



## Report for the Elder Abuse Network Grey Bruce

### Building Safe Communities for Seniors Summary from Community Consultation June – September 2016

#### Introduction

In June 2016, as part of Senior's Month, **Violence Prevention Grey Bruce**, in partnership with the **Grey Bruce Council on Aging**, and the **Grey Bruce Elder Abuse Network** held consultations with seniors, senior's organizations, caregivers, and interested community members in four communities: Lion's Head, Flesherton, Owen Sound and Kincardine.

The Community Consultations were held in Legion Halls, and the local Legions donated space in three of the four locations. From July until September an electronic survey (Survey Monkey) was distributed widely to service providers, interested volunteers, individuals and senior's groups to increase the number of participants in the consultation process.

This Community Consultation was the first phase of a one-year project funded by New Horizons for Seniors, by Violence Prevention Grey Bruce to establish an Elder Abuse Network in the region, and to develop and carry out training on Elder Abuse issues. We wanted to hear about ways to increase safety and prevent abuse and neglect for seniors directly from diverse people in their communities. The information from this consultation phase will inform the next steps for the Elder Abuse Network project.

*"Not sure that I would know how to handle elder abuse if I stumbled upon it. Makes me sad." (survey participant)*

#### Methodology

Facilitated group community consultations (focus groups) were held in Owen Sound, Kincardine, Lion's Head and Flesherton. Information about the consultations was distributed widely in advance through the Grey Bruce Council on Aging, local service providers, regional networks and members of Violence Prevention Grey Bruce and the Elder Abuse Network. A facilitator and a note taker attended each consultation. Members of the Grey Bruce Council on Aging attended all four consultations and organized snacks and drinks for participants.

The consultation included an educational component on Elder Abuse based on material in It's Not Right: Neighbours, Friends & Family education Elder Abuse package developed by the Centre for Education and Research into Violence against Women & Children at Western University. The same format and four discussion questions were used at each of the consultations.

A brief pre/post opinion questionnaire was used at the group consultations to collect information on participant demographics and their learning as a result of the consultation.

The electronic survey, distributed after the group consultations, did not use the pre/post opinion questionnaire, but did collect some demographic information. The electronic survey also incorporated feedback from the community sessions to determine if the data from the focus groups reflected broader opinions and thoughts about Senior Abuse issues.

## **Participation**

Attendance at the 4 consultations was lower than anticipated, totalling **25**. The survey had a high response rate that provided input from **87** individuals. Input from people attending a presentation in Paisley is also included in this report.

The information presented in this report is based on feedback from about **135** participants.

## **Participant Demographics**

- 40% of survey participants indicated being 50 or less
- 27% self-identified as seniors.
- Participants at the community consultations were mainly over 60 years of age.
- Several, self-identified professionals attended the consultations and comprised about 23% of the survey respondents (i.e. Police officer, Minister, Psychologist, healthcare provider).
- Concerned community members were the largest contingent for both the survey and community consultations. (People could identify themselves as having more than 1 reason for attending or responding, e.g. senior and concerned community member)
- Most participants in the survey were from Grey (28%) or Bruce (26%). Three people came from other districts and the remainder did not answer this question.

(Note: An error in the survey made it difficult to collect more detailed information about the age of respondents.)

## **Findings from the Community Consultation and Survey**

### **Attitudes and Self- Assessment**

Four statements regarding opinions about senior abuse were presented with 5 rating options (Strongly Disagree through Neither Agree/disagree to Strongly Agree.

1. *Little things that people do can make a difference in big problems like abuse.*

There was a high level of agreement with this statement (somewhat/strongly) 97% on survey, 75% at the consultations.

*"I used to be more informed, more skilled, more comfortable negotiating crises, abusive situations. My area of work, family situation, people I interact with has changed. I don't feel my information, skills are up to date. I'm not confident so might hesitate to intervene." (survey respondent)*

2. *I can identify the warning signs and risk factors of abuse of older adults.*

The majority of respondents agreed (somewhat or strongly) that this was true - 80% on survey, 75% at the consultations.

3. *I wouldn't know how to respond if someone I knew was in a potentially abusive situation*

Respondents at the consultations were about 50/50 on this item; a higher proportion of the survey respondents disagreed with this statement and therefore believed they would know how to respond (70%)

4. *Most abusive situations are a family matter and none of my business.*

There was a high level of disagreement with this (consultation 75%, survey 97%), indicating that respondents do not think it is a family matter and no one else's business.

### **What does the abuse of seniors look like in Grey Bruce?**

Participants in the four community consultations provided a list of what senior abuse looks like in our region. The top 12 issues from that list were used in the survey and survey participants were asked to rank them on a 5-point scale (Not important – Extremely important). Survey participants ranked all 12 items in the range of 'very important' to 'extremely important'. The top ranked issues (in order) were:

1. **Isolation of seniors** due to poverty, lack of transportation and loss of their social groups
2. **Physical abuse and neglect**
3. **Isolation of seniors by their caregivers** and/or family
4. **Emotional and psychological abuse**
5. **Uncoordinated service response** that does not meet the true needs of seniors in their home
6. **Family and/or friends take advantage of dependent seniors** (take their money, move into their homes, pressure them)

*'The family is dependent on the senior for food, housing, clothing. They lose control of their home when family members move in.'* (focus group)

There was some important discussion at two of the community consultations about providing aging people with special needs services and supports, and the need for inclusive approaches for aging intellectually handicapped people. Focus group participants at two consultations also noted aging people with special needs as having higher risks for Elder Abuse.

Some people provided additional issues not on the list, for example: over medication by physicians and family members, lack of access to primary health care (seniors without family doctors).

At each of the community consultations stories of senior abuse emerged as the group became comfortable. There was an initial reluctance to talk about abuse issues at each of the focus groups. For some participants the focus group was a chance to get some information, share their experiences, and find out that they are not alone with the issue of senior abuse.

*'Threats by the family of withdrawal of family support, family visits, grandchildren visiting, if money is not given.'* (focus group)

There were themes repeated in both the focus groups and survey:

- **Financial abuse** including scams, including exploitation by family or trusted friends as well as internet and phone scams and the misuse of Powers of Attorney and joint bank accounts. Financial abuse is noted in research as one of the top senior abuse issues.
- **Isolation** of seniors was another frequently raised issue. Whether it was children living far from aging parents, caregivers causing isolation (I won't drive you to town), the lack of transportation in rural areas, or isolation caused by poverty and/or the lack of access to friends and supports, isolation of seniors was identified as an important reason for abuse being able to happen. This is very consistent with the research that shows that social 'embeddedness' and higher levels of social support lower the risk of elder abuse.
- **Emotional abuse** as it is related to ageism and exploitation by families sharing living space with resulting verbal abuse and restricting the social lives of the elderly person, was a concern noted in all focus groups. Again this is consistent with research that suggests that seniors can be more at risk of emotional and physical abuse, as well as financial abuse if they are sharing living space.
- **The Lack of services**, distance from them and **lack of coordination of existing services** as well as the general **lack of knowledge about available resources**, was identified as a concern at all of the focus groups, and in the survey.

### Why is senior abuse happening in Grey Bruce?

The top 10 responses to this question from the Community Consultations were used in the survey tool and participants were asked to rate the list using a 5-point scale (Don't agree – Strongly agree).

*'People abuse because they can.' (focus group)*

All of the reasons noted by the focus group participants were scored between 4-5, indicating strong agreement. The top reasons are:

1. **Victims of abuse are afraid to speak up because they depend on their family/caregivers.** (Rated 4.74 on the 5 point scale)
2. **Seniors are isolated** in rural communities like ours
3. **Seniors at the onset of dementia are more vulnerable** and at risk for abuse
4. There are too few protections and **too little advocacy** for senior's safety
5. There is a **code of silence around abuse issues** and discomfort or helplessness with this issue within the community and with service providers.

*'We don't want to know, don't want to talk about it. It's family solidarity and protection.' (focus groups)*

Survey participants provided several important additional comments:

- *There is too little education for families and caregivers to understand the nature of an elder's issues and best*

*'We need to inform the community – look at the bigger picture.' (focus group)*

- practices for care. Many families are not intentionally abusive but lack understanding and alternatives.*
- *Unaddressed, unresolved perpetrated childhood abuse by the senior towards the abuser? Is this a possible contributing factor? For what percentage of cases?*
  - *I assist a senior in (name of community). The services are so confusing, not coordinated, just disgusting.*

## What do Seniors and Communities need to know to prevent abuse?

Ten answer choices were provided to survey participants from information gathered at the community consultations.

The top 5 responses are:

1. **Improve coordination of services** so they work together on senior abuse issues (86% of respondents)
2. **Support senior's access** to transportation, housing, groceries to reduce isolation (81%)
3. **Educate doctors, health care providers and professionals** on recognizing and responding to senior abuse (76%)
4. **Educate families, seniors, caregivers**, clergy and the broader community about safety for seniors (73%)
5. **Help seniors to talk about abuse issues** (address shame, stigma and silence) (72%)

*'We need to pay attention – check in on one another.'*  
(focus group)

**Abuse in institutions** was a concern expressed, mainly by those with experience of family members who resided in institutions.

A key theme at the focus groups was underfunding and understaffing of long-term care facilities that impacts on the quality of life for seniors. Focus group participants commented that staff and long term care facilities *'do the best they can'* but need more resources to meet the needs of seniors.

A focus group participant spoke about the **difficulty getting information about the rights of family members**, and exercising these rights when they are concerned about abuse in an institution, and about the **difficulties advocating** for their family member.

One survey participant commented that *'we need more staff in seniors residences – someone keeping an eye on the residences or a reporting system so people don't lose their jobs.'*

*'Education of the broader community, including personal attitudes towards aging, identifying abuse and reasons that seniors don't talk about it, and taking steps to reduce the isolation felt by seniors most at-risk.'* (survey respondent)

Another survey respondent noted that what is needed is *'advocate with the South West LHIN, federal and provincial governments to do more to address senior abuse.'*

## What is the priority issue and action needed in Grey Bruce to build safe communities for seniors?

The top priority issues and actions from the survey and community consultations are:

- 1) **Education** on abuse issues, financial literacy, senior's rights, getting help, recognizing risk and warning signs, and resources for: the community, seniors, health professionals, youth, financial managers, institutional staff, law enforcement, community services.
- 2) **Coordination of existing services** and clear pathways to address senior when it happens. This includes information on navigating the system for providers, seniors and families, and an agreed upon system response to senior abuse when it is identified.
- 3) **Reduction of the isolation** of seniors (address poverty, transportation, housing needs, access to social and support needs). *'Be a good neighbour, friend, family member.'*  
(focus group)
- 4) **Advocacy** – improve laws and legislation, advocate for more supports for seniors, funding for senior's abuse response and funding to support system wide coordination.
- 5) **Make it easier to talk about senior abuse** and get help that is needed early. Shared community strategies to address stigma and empower seniors are needed.

A recent review of 'global issues in the field of elder abuse, with a focus on prevention'<sup>1</sup> identified 5 'promising strategies for prevention' several of which concur with the priorities that the residents of Grey Bruce have identified.

- **Multi-disciplinary Teams** – “effective elder abuse prevention requires the coordination of available services. ...MDTs are likely to be an effective response to coordinating care and reducing fragmentation, leveraging resources, increasing professional knowledge and improving outcomes.”
- **Money Management Programs** – for seniors, with well-trained and accredited money managers
- **HelpLines**
- **Caregiver Intervention** – services to relieve the burden of caregiving as well as education of caregivers
- **Emergency Shelter**

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<sup>1</sup> Pillemer, K., Burnes, D., Riffin, C., Lachs, M., Elder Abuse: Global Situation, Risk Factors and Prevention Strategies: The Gerontologist, 2016, Vol. 56, No. 2, 194- 205

Crime and Abuse Against Seniors: A Review of the Research Literature With Special Reference to the Canadian Situation, Department of Justice, Canada, 2015.

### **Next Steps:**

- ✓ Present this report to the Grey Bruce Integrated Health Network.
- ✓ Present the report to: Interagency meetings, Public Health, VON, Home and Community Services Grey Bruce, Senior's Groups, Grey Bruce Council on Aging and other professional networks, and post on websites.
- ✓ Send out the report electronically to agencies and networks, faith groups
- ✓ Look at opportunities for protocol and relationship building between sectors dealing with seniors and senior abuse.
- ✓ Use the findings from the consultation for training on senior's abuse for provider and community groups in 2016-2017 as part of the Elder Abuse Network project.

### **Conclusion**

The consultation provided the project and the Grey Bruce community with some clear direction for the next 6 months, and for future community work to prevent and address senior abuse in our region.

We are most appreciative of all who contributed to building more knowledge of the ways of creating safer communities for seniors in our region. Thank you to the Grey Bruce Council on Aging for partnering with Violence Prevention Grey Bruce for the focus group consultation, and to all the participants at focus groups and through the survey.

For more information about the Elder Abuse Network project contact Violence Prevention Grey Bruce at [info@violencepreventiongreybruce.com](mailto:info@violencepreventiongreybruce.com) and the report can be downloaded at [www.violencepreventiongreybruce.com](http://www.violencepreventiongreybruce.com)