

An Introduction to Elder Abuse for Professionals

Overview



INTRODUCTION

This document supports the NCEA slide deck *An Introduction to Elder Abuse for Professionals: Overview*. The slides and the guidelines for using them are at www.ncea.acl.gov/whatwedo/education/curricula.html.

THE ELDER JUSTICE ROADMAP PROJECT DEFINITION OF ELDER ABUSE

The NCEA presenter's toolkit uses the Elder Justice Roadmap Definition of elder abuse. The Elder Justice Roadmap Project was a groundbreaking partnership between the elder justice field, its allies and the federal government to create a national elder justice strategic plan. This behavioral definition of elder abuse was used during this project, funded in 2012 – 2013 by the Department of Justice and Health and Human Services.

This is an explanation of the Elder Justice Roadmap Project definition of elder abuse excerpted from the Elder Justice Roadmap Project Report: Phase 1, Appendix IV.

A note regarding definitions:

After examining numerous options, the definition of *elder abuse* used for this project is as follows:

Elder abuse is:

- > physical, sexual or psychological abuse, as well as neglect, abandonment and financial exploitation of an older person by another person or entity,
- > that occurs in any setting [e.g., home, community or facility],
- > either in a relationship where there is an expectation of trust and/or when an older person is targeted based on age or disability.

The following explains the rationale behind our use of this definition/description of *elder abuse*:

Age: We used the term “older person” rather than designate a specific age because we did not want to limit respondents' responses. By not specifying a precise age, participants could respond regardless of the age used in the laws or protocols governing their state, tribe, agency or program.

Younger vulnerable adults: Some definitions of elder abuse include abuse not only of older people but also of younger vulnerable adults ages 18 to 60 [or 18 to 65, depending on the jurisdiction]. It is conceptually confusing and factually inaccurate to say that the abuse of younger adults, such as a person age 18, constitutes elder abuse. Although similar and overlapping issues often relate to both older adults and younger people [usually described in laws as “vulnerable” or “adults with disabilities”] who are victimized, there may also be significant differences. For the purposes of this project, we believed it was important not to conflate those populations or assume that the needs, wishes, priorities and considerations relating to older and younger victimized people were the same.

That said, critical players in the elder abuse field – such as some adult protective services, long term care ombudsman programs and health providers, as well as the Administration for Community Living – have missions, jurisdictions, clients and patients that include all adults, regardless of age. We recognize the overlap in the issues facing older and younger populations, that there often is good reason to provide seamless services across ages, and that those who serve both populations should not be forced to choose between them, for example, by conditioning resources on age.

Types of Abuse: In developing the definition of elder abuse for this project, we used broad terms that describe the types of abuse older people experience [e.g. physical, sexual or psychological abuse, financial exploitation, neglect]. Though abandonment is a form of neglect, we also included it because some states refer to it separately in their elder abuse laws.

Self-neglect: Though some definitions of elder abuse include self-neglect we did not because conceptually, one person being mistreated by another is fundamentally a different type of phenomenon than a person neglecting him or herself. Conflating abuse, neglect or exploitation that one actor inflicts on another with situations involving a sole actor is confusing and counter-intuitive to many stakeholders. That said, self-neglect [like mental illness and cognitive impairment] often is associated with elder abuse [including as a potential risk-factor or consequence] and thus is a critical factor to consider in any discussion about the problem. In addition, some agencies that respond to allegations of elder abuse also provide services to individuals who neglect themselves.

Relationship of Trust: Some definitions of elder abuse have required that the perpetrator be someone in a “relationship of trust” with the victim. This excludes older people victimized wholly or in part because of their actual or perceived age or disability where the victimization did not occur in a relationship of trust. The definition in this project included older people targeted based on their age or disability even where no relationship of trust exists. We used this broader definition in part to not exclude a range of stakeholders whose role is not conditioned on a relationship of trust, for example those responding to financial exploitation and consumer protection issues. Additional discussion is needed to address how responders can or should determine whether a relationship of trust exists or targeting has occurred.

Setting: Older people suffer as a result of elder abuse regardless of setting, identity of perpetrator, or the professionals and entities with jurisdiction or responsibility to respond. Inadequate response or coordination among responders, or during transitions from one setting to another, can exacerbate vulnerability to and duration of elder abuse. In addition, given the emphasis on providing care, services and assistance in a person-centered manner, it is increasingly important to have definitions of abuse, neglect and exploitation that apply across settings [home, community and facilities]. Thus, for this project, we did not limit the definition of elder abuse to any one setting.

Definition versus description: Individuals, entities and documents use different definitions of elder abuse depending on discipline and context. For example, a definition of elder abuse for purposes of a criminal law might include the concept of knowledge or intent. Our aim in this project was to employ a definition that described the core conduct included in elder abuse so that it could be used in various contexts and by people in many applicable disciplines, understanding that additional specification might be necessary in some applications.

In developing the definition used in this project, we considered and built on many of the varied existing definitions, including: those found in laws [such as the federal Elder Justice Act, the Older Americans Act and the Violence Against Women Act, various states' laws and others], and those developed by various entities such as the National Academy of Sciences, the Administration on Aging [through the National Center on Elder Abuse], the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [not publicly released or in use], and the New York City Elder Abuse Center [a definition rigorously vetted by a broad range of stakeholders and that, subjected to the crucible of daily application by myriad systems for three years, has held up well].

We drew on these and other sources in developing the definition used in this project with the goal that it would resonate with and be clear to the broad range of stakeholders whose suggestions we hoped to receive. In developing the parameters for the above definition, we were guided more by practical than doctrinal considerations. Our twin goals were clarity and common sense, not just internal to the field but also with other potential stakeholders and allies. While we understand that all definitions ignite debate, our hope is that this lengthy explanation of our rationale might advance the conversation and promote greater clarity in the field's approach to this important subject.

TEAM PRESENTING

When presenting on an overview of elder abuse, consider working with trainers who have expertise in the dynamics of elder abuse and the various forms of elder abuse and related phenomena, aging, working with older adults, victim services, the justice system, and working with family violence offenders. Consider co-presenting with someone who works in a different field or discipline.

POSSIBLE VIDEO CLIPS

Video clips of older victims and survivors sharing their experiences can be a powerful way to engage the audience. If time permits, consider using a video clip in place of or in combination with the case examples at the beginning of the module. A description of the videos and ordering information can be found at <http://ncall.us/sites/ncall.us/files/resources/2013%20EA%20Video%20List.pdf>.

Possible videos examples of elder abuse include:

- > In Their Own Words [All]
- > Older Mothers Never Give Up Hope: [All]
- > An Age for Justice [Various examples]

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