



Multi-Sector Approach to Respond to Elder Sexual Violence

The anti-sexual violence movement has matured over the past decades, increasing attention to the needs of special populations and their members' experiences with sexual violence. Elder sexual violence is a growing area of need requiring strategic and specialized services by rape crisis programs. With limited resources and increasing work demands, working with large, dense, and diverse populations such as elder sexual assault victims, requires a multi-sector response. Rape crisis programs aim to provide high quality victim services; working with other senior-serving organizations can bring resources and expertise to form a strong community collaborative approach. This resource will outline the steps rape crisis centers can take to work in partnership with Adult Protective Services and other aging organizations in the community.

Aging Populations

Reviewing the demographic changes that will impact the nation in the coming decades emphasizes the need for rape crisis programs to prioritize serving older sexual assault victims. As the baby boomer's generation continues to age, the percentage of older people in the population will grow substantially. According to Census data report, the overall population of the nation will grow from 312 million in 2012 to 400 million by 2050, reflecting a 27%

increase (Ortman, Velkoff, & Morgan, 2014). As the population grows, people will continue to live longer. Estimates indicate that by 2030, 20% of the American population will be 65 years and older (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1995). The Institute on Aging (n.d.) states that the 85 years and older age group will grow by 2050 to be a quarter of seniors as a group. All rape crisis programs need to be proactive with implementing services for this victim population as a strategic imperative.

Multiple generations exist within the senior population. The initial age for senior designation can be 60 years. The 'oldest old,' people who are 85 years and older, is the fastest growing older population sector (Ramsey-Klawnsnik, 2010). As seniors' age, they will become more dependent on family for assistance with daily activities or care takers (World Health Organization, 2002).

Some reasons that elder sexual assault is not more widely reported reflects the same general cultural discomfort meeting the needs of seniors, particularly around sexual violence. Some older victims may not be cooperative with advocates for a variety of generational as well as cultural factors (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017).

Collaborating with Older Adult Protective Services

Defining specific roles for victim service agencies and the Area Agency on Aging as the primary organizations working with senior victims is critical. This relationship is paramount to community collaboration. Once established, adding other partners, including the District Attorney's office and local law enforcement, will be essential to building a cross-systems, supportive response within the criminal justice system working for senior victims. Each entity brings unique skills and scope of activity that will benefit senior victims. Appearing as a team that supports the victim will also help to reduce isolation that many victims experience.

For the purposes of cross-training and building a pro-active working relationship between rape crisis programs and aging services, rape crisis center staff at all levels need to understand the mission, program, and services available to older adults in the service area. Some aging programs may be part of local government, or a separate private non-profit organization. Generally, the aging program helps protect vulnerable adults who are in danger of being mistreated or neglected. Importantly, some aging offices serve as the investigative arm for financial crimes perpetrated against seniors, which is a true asset for victim services and the District Attorney's office. Understanding each other's programs and services can assist the two organizations in sharing the work with serving senior victims of sexual violence.

Planning and Preparation

Prior to launching an initiative to expand service delivery for elder victims, planning and preparation is necessary.

Information gathering, or a needs assessment, should be conducted by the rape crisis center. The initial information gathering process will look at direct services delivery over the past 3-5 years by reviewing the demographic profile of victims served who are between ages of 50-59 and 60 years and older. This assessment should be used to:

Language Considerations

Like any conversation about sexual violence, sexual abuse of seniors can be a difficult conversation for both the victim and advocate. The use of language is delicate because of the potential for a generational gap between the rape crisis advocate and the senior victim. Finding common language to help senior victims communicate with the advocate is important. Use the language and context with which the senior victim is comfortable using. Previous experiences in the victims' life may influence their perspective about sexual violence. Do not try to encourage modern use of terms to identify body parts, or descriptions of the violence endured; this may be disruptive to the healing process. The range of emotions and powerlessness, coupled with attitudes influenced from generational context of sexual violence by the victim, will require the rape crisis advocate to work reassuringly and slowly with the victim.

- Identify how, where, when, and how often the range of services were provided.
- Identify what other providers were contacted for care coordination or referral.
- Collect a detailed review of services provision and number of victims served to determine the baseline for the rape crisis program.

During the beginning phase, the initial activity between the rape crisis program and the Aging office should include cross-training of staff at both organizations about how to serve senior victims.

Organizers should:

- Create a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to define the scope of the working relationship between the two primary organizations.
- Define which senior victims they will be helping together. When expanding to an entirely new sector of services it is essential that both agencies have the capacity to meet the need.
- Detail what unique and essential services each organization can provide to help senior victims. Through this process, both entities will also be able to identify gaps in services.
- Examine if there is a need to address case management and service plans across both organizations to avoid redundancy and maximize the skills and scope of activity.
- Discuss the role of confidentiality as it pertains to how services are provided directly to the senior victim
- Discuss how care coordination will work.
- Define and train staff on when and how to make a mandatory report.
- Identify if services can be delivered to senior victims at accessible sites, and how that is coordinated.
- Define how to contact one another during regular hours versus after hours of operation.
- Build a listing of specific elder serving entities in the community. Develop a plan to build relationships with the identified organizations.

Organizational Considerations

① Time and Flexibility

- Working with senior victims will require advocates to work slowly to avoid confusing or frightening the senior victim. Some seniors may have a neurological disease impacting their ability to participate during individual meetings.

② Education and Resources

- Develop educational content for senior-serving organizations in the private, non-profit, health care, and service sectors. These products may take longer to complete to allow for senior input on all aspects of the product, including literacy level, language, content, card stock weight, font size, and color. Consider working with senior groups through the local aging office to assist.
- Conduct joint education or training sessions where both the rape crisis advocates and an Office of Adult Services advocate share this work.
- Senior leadership should assess marketing materials, outreach events, and service sites to determine if they are inclusive for older victims.

③ Training

- Invest in training advocates to be prepared for working with a population that will challenge their own values and comfort levels. If possible, the assigned advocates need to complete the state Adult Protective Services training. This investment helps the advocate understand on a more global perspective how each program operates when working with a shared victim.

④ Working with Survivors

- Recognize that some seniors may also have prior history of sexual violence that has never been disclosed. Addressing those issues is important as well as addressing coping skills.
- Senior victims may not cooperate with law enforcement to bring criminal charges against a family offender. Promoting other options like protection orders, safety planning, and emergency contact can offer some measure of safety for the senior.
- Accessing domestic violence shelters for short-term safety may be a viable option.

Community Awareness and Outreach

Building a diverse collaboration among interested stakeholders to end violence against seniors is a longer-term objective of working with older adults. A senior-focused collaboration will force most rape crisis programs to work with a new sector of partners. A collaboration also helps to share the work between organizations, ensuring that no single entity is facing the total cost and responsibility alone. The organizations need to be fully inclusive of all entities that serve seniors within the service area. This type of collaboration is a classic community organizing model.

Community awareness and outreach should be shared activities between the rape crisis center and Aging office. These activities should have a targeted focus for a specific audience, rather than general awareness about sexual violence.

Ways to advertise and promote services in the community may include:


- Using various forms of media (print, social media) to reach seniors;
- Working with local chambers to identify how to reach the senior audience;
- Collecting information from the cable company on viewing habits and channels for different demographics on reaching seniors;
- Identifying the attendance habits of seniors at the local movie theater and consider advertising Public Service Announcements

(PSA) before movies (This strategy was very successful and cost-effective for the Mercer Elder program in Pennsylvania);

- Providing health education programs through local hospitals and health-care providers;
- Leveraging hospital newsletters to include elder abuse information;
- Looking at non-traditional allies having contact with seniors (garbage men, mail carriers);
- Offering elder abuse training seminars to help build capacity for the senior-serving providers, with an emphasis on assisted living and nursing homes.

Within the service area, identify what regular community events are conducted and directed to the senior population.

- Check with the county government, state elected officials, and senior housing programs for low income and higher income seniors about senior health fairs.
- Every community has retiree affinity groups: retired nurses, teachers, steel workers, executives (SCORE), veteran groups, police, and firemen. Educate these groups about the project, why it is important, and how the members can be a conduit for your collaborative efforts.
- Engage AARP groups are advocacy groups at the local level to promote the project.



A senior-focused collaboration will force most rape crisis programs to work with a new sector of partners

- Utilize newsletters to promote the project and include both the rape crisis program and Aging organizations points of contact in all promotion efforts. Remember, seniors are very familiar with the local aging office. Cross promotion helps seniors to see the rape crisis program is an equal partner.
- Another sector that will require attention and nurturing, if the rape crisis program does not already have a relationship, is with the faith sector. The senior focus can fit into the vulnerable populations' policy and procedures that many faith institutions have initiated over the past decade. There are many committees internally that can help promote the elder program. Faith institutions have a voice within the community. There is also the potential for volunteers and donations.

Rape crisis programs are community-based, and have strength working with allied human services, including the Aging offices. Together, you can build your program slow and steady to efficiently serve older adults in your community.

This article is distilled from conference seminars conducted at the PCCD Pathways (2014/2017) and National Adult Protective Services Conferences (2016) by representatives from a rural county-wide rape crisis center and aging office to promote practical ways each agency can build a collaborative, community response to elder sexual assault. Planning, communication, cross-training, and community engagement are all strategies that can help build a positive response to help senior victims. Sharing the work and the cost also helps to assure that the focused effort to serve older victims will be sustainable. Resources are included with this article.

Additional Resources

[National Sexual Violence Resource Center \(NSVRC\)](#)

[National Center on Elder Abuse \(NCEA\)](#)

[National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life \(NCALL\)](#)

[National Adult Protective Services Association \(NAPSA\)](#)

[Institute on Aging](#)

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Author: Lizette Olsen, Executive Director, AWARE, Inc.



Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape

2101 N Front St, Governor's Plaza North, Bldg #2, Harrisburg, PA 17110

Toll-free: 800-692-7445 • **Phone:** 717-728-9740 • **Fax:** 717-728-9781

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