

STOP

Services ♦ Training
Officers ♦ Prosecutors

Newsletter

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Elder Sexual Abuse: The Dynamics of the Problem and Community-Based Solutions

By Karla Vierthaler, Outreach Coordinator for Older Victims, PCAR

- ❖ Ms. G was bedridden and dependent on her two sons, both of whom had a mild developmental disability. During a welfare check, police found Ms. G living in "unthinkable" conditions. When Ms. G was taken to the hospital for treatment, signs of sexual abuse were found.
- ❖ Ms. M had difficulty speaking and required assistance sitting up and dressing. She repeatedly walked away from the nursing home where she resided. On one occasion, she was found near a major highway by police and did not want to return. "I want to die. Please hit me with your car," she pleaded. Several weeks later, a nursing assistant walked into the woman's room and found a frequent male visitor with his hands between the woman's legs.
- ❖ A 62 year old woman was forced to perform oral sex on a stranger who had broken into her house. She told police she had been raped. When her rape kit came back negative, charges were dropped. It was only after therapy that the woman was able to disclose that the assault had been oral.

What is Elder Sexual Abuse?

Elder sexual abuse is defined as coercing an older person through force, trickery, threats, or other means into unwanted sexual activity. It includes

sexual contact with elders who are unable to grant consent as well as unwanted sexual contact between service providers and their elder clients.

Risk Factors

While people of all ages are susceptible to sexual abuse, unique factors associated with the aging process put the elder population at heightened risk. In some cases, people of advanced age need others to provide assistance with daily functions. In other cases, reduced cognitive or emotional functioning render older persons more susceptible to sexual abuse.

The most important characteristic, however, is perceived vulnerability of the elder person. Perpetrators seek out potential victims who may be easily overpowered and manipulated. They look for those who are unlikely to report the assault or may not be considered credible if they do report.

What We Know About Elder Sexual Abuse

Elder sexual abuse research is still in its infancy, but early trends have identified some characteristics important to those who investigate elder abuse and counsel victims.

- ♦ Perpetrators are likely to be male caregivers and/or relatives younger than the victim.
- ♦ Older victims are most often females over age 70 that are partially or totally dependent on a caregiver or functioning at a poor level.

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Investigating Nursing Home Sexual Assault: A Training Initiative

By Karla Vierthaler, Outreach Coordinator for Older Victims, PCAR

Pennsylvania law requires that long-term care facilities report instances of sexual assault of residents to the Pennsylvania Department of Aging and local police. Statistics from the Department of Aging reveal that between 1997 and 2004, there have been over 784 reports of sexual assault in long-term care institutions. Given the vulnerability that illness and disability forces onto long term care residents, they are susceptible to easy victimization due to the open access that staff and others have to them. Perpetrators who escape apprehension seldom stop after their first assault and go on to offend against others. Thus, one unsolved assault leads to multiple others. To date, criminal investigators and first responder police have received little, if any training on this form of victimization. However, if law enforcement

officers were trained to conduct effective evidence-based investigations in these cases, there would be a greater likelihood of identifying, arresting and prosecuting the perpetrator.

The Institute on Protective Services at Temple University has received a grant from the United States Department of Justice to develop and pilot test an evidence-based elder sexual assault investigation course for criminal investigators and first responder police in Berks, Bucks and Washington Counties in Pennsylvania. The course, designed in collaboration with PCAR, will be used to prepare first responding police and criminal investigators to effectively investigate sexual assaults against elder long term care residents.



Developed by the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape and the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence.



Elder Sexual Abuse: The Dynamics of the Problem and Community-Based Solutions

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- ♦ Older victims suffer more genital trauma from sexual assault than younger victims.
- ♦ Older victims are less likely to report sexual abuse than younger victims.

How is Sexual Abuse Different for Elders?

Simply stated, sexual abuse is devastating for an elder victim, especially when combined with the dynamics of an age-related disability. When the perpetrator is the caregiver, the situation becomes similar to forms of domestic violence where the victim is dependent on the abuser and has few alternatives. Other factors can include:

- ♦ Lack of a strong support system
- ♦ Lack of knowledge about body parts and sex acts
- ♦ Generational beliefs about sex and sexual abuse may increase feelings of shame and guilt
- ♦ Abuse may exacerbate an existing illness
- ♦ Assault is likely to cause more physical damage due to thinner, more sensitive skin and weak, brittle bones
- ♦ Longer physical and emotional recovery times

Investigating Elder Sexual Abuse

Please note that these can also be signs of other conditions such as depression, dementia or vaginitis. Look for a combination of symptoms and ask the elder questions about the nature of the signs displayed.

Physical Signs of Sexual Abuse

- ♦ Bruising on inner thighs
- ♦ Vaginal/anal bleeding
- ♦ Sexually transmitted infections/diseases
- ♦ Difficulty walking or standing
- ♦ Pain/itching in genital areas
- ♦ Exacerbation of existing illness

Emotional Signs of Sexual Abuse

- ♦ Scared or timid behavior
- ♦ Depressed, withdrawn behavior
- ♦ Sudden changes in personality



- ♦ Odd, misplaced comments about sex or sexual behavior
- ♦ Fear of certain people or of physical characteristics (long-hair, male, etc.)

Effectively Responding to Elder Sexual Assault

Since older victims are unlikely to report sexual abuse, communities across the country face the challenge of identifying and treating elder sexual abuse. While Sexual Assault Response Teams are vital to ensuring victims receive appropriate services, this model does not adequately serve elder victims. The primary reason is because elder victims do not report the crime or seek services through the emergency department where they would have access to the Sexual Assault Response Team.

In fact, the first response to sexual abuse is likely to be through elder care providers, protective service workers, friends, or family who may have little knowledge of sexual abuse and the services available to victims. To address these issues, the Pennsylvania Department of Aging and the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape have partnered to create an organized interdisciplinary training curriculum to encourage the inclusion of professionals working with the elder population in the multidisciplinary model and to educate communities about elder sexual abuse.

For more information on the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape's Elder Sexual Abuse Project and curriculum, please contact Karla Vierthaler, Outreach Coordinator for Older Victims at 1-800-692-7445, ext. 125, kvierthaler@pcar.org.

Working With Older Victims of Domestic Violence

Gretchen Reese, Technical Assistance Specialist, PCADV

Domestic violence affects more than 100,000 Pennsylvanians each year and older citizens are no exception. The violence can happen to anyone, at any age. It can be physical, sexual, emotional or economic and the abuse occurs in all types of intimate relationships.

Aging services and domestic violence services are available in every county in Pennsylvania. Each system offers specialized resources to meet the needs of the over-50 population. In attempting to respond to the needs of older victims of family violence, domestic violence advocates and aging care managers began to realize that because of their unique experiences and circumstances, the needs of seniors were not being adequately met by either system. As a result of this realization, a three-year project entitled "Domestic Violence in Later Life" was initiated. Statewide joint trainings for aging and domestic violence staff were conducted. Policies and procedures were developed and are now in place to increase access to options and resources for older victims. Older Pennsylvanians can speak to aging services providers or domestic violence program advocates about their concerns and feel confident those concerns are addressed appropriately. Workers and advocates in both agencies have made a commitment to help each individual access the services that best meet their needs.

According to the Department of Aging elder abuse occurs when a person, age 60 or over is subjected to physical or sexual abuse, financial exploitation, neglect, abandonment or psychological abuse.

Domestic violence in later life occurs when an older person (age 50 or over) has been subjected to a pattern of coercive control and abuse by a family member or someone with whom they have an intimate ongoing relationship. It includes physical, sexual, psychological and financial abuse. Abusers use whatever strategies or combination of strategies necessary to maintain power and control.

It is sometimes difficult for law enforcement or other

service providers to determine which agency will provide the most effective, appropriate services for an older person who is a victim of abuse. In order to provide victims with options and assist them in making informed decisions, it is important to understand the services provided by each system and to understand their limitations.

In Pennsylvania, there are 52 Area Agencies on Aging serving all 67 counties. The bulk of aging services fall under the category of assessment and care management and are designed assist seniors to remain safely and comfortably in their own homes. Older Adult Protective Services is an important component of aging services. Pennsylvania statute authorizes Area Agencies on Aging to investigate reports of elder abuse and to provide protective services for older adults who lack the capacity to protect themselves and who are at imminent risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation or abandonment.

