others depends on having stable supports in place. We all need support—caregivers, too. Being the sole or primary caregiver of an older person is stressful—especially when support structures are weak. Caring for someone else can leave us feeling emotionally drained or stretched thin; when we feel this way on a regular basis, we may not be able to provide sustained, quality care. We may even be putting ourselves or the older people we care for at risk.

We can help prevent elder abuse by building stronger social structures to support caregivers and the people they care for.

If you or someone you know is a caregiver, you can build a network of contacts for older people receiving care. People who attend their church, bring them to the grocery store, deliver their mail, visit from out of town, or provide their medical care are all part of this network. Connecting the people who provide these supportive services helps caregivers support one another. Many community agencies provide supplemental care services, like food delivery, transportation assistance, and health care advice. Find out what's available in your community and make sure the network you are building includes them, too. Caregivers can also learn from and help one another through support groups that provide a place to exchange tips and best practices and to share experiences and talk through challenges.

Though the primary audience of this pamphlet is caregivers, broadly inclusive language helps build understanding about the responsibility we all have to prevent and address elder abuse.

What are the warning signs?

Interventions are most effective when they are targeted and timely. To ward off tragedy, construction workers install support beams so buildings can withstand heavy winds, earthquakes, and other disasters. We need to take the same approach with elder abuse. We need social support beams, like home visitation services and accessible public transit, to protect against abuse and neglect. We can all contribute to this effort by understanding the risk factors for elder abuse and mitigating hazardous or unsafe situations before they escalate.

Warning signs include changes in an older person's appearance, demeanor, behavior, and routine, as well as general signs of low-quality care. Soiled clothing and piles of dirty dishes or laundry, for example, may be caused by understaffed or improperly managed facilities, ill-equipped or overwhelmed family members, or self-neglect. These are signs that you need to ask more detailed questions about living conditions and perhaps alert other caregivers and contacts about the situation. The more people who can sense a potential problem, the more likely it will be caught early and addressed properly.

Remind the public that elder abuse is a social problem, as opposed to an isolated or individual problem, by pointing to specific interventions that involve coordinated and collective action.

How can I be part of the solution?

Caregivers have an essential role to play in ending elder abuse. All caregivers must be able to recognize when critical interventions are needed and know how to access available resources quickly and effectively. A reporting process should be put in place in every community so that knowledgeable individuals, skilled professionals, and responsible agencies can respond in times of crisis. Points of contact include family members, long-term care ombudsmen, Adult Protective Services agents, and legal advisors.

Beyond addressing individual situations, contributing to collective advocacy efforts, such as town hall discussions, awareness-raising campaigns, and meet-and-greets with elected officials will build public understanding about elder abuse and strengthen the social supports needed to prevent it. Strong, stable communities with structures to support people of all ages not only ensure justice and dignity for older people but also secure the wellbeing of caregivers and enhance the quality of life for us all.

Build public efficacy and engagement in the effort to eliminate elder abuse by demonstrating (rather than simply stating) that solutions are available and change is possible.