

*Housing Committee
copy*



Study of Shelter Needs of Abused Older Women

Executive Summary

Prepared By:

Kappel Ramji Consulting Group
April 29, 1998

INTRODUCTION

The Older Women's Network (OWN) is an advocacy organization that promotes equality and justice for older women in the workplace, the home and in society at large. OWN has been concerned about the lack of public awareness, professional sensitivity and gaps in services in the area of abuse of older women. With funding from the Seniors' Secretariat, provided through the Ontario Women's Directorate's Violence Against Women Prevention Initiative, OWN undertook this study with the following objectives:

- To determine the priority needs and service gaps for abused older women.
- To review the existing shelter services and their current capacity for serving abused older women.
- To identify the types of changes that are required to existing shelter services.
- To recommend feasible ways of implementing changes in existing shelters, including who should be responsible.
- To recommend some relevant options to meet the identified needs of older women, including alternatives to shelter accommodation.

The currently accepted national incidence rate of elder abuse is the 4%. At this rate, there are approximately 31,100 women over the age of 65 in Ontario currently experiencing abuse. Financial abuse accounts for 62.5% of the abuse, while chronic verbal aggression accounts for 35%, physical abuse accounts for 12.5% and neglect 10%. The purpose of this study was **not** to examine the extent or types of abuse that older women experience. Rather, its purpose was to determine the types of supports or services they need to be safe and the specific role that existing shelters might play.

METHODOLOGY

The study involved more than 240 stakeholders. One hundred and thirty four (134) representatives from shelters and community services, as well as other key informants participated in focus groups or personal or telephone interviews. Personal interviews were carried out with 106 older women from five sites in Ontario - Ottawa, Peterborough, Thunder Bay, Toronto and Windsor. Sixty nine percent (69%) of the women in the sample were under 75, 31% were over 75 years of age. The women were born in 30 different countries and only 50% spoke one of the two official languages. To encourage fuller participation, interviews were carried out in 15 different languages, with 50% in English or French. Twenty percent (20%) of the women in the sample had used Ontario's shelters. Fifty eight (58%) percent disclosed abuse voluntarily through the course of the interviews.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Abuse of older women is not well understood or acknowledged by society as a whole.** This lack of understanding permeates all aspects of our culture, starting with young children and extending into their adult years. It is due, in part, to the role and status of women in our society as well as a negative view of aging that tends to pervade our culture. Abused older women have internalized these messages and blame themselves for their abuse. Older women are more likely to suffer financial and emotional abuse and neglect rather than physical abuse. While there has been some progress made in bringing public attention to the negative consequences of wife assault, many older women do not think of themselves as abused unless they are physically abused. Therefore, many abused older women remain silent. This "cultural taboo" prevents women from asking for help.

Recommendation 1: That the Government of Ontario, building on its existing Violence Against Women public education strategy and other initiatives such as Seniors' Month and the Initiative for Vulnerable Adults, invest resources in a multi pronged social marketing strategy that promotes a positive image of older women, increases awareness and educates the public about the abuse of older women, its causes, social costs, and remedies. This strategy needs to take into account the various target groups that exist for the messages and the different venues for getting the messages out including young children and schools, intergenerational initiatives, various print and audio visual mass media, including ethnoracial media.

Recommendation 2: That, since 1999 is the International Year of Older Persons, government ministries be directed to focus on the issue of abuse of older women in their educational, intergenerational and other related initiatives. Areas of government with a major interest in these issues are: The Ontario Women's Directorate, the Seniors' Secretariat, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation, the Ministry of Community and Social Services, the Ministry of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Education and Training.

- **Abused older women go to their families, friends and/or cultural or faith communities first for help.** Cultural groups and faith communities often have supports and services available for members experiencing difficulties. Sometimes these groups reinforce the prevailing ideas described above. They suggest that they should put up with the situation for the good of the family. Even so, women still will turn to them first.

Recommendation 3: That, to ensure that the messages about abuse of older women are received, heard and internalized by the diverse communities in Ontario, the Government of Ontario involve representatives from various cultural and faith communities as well as older women themselves in the

design, development and production of its social marketing strategy.

- **Abused older women seek help in many different ways.** They may seek help from mainstream services if they are concerned about confidentiality or stigma. Sometimes when they try to access these services they encounter barriers. Abused older women also seek help indirectly. This way they do not break the taboo but also may get some help. Sometimes, when older women speak about their abuse, they are not believed. Many physicians, social service workers, and community faith and cultural group members do not recognize the signs of abuse of older women or are not sure where to get help for women who do disclose abuse. If an abused older woman finally decides to ask for help and encounters disbelief, lack of skill or information, she may never try again.

Recommendation 4: That training and education on preventing, detecting, assessing and addressing the abuse of older women be provided to front line workers in community based agencies, women's services and seniors' services including CCACs, Long Term Care facilities, home support services, and peer support program. Further, that curricula currently in place to train volunteers and professionals, including teachers, nurses, physicians, social workers, cultural interpreters and others be reviewed and enhanced to include materials on preventing, detecting and addressing the abuse of older women.

- **A major gap in services is the lack of information, coordination and integration of the services that exist.** In the area of abuse of older women, no one is taking the lead. Rather, many different groups and organizations provide services to abused older women as part of their other mandated services. There also does not appear to be effective interface between the women's services and seniors' sectors. As women age, they become involved in the seniors' services sector where a feminist analysis and woman centred approach to service is less evident. At the same time, women's shelter staff lack expertise in the area of aging and the special health and personal needs of older women. Many communities have distinct Violence Against Women Networks and Elder Abuse Committees. It is not clear if these groups have cross representation or are even working closely together. When a situation of abuse of an older woman comes to light, it is sometimes also not clear who is responsible for which piece of the solution, or who is going to stand beside the woman to make sure the issues are all addressed appropriately.

Recommendation 5: That all existing services in the areas of violence against women, long term care, seniors' services and other places that may come into contact with abused older women be mandated to address their needs so that women who access the system at various entry points can be assisted to break the cycles of violence they find themselves in.

Recommendation 6: That local communities be encouraged to develop long

range plans for addressing the needs of abused older women that include developing comprehensive, coordinated, integrated community wide response models that are able to quickly and effectively address the needs of abused older women in their communities. That wherever local Violence Against Women Networks or Elder Abuse Committees already exist, they jointly develop the coordinated community response . The response should be grounded in commonly developed values and principles respecting the older woman's right to choice, self determination and autonomy. That the Government of Ontario support communities in these efforts with appropriate resources.

Recommendation 7: That abused older women themselves be intimately involved in the development of coordinated community responses so that their perspectives are incorporated.

Recommendation 8: That, in addition to other key community stakeholder groups, the shelters and other violence against women services play an active role in the development of coordinated community responses so that their woman centred approach and expertise on violence against women is reflected in the model.

- **Within a more coordinated community response, shelters have a role in addressing the safety needs of abused older women.** Shelters are currently not serving very many women over 55. Some women do not know about shelters. Others would never think about leaving their home and family. There are physical, cultural and/or linguistic barriers in many shelters that make it hard for abused older women to receive appropriate services. However, rectifying these barriers will not necessarily mean greater numbers of abused older women will use shelters. The concerns that service providers identified around the difficulty older women might have living with younger women and children in shelters was not as big a concern for the women themselves. Safe shelter can mean more than typical VAW shelters. It can mean safe homes, beds in retirement homes, or speedy access to seniors subsidized housing and other types of second stage housing. This study did not find sufficient reason to establish separate facilities for abused older women.

Recommendation 9: That the Ministry of Community and Social Services ensure that shelters in Ontario are accessible to and inclusive of all women seeking their services . That changes be made to their facilities and services to minimize barriers for women related to age, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, physical and developmental disabilities and mental health concerns.

Recommendation 10: That shelters in Ontario fulfil their mandate to serve all women, including abused older women by facilitating access to safe shelter

for those who cannot use the existing shelters (e.g. those with medical nursing needs). This can be achieved through partnerships or joint ventures with other organisations (e.g. nursing homes/retirement homes) and facilitating easy access to the existing housing stock rather than establishing new facilities.

Recommendation 11: That shelters participate in the training necessary to better respond to the common issues/needs of abused older women, including increasing knowledge and skill in the areas of the aging process and the special health and mobility concerns of some older women. That MCSS place priority for its shelter training dollars on the issue of abuse of older women.

Recommendation 12: That funders support these expanded roles of shelters with adequate financial resources.

- **Safety for abused older women means more than shelters.** The women in the sample spoke about the factors that contribute to safety. They suggested that people to talk with such as peer counsellors or support groups, telephone supports, day programs, people coming into the home i.e. home based support services, and a 24 hour multilingual emergency phone line would all increase their safety. All of these would increase the network or circles of people who are involved in some way in the life of a vulnerable abused women. The greater the numbers of people in a woman's life, the more likely it is that she will be safe. There are existing networks that can be enhanced to provide the kind of support women described such as programs in seniors' centres and faith and cultural communities. Some cultural and faith communities may already have specific ways of dealing with community problems that can be harnessed to address this issue. Yet some women will still be hard to reach. While this study did not have time to seek out large numbers of hard to reach older women who are being abused, they must not be forgotten.

Recommendation 13 : That to enhance the informal supports older women are seeking and to bridge the existing gaps between cultural/faith communities and social services, resources be invested in developing Peer Support Programs for abused older women. Further, that when cultural and faith communities have mechanisms in place to deal with the issue themselves, they be supported to do so.

Recommendation 14: That key stakeholder groups such as shelters and seniors services be supported in efforts to develop effective strategies to seek out hard to reach abused older women and link them with the resources they need to increase their safety.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The recommendations point to:

- Many stakeholders taking responsibility with shelters being one important player.
- Stakeholders working together in a coordinated, integrated fashion sharing their expertise, philosophy and values to improve the community's overall response to abused older women.
- Involving older women themselves and social, cultural and faith communities in the development of relevant responses to abuse.
- Emphasizing peer supports and the importance of starting in more informal, typical places women are already going for support.

There are existing government social marketing and training strategies that can make the abuse of older women a priority. This will begin to break down the cultural taboos and help women feel that the abuse is not their fault and that they can speak about it openly. Some communities are beginning to develop coordinated responses to the issue of abuse of older people. The existing shelter system in Ontario, with increased physical, cultural and linguistic access will be equipped to serve older abused women. These building blocks can be enhanced with better coordination and integration of the violence against women and seniors services sectors. The development of peer support models for older abused women and strengthening the linkages between cultural and faith communities and existing service infrastructures will make it easier for women to access the supports and services they need.

The Seniors' Secretariat has taken a bold step in beginning to address the issue of abuse of older women from a public policy perspective. The recommendations presented here are broad and are also a beginning. There is much more to learn. By involving older women themselves in the solutions, trying out or testing new ideas, and making adjustments based on direct experience, a responsive and effective system will emerge in Ontario. There are two final recommendations which need to be considered as next steps:

Recommendation 15: That the recommended directions in this report be validated with appropriate stakeholders and older women. This will assure government that the recommendations are appropriate and relevant, and that there will be support and interest in making the proposed ideas work. In addition, a validation process will begin to increase public awareness about the issue and the government's intended direction.

Recommendation 16: That, in order to effectively act on the proposed recommendations, an implementation plan that focusses on piloting specific ideas in various communities across the province be developed by the Seniors' Secretariat and the nine (9) ministries involved in the Violence Against Women Prevention Initiative together with other key stakeholders including abused older women. Once the plan has been developed, various stakeholders can begin to act on their particular areas of responsibility and contribute to making Ontario a safer place for abused older women.