



Abuse in Later Life—Advocacy Across the Lifespan

Prepared by the National Clearinghouse for Abuse in Later Life (NCALL), 2010

The Case of Verbalee T.: Between 1999 and 2006, Verbalee T.¹ was repeatedly verbally, sexually, and physically abused by her husband in Wisconsin. Despite interventions and actions throughout that time by the county's Adult Protective Services System, the civil and criminal justice systems, her children, her medical care providers (physicians, emergency rooms, and hospitals), intermittent long term care services, home health services and others, Verbalee did not receive the protection from her husband that she desired or deserved. Many systems intervened, but let her down – in large part because each system had some, but not all, of the information available. The local domestic abuse program was never contacted to work with Verbalee. Decisions that were intended to aid her ended up leading to her further harm. If there had been a coordinated effort in the community's response to the abuse, perhaps the end of Verbalee's life would have been more peaceful.

- **The Aging of America**

- The number of persons **over 65** in the United States will approximately **double** in the next two decades. Persons age 65 and older will represent roughly **one in five** Americans; compared with one in eight today. Currently, **25% of adult women are age 60 or older**. Persons **85 and older are the fastest growing population** group in the United States. The life expectancy of individuals is growing; it is likely that the average lifespan of our children will be 100. (U.S. DHHS, Area on Aging, 2009.)

- **Abuse in Later Life--Prevalence**

- **11% of individuals 60 and older reported experiencing abuse within the last year.** (Acierno, 2009, p. 13.)
- Elder abuse victims are at **more than twice the risk to die prematurely** than older adults who are not victims of abuse. (Dong, et.al., 2009.)
- Although each year the number of reported incidents of abuse in later life grows, approximately **84% of elder abuse incidents are not reported.** (NCEA, 2004.)
- Forms of abuse include: **physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, neglect, and financial exploitation.** (NCEA, 2004.)
- Family members were the alleged abusers in over **76%** of the incidents reported to researchers. (Acierno, 2009, p. 8) **57%** of reported physical abuse was **perpetrated by a partner/spouse**; **19%** by **adult children, grandchildren, or other family members.** (Acierno, 2009, p. 44.)

¹ The name and other identifying information have been changed to protect the victim's privacy.

- As compared with younger victims of domestic abuse, victims of abuse in later life may be **less likely to report** abuse due to factors such as fear of retaliation; fear and shame; reluctance to implicate member of family; power differential between older victim and partner, child, family member, caregiver – who are or are perceived to be more powerful; cultural issues; isolation; loss of social network; language barriers; financial barriers, concerns about being removed from their own home (to a nursing home) and ageism. (Brandl, et. al, 2007, pp 52-58.)
- Victims of one form of elder abuse (e.g., financial exploitation) are at highest risk for **other, co-occurring forms of abuse** (e.g., neglect, physical abuse, psychological abuse). (Bonnie & Wallace, 2003; Lachs, et al, JAMA, 1998; Quinn and Tomita, 1997.)
- As compared with younger victims, older victims have **less information about services and resources and less access to them.** (Wilke and Vinton, Affilia, 2005.)
- 85% of older adults who experience sexual abuse **did not report to police or other authorities.** (Aceirno, 2009. p. 10)

- **Resources**

- **Support Groups:** As of 2008, there were 29 support groups tailored to older women victims in the United States.
- **Specialized Services:** As of 2008, 56 direct service programs has created specialized services for older victims of abuse including crisis intervention, legal and systems advocacy, counseling, emergency shelter and transitional housing.
- **Assisted Living and Long Term Care Options:** Some abuse in later programs have working agreements with assisted living facilities to provide temporary, emergency shelter for older victims needing assistance or care, illustrating the importance of collaboration among those who care for and provide services to older victims.
- **Abuse in Later Life Interdisciplinary Teams:** The purpose of an Interdisciplinary Team (I-Team) is to work collaboratively within and across a community or county to assure safety and coordinated services for victims of abuse in later life. The strength of each I-Team depends on the range of professionals involved with the I-Team. Professionals from law enforcement, clergy, APS, health care, disability and aging systems and domestic abuse and sexual assault programs are involved with their I-Team to provide better services and safety for victims of abuse in later life.
- **Coordinated Community Response Teams:** Local Coordinated Community Response (CCR) Teams include a variety of professionals working to improve a community's systems' responses to end violence and improve safety. Professionals from law enforcement, faith communities, APS, health care, domestic abuse and sexual assault advocacy programs, civil and criminal justice systems, and the aging and disability systems participate as members of a CCR.

References:

Acierno, Ron et.al. (March 2009) *National Elder Mistreatment Study*. NCJRS.

Bonnie, R. J., & Wallace, R. B., (2003) *EM: Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation in an Aging America*. Washington, D. C.: The National Academies Press.

Brandl, B., Dyer, C.B., Heisler, Otto, J.M., Stiegel, L. A., Thomas, R.W. (2007) *Elder Abuse Detection and Intervention: A Collaborative Approach*. New York. Springer Publishing Company.

Dong, Xinqi et al. (2009) "Abuse and Mortality Risk in a Community Dwelling Population." *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 302(5).

Lachs, M.S., Williams, C.S., O'Brien, S., Pillemer, K.A., and Charlson, M.E. (1998). "The Mortality of Elder Mistreatment." *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 280(5), 428-432.

National Center on Elder Abuse, (2004) Fact Sheet (citing The National Elder Abuse Incidence Study, Final Report, September 1998).

Quinn, M. J. & Tomita, S.K. (1997). *Elder Abuse and Neglect: Causes, Diagnosis, and Intervention Strategies*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Agency on Aging (2009). *A Profile of Older Americans* (2009). (Data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the National Center on Health Statistics and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.)

Wilke, D.J. and Vinton, L. (2005) "The Nature and Impact of Domestic Violence Across Age Cohorts." *Affilia*, 20(3), 316-328.