

Toward an Elder Abuse Prevention Campaign

Abstract

As the aging of the baby boomer generation triggers dramatic growth in our nation's population of older adults, the proportion of our population affected by or at risk of elder abuse is increasing. Although inconsistencies among state-level data collection methods make it difficult to know the exact extent of the problem, what is clear is that members of the public are ill-informed about elder abuse—and ill-equipped to prevent high-risk situations or recognize and report instances of abuse.

To determine the feasibility of a public education campaign addressing elder abuse, Reingold conducted a market research study that included focus groups and interviews with adult protective services professionals and members of the public; analyses of elder maltreatment awareness and prevention campaigns; assessments of media coverage of elder abuse; and a review of academic journal articles on best practices and lessons learned in interpersonal violence interventions. We also talked with potential communication partners.

The findings were clear: There is a pressing need for a clear and consistent public education campaign to raise awareness and understanding of elder abuse, as well as to educate people about identifying and avoiding situations in which older Americans are at risk of abuse.

Identifying the Problem

Elder abuse is a hidden problem in our society. The veil of silence shrouding this troubling issue makes it impossible to know the full extent of the problem, but recent estimates suggest that one in every 10 older Americans will be abused. As 72 million baby boomers grow older, these estimates place more than 7.2 million people at risk of elder abuse, and yet the general public has little knowledge or understanding of this problem and how to prevent and stop it.

Lack of awareness about elder abuse rose to the forefront in all of our research activities. Several focus group participants, interview respondents, and potential communication partners indicated that the problem is not fully understood in their communities. Our media audit also revealed a general lack of understanding of elder abuse among journalists who play a role in educating the public about social concerns.

Where to Begin?

Elder abuse is a complex relationship problem that includes physical and emotional abuse, neglect by a caregiver, self-neglect, and financial exploitation. Interventions for elder abuse are controversial and raise questions about the cognitive abilities of the people affected by abuse

and their right to make decisions for themselves; social taboos against incriminating close family members who may be perpetrating the abuse; and questions about how to define and implement evidence-based interventions in the face of data collection practices that vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

There are also structural problems that make it difficult to increase intervention in elder abuse, including an under-resourced and over-extended adult protective services system; inconsistent laws governing reporting of elder abuse; and the lack of a national elder abuse prevention helpline to provide a single source of information and referrals.

With so many challenges, it is difficult to know where to begin. A social marketing campaign designed to improve public awareness and understanding of elder abuse can aid in addressing all of these factors.

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Protecting people with compromised cognitive abilities. The evidence is clear that people who are experiencing age-related cognitive decline do not respond well to messages about protecting themselves and their investments from abuse. They may resist interference in their affairs due to a sense of pride and effort to conceal their diminishing capabilities—or they may simply not understand or appreciate that they are at risk. That is why it is critical to start educating the baby boomers about the risks of elder abuse before they lose cognitive abilities, and to provide them with detailed information on actions they can take now to guard against potential abuse or exploitation. Actions such as creating a long-term care plan and establishing dual power of attorney so that no single person has control over one's finances are important steps to take.

Overcoming the stigma of victimization and taboos against incriminating loved ones. Being a victim or perpetrator of abuse carries a powerful stigma in our society. The stigma of victimization and the fact that perpetrators of elder abuse often are relatives or “trusted” friends make it difficult for victims to acknowledge what is happening to them and report abuse or otherwise protect themselves. Furthermore, the relationship between the abuser and the abused is often so complicated that outsiders who perceive elder abuse may be disinclined to intervene because they think it is “a private matter” or “none of my business.”

While bystanders may be appalled by elder abuse, they may feel as though they need permission to intervene or need assurance that their intervention will not make the situation

worse. Victim blaming is also a common reaction—among both the general public and victims themselves—that creates a serious challenge when it comes to preventing and responding to elder abuse.

A social marketing campaign can help reduce the stigma of victimization with messages that let people who are abused, and their family members and bystanders as well, know that the abuse is not their fault. These messages should use language of survivorship that help empower at-risk individuals to remove themselves from dangerous situations and enable abused individuals to break free of the cycle of abuse. An educational campaign can also aid in overcoming the belief that elder abuse is a private family matter, using messages that demonstrate the impact of elder abuse on society as a whole and focus on the responsibility of all community members to look out for vulnerable older adults.

Facilitating the development and implementation of evidence-based interventions. Programmatic hurdles, including differing legal definitions of elder abuse across jurisdictions and a lack of a standardized national data collection system, are critical challenges facing the field of elder abuse prevention. The ambiguity about what constitutes elder abuse is not only a critical communications challenge; it will also cause ongoing problems when it comes to data collection and program evaluation.

*"I am in the Aging Network. I should know what to do with this, where to go, but I don't."
—Interview Respondent,
National Council on Aging
employee.*

Data collection, evidence-based interventions, and well-resourced adult protective services systems are critical elements in elder abuse prevention, but they are not prerequisites for launching a social marketing campaign. In fact, public support for funding allocations to support data collection and improved interventions may be a positive by-product of greater public awareness of elder abuse. It is important to recognize the value of evidence-based interventions and continued research, but it is equally important to engage the public in the fight against elder abuse and allow public education to fuel advocacy for funding and political support for an improved infrastructure to collect and analyze data.

Addressing pressure on the adult protective services (APS) system. A well timed and carefully implemented social marketing campaign can support the APS system in a number of ways. On first blush it may seem that a social marketing campaign would place undue strain on an adult protective services system that is generally overworked and lacks the infrastructure to respond

to increased reports of suspected elder abuse. In reality a campaign can help re-position APS in the public eye and help garner public support for APS.

“Most people are surprised to find out that there is an equivalent of Child Protective Services for adults.” —Interview Respondent, APS Professional

First, as with the matter of data collection, increased public awareness and outcry about elder abuse can help in securing more funding to bolster the APS system. Second, many members of the public do not know there is an equivalent of Child Protective Services for adults. Members of the public who are aware of APS may have outdated views and think of them as “the men in white coats” who will lock their friend or neighbor away in a facility. A social marketing campaign can improve the public’s knowledge, understanding, and trust of APS.

It is also important to note that behavior change takes time. Although a well-executed social marketing campaign will ultimately result in increased reports of elder abuse, which will then need to be investigated, increased reporting may not happen immediately. And, while reporting suspected abuse is an easy call to action for a campaign, it is not the only action people need to take to prevent elder abuse. An awareness-focused campaign that encourages people to prepare their long term-care plans, file dual powers of attorney, and stay involved in the community to prevent isolation may naturally evolve into a campaign that exhorts people to report suspected abuse when the APS system is better prepared to respond to those reports.

Finally, we know elder abuse happens much more often than it is reported. The fact that many instances of elder abuse are unreported, and therefore go uninvestigated, does not mean they didn’t happen. Waiting to blow the whistle on those cases until APS is better resourced and able to respond will not undo the harm, nor will it make the cases easier to investigate. The stakes are too high to leave this issue in the dark.

Elder Abuse Campaign Goals

There is a pressing need for a strategic and multifaceted campaign that includes media relations, public service announcements, online tools and information, and partner outreach, among other things. Such a coordinated national effort to educate the public about elder abuse will:

- Provide people with accurate information about what elder abuse is, where it happens, and how to recognize it.
- Show people that elder justice is relevant to them—if not directly, then through their parents and grandparents, friends and neighbors.

- Reduce the stigma of victimization, and let people who are abused know that the abuse is not their fault.
- Fight ageism with messages that strengthen a system of values in which older adults are respected and appreciated.

A social marketing campaign to raise awareness of elder abuse does not have to be a cost prohibitive proposition. By working with enthusiastic partners and strategically employing online and traditional media, it is possible to elevate elder abuse prevention considerably. Online and broadcast media can raise public awareness of how to recognize and respond to elder abuse. Search engine optimization (SEO) techniques can increase the visibility of online information about the issue, and search engine marketing can deliver tailored messages to target audiences such as caregivers, older adults, and senior services providers. Strategic earned media and media relations efforts can secure broadcast time for public service announcements on elder abuse prevention. These media can also enable tracking of the reach and effectiveness of the campaign messages.

Four Approaches to Effecting Social Change

Although a public communication and outreach campaign on the subject of elder abuse is critical, it is important to note that communication is only one aspect of effecting social change and, if done in isolation, will have little impact.

Best practices in social marketing emphasize the importance of a multifaceted approach to achieving social change, using legal, technological, economic, and informational avenues. While a social marketing campaign can address the informational aspect, the other three aspects create an environment for change. In fact, in these areas we are at a transformational point.

Legal. For the first time there is a significant legal foundation to support and unite elder abuse prevention efforts. Although legal barriers still exist, enactment of the Elder Justice Act was a milestone that sets the stage for increased public discourse about elder abuse and its prevention. Increased funding, information-sharing, training, and multiagency coordination under the law will help create an infrastructure for communication and outreach.

Technological. New technologies such as instant messaging services, social networking sites, and even voice-controlled mobile devices provide an opportunity to re-engage older adults, and keep them engaged as they become less mobile in their later years. Isolation is a known risk factor for elder abuse, but for the first time, housebound older adults can interact with the outside world online. A 2010 study found that the number of seniors who regularly use social

media is growing. Between April 2009 and May 2010, the number of Internet users ages 50 and older engaged on social media increased from 22 to 42 percent.¹ It is reasonable to believe that baby boomers will continue to be avid users of social media as they age. Elder abuse prevention efforts should take advantage of these new technologies to keep older adults active and engaged in community life, even when it is difficult for them to move around.

Economic. Of all forms of elder abuse, financial exploitation is the best understood by the public. In addition, today the public is very focused on economic issues and primed to hear messages about the cost of elder abuse in terms of financial losses to elders, institutional costs due to stolen identities and false claims on programs such as Medicare and Social Security, and health care costs of elders who are abused and neglected. There are already successful communications and legal efforts addressing health care fraud, underscoring its impact on both elders and society as a whole. Today's economic climate has primed the public to listen and respond strongly to information about the costs of all forms of abuse of older Americans, not just financial exploitation, and to support efforts to prevent this abuse.

Conclusion

Elder abuse is a complex issue that needs to be tackled in many different ways. A strategic social marketing campaign designed to increase public awareness and understanding of the problem is a critical piece of a coordinated national effort addressing elder abuse. Without it, the issue will remain distorted and misunderstood.

The trumpeted backdrop of a growing aging population and the foundation being forged under the Elder Justice Act provide an opportune time to launch a campaign that rides a small wave of public awareness. But time is of the essence. The time is right to educate the public about elder abuse prevention and intervention so that baby boomers can prepare for their later years while they are still active, mentally competent, and fully independent.

DISCLAIMER:

This White Paper reflects the opinions and thoughts of the author as submitted to the Elder Justice Coordinating Council. It does not represent the interests or positions of the Elder Justice Coordinating Council nor any of the federal agencies that are members of the Council. The Council has reviewed this White Paper and has taken its contents under advisement, but does not endorse nor adopt it wholly or in part as representing the policies or positions of the federal government.

¹ Madden, Mary. Older Adults and Social Media. Pew Internet & American Life Project, August 27, 2010, <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Older-Adults-and-Social-Media.aspx>, accessed on October 16, 2012.