

# National Action Agenda, 2002

## Call to Action to Protect America's Most Vulnerable Elders

**E**lder abuse, by definition, is an emergency, a crisis requiring full mobilization of response interventions, from mental health and medical care, to emergency and crisis shelter, to police protection, to legal interventions and financial advocacy.

The federal government has a crucial responsibility to give states and communities the tools they need to ensure the safety of their most vulnerable. Currently, however, only Title VII of the Older Americans Act – Vulnerable Elder Rights Protection Activities – targets resources specifically addressed to elder abuse.

In the United States, the numbers of people living into old age are dramatically increasing, and so, too, the risk of abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The risk of harm is a real one. Engaging all sectors of society is essential.

Elder abuse is a national concern. We commit to this vital task, and we call on national, state, and local advocates and leaders to join forces and make a commitment to act now with vision.

### Blueprint for Action

In December 2001, the first *National Summit on Elder Abuse* was convened. The Summit was charged with the task of recommending a national policy agenda for protecting America's most vulnerable elders. Ten essential priorities were identified. Priorities one and two were equally ranked.

#### PRIORITY 1

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##### Support National Elder Abuse Act

Congress is urged to enact a National Elder Abuse Act to clearly articulate a cohesive national policy. As a matter of priority, this law would:

- Action 1 Create a nationwide structure to serve as a focal point for raising public awareness, funding critical services, and coordinating federal, state, and local response.
- Action 2 Support technical assistance, training, and capacity building for state and local government, nonprofit and private sectors.
- Action 3 Establish a grant program to fund research and data collection on elder abuse prevalence, elder and family needs, and promising interventions that would inform policy making.

#### PRIORITY 2

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##### Mount a National Education and Awareness Effort

Top national priority must be given to raising America's awareness about crimes committed against elders. To inform the public at large,

justices, legislators, and state and local leaders, the federal government should:

- Action 1 Encourage the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to recognize elder abuse as a public health issue.
- Action 2 Develop a campaign to educate policy makers on elder abuse issues, and engage the support of key legislators to increase funding for elder abuse public awareness.
- Action 3 Educate the media about elder abuse to encourage greater attention and sensitivity in news coverage.
- Action 4 Develop active national partnerships to encourage collaborations.
- Action 5 Create a national toll-free 800 help number.
- Action 6 Establish and maintain a national repository of abuse stories. Analogously, investigate strategies and successes of domestic violence and child abuse movements that communities can use.
- Action 7 Develop a technical assistance kit for supporting victim advocates, adult protective workers, social service providers, law enforcement, and prosecutors locally.
- Action 8 Declare National Elder Abuse Awareness Month.
- Action 9 Disseminate prevention education and public information.

### **PRIORITY 3**

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#### Improve the Legal Landscape by Strengthening Elder Abuse Laws

The improved response to elder abuse by the justice system must be predicated on laws that take into account the special nature of these victims, the crimes committed against them, and the perpetrators. Of national priority:

- Action 1 Enact or amend elder abuse laws (federal, state, local) to permit the

justice system to take into account the special nature of these victims, the crimes committed against them, and the perpetrators.

- Action 2 Eliminate or amend laws that set up barriers to investigations and prosecutions.
- Action 3 Identify and share protocols, procedures, effective laws, useful pleadings and procedural documents, and provide training on the tools.

### **PRIORITY 4**

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#### Develop and Implement a National Elder Abuse Training Curriculum

In crises, first responders (paramedics and police) and service providers – adult protective, domestic violence, dementia specialists, and victim/witness assistance personnel – need to know what to do. A comprehensive, nationwide elder abuse curriculum is critical to strengthen the response of states and communities nationwide. As a priority:

- Action 1 Involve important stakeholders in developing the national curriculum, customizing modules to ensure that key professionals are highly qualified and trained.
- Action 2 Earmark funds to establish coalitions of stakeholders in each of the states to gather and communicate information on training needs, and develop locally responsive plans for using the curriculum.
- Action 3 Develop teaching modules on issues central to elder abuse prevention, recognition, mandatory reporting, investigation, intervention, and policy. For example, specialized training to varied sectors of the law and justice system is essential to better identify cases, improve investigations, increase prosecutions, serve victims, better coordinate all elements within the justice system,

- and promote abuse prevention.
- Action 4 Set clear goals, objectives, and methods for evaluation of training.
- Action 5 In curriculum design, integrate and relate information about sociocultural contexts and sensitivities, keeping in mind both rural and urban needs.

### **PRIORITY 5**

#### Ensure Age-appropriate, Specialized Mental Health Services Are Available and Accessible

The mental health response is crucial in providing crisis care to victims of abuse or neglect, and assisting those at risk. As a priority, we call on government to:

- Action 1 Increase the numbers of specialized clinicians who can do aggressive outreach and provide intensive case management (including home visits), preferably in a team approach.
- Action 2 Invest more resources in victim services, to include crisis intervention, particularly in trauma situations.
- Action 3 Ensure delivery of accurate dementia-related diagnosis and treatment, capacity assessment and surrogate decision-making, and services to relieve caregiver burnout (respite, counseling, and training).
- Action 4 Give priority to age-appropriate substance-abuse treatment, medication management, and education for victims and perpetrators.
- Action 5 Ensure that support services are in place for perpetrators of abuse (including programs within jails).

### **PRIORITY 6**

#### Commission General Accounting Office (GAO) Study

There is a need for a comprehensive, systematic analysis by the General Accounting Office (GAO) of the effectiveness of federal programs in combating elder abuse. Of importance for informing future policy decisions on budget allocations:

- Action 1 Examine and describe how federal funds, such as the Social Service Block Grant, are used. State distribution of funds should be fully documented.
- Action 2 Review efficacy of statutes and regulations, service delivery systems, and data collection and reporting structures.
- Action 3 Gather information on areas of weakness and barriers, and from the analysis, identify new research needs.

### **PRIORITY 7**

#### Increase Awareness within Justice System

To protect victims, hold offenders accountable, and prevent future offenses, elder abuse and neglect must become a priority crime control issue. Older abuse victims and those at risk are in need of the justice system's help. The government must take the lead to:

- Action 1 Raise awareness within the justice system of the needs of abused and at risk elders.
- Action 2 Establish protocols, procedures, and infrastructures to improve the coordinated response of the justice system, including law enforcement, prosecution, corrections, judiciary, medical examiners and coroners, public safety officers, and victim advocates, and promote coordination with APS workers, ombudsmen, and others.

### **PRIORITY 8**

**Establish a National Institute on Aging (NIA) Research and Program Innovation Institute**

Complicating prevention efforts is the paucity of information on the scope of the elder abuse problem and the capabilities of and constraints on the adult protective services system (APS) to respond. We call upon government to:

- Action 1 **Designate a special research institute within the NIA (perhaps to be known as the Rosalie Wolf Memorial Institute) that would focus priority research attention to elder abuse.**
- Action 2 **Fund research that will allow the development of a comprehensive, coordinated national response to best serve vulnerable adults. Topics on a research agenda include diverse influences of culture on patterns of abuse, methods of intervention, uniform definitions, and standardized reporting criteria.**
- Action 3 **Fund research and evaluation studies to sustain, advance, and assess outcomes of professional training and practice on elder and adult abuse.**

**PRIORITY 9**

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**Invest in a National Resource Center on Adult Protective Services (APS)**

A national resource center is particularly important for advocates on the front lines who deal where the real issues are. As a matter of priority, to strengthen capacity and to improve services to the most vulnerable:

- Action 1 **Institute a national system of certification to ensure that all APS workers have a standardized base level of knowledge and competencies.**
- Action 2 **Create a training system (based on best practice and research) for APS workers at all levels based on best practice and research that will enable workers to best serve**

vulnerable adults

- Action 3 **Develop and disseminate best and innovative practices in adult protective services.**
- Action 4 **Provide technical assistance to state and local adult protective services programs.**

**PRIORITY 10**

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**Seek Presidential Executive Order**

Using the impetus of a Presidential Executive Order, the government should direct all federal agencies, as well as encourage all governors, to analyze critically the extent to which policies ensure assistance for abused, exploited and neglected elders. The order would call for a report with recommendations and findings.

**Acknowledgments**

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For more information about The National Policy Summit on Elder Abuse, visit the National Center on Elder Abuse Web site. Or call us at 202- 898-2586.

[www.elderabusecenter.org](http://www.elderabusecenter.org)