

## **Bystanders in primary prevention programs**

### **Advice for Elder Abuse Prevention Networks**

#### **Background**

As in other areas of family violence prevention, strategies for preventing elder abuse can be seen along a continuum of primary, secondary and tertiary. Primary prevention focuses on stopping elder abuse before it happens by addressing the societal factors – drivers – which create the necessary conditions for it to occur. Drivers of elder abuse include stereotyped views of older people as frail and helpless, making them the butt of jokes and negative stories in the media, condoning or ignoring elder abuse and adult children limiting the independence of their parents. Elder abuse prevention networks focus on primary prevention through inter-related methodologies including direct participation programs for older people and their families, community mobilisation and communications and social marketing.

#### **Purpose**

This paper summarises some recent literature on the role of bystanders in family violence primary prevention and the framing of messages about elder abuse to assist members of Elder Abuse Prevention Networks to design and plan activities.

#### **Who are bystanders?**

In the context of elder abuse prevention a bystander could be a carer or health professional. It may also be a supportive family member or neighbour. It could be someone with whom an older person comes in contact through the use of other services - such as libraries and hairdressers. Faith based and sporting club leaders, financial advisors and others in the community may also be able to provide advice and support. A bystander is usually characterised as someone who observes violence occurring and does nothing. The aim of this approach is to encourage them to get involved. Action by bystanders may take place at the time or later, depending on the situation.

#### **Where do bystanders fit in the primary prevention of family violence?**

Community mobilisation "... aims to mobilise and support communities to address family violence and the social norms that make it acceptable." (PWC 2015). It has been identified as an effective strategy for primary prevention. Community mobilisation seeks to engage bystanders as champions in the prevention of elder abuse. A 2017 review by Deakin University concludes that; "... bystander approaches are effective in addressing violence against women and family violence and in promoting gender equity." Elder Abuse Prevention Networks provide an opportunity to explore these approaches in primary prevention and addressing ageism and in different socio-cultural contexts.

#### **What is it that we want bystanders to do?**

Through involvement in programs, bystanders will be able to discuss elder abuse confidently and knowledgeably with older people, their families and the community more generally. Situations where this is relevant can be seen on a spectrum from holding informal discussions about the nature of elder abuse, challenging ageist jokes or derogatory comments about older people through to responding to suspected episodes of exploitation.

#### **How do bystanders fit into elder abuse prevention programming?**

Programs focussed on bystanders are best incorporated as one component of a multi-faceted elder abuse primary prevention program as in the case of Elder Abuse Prevention Networks.

#### **What are we aiming for in targeting bystanders?**

In bystander programming we are aiming for changes in:

Knowledge - understanding of elder abuse, the harm it can cause older people, prevalence, effective ways to intervene and common myths about older people;

Attitudes – feeling empathy with older people, being prepared and confident to challenge age discrimination and respecting the rights of older people to make their own decisions; and

Behaviour – providing leadership in the community by taking action to prevent elder abuse.

### What are key messages for use by bystanders?

The way we talk about elder abuse will have a “lasting impact on levels of public understanding and engagement” (Frameworks Institute, 2016). Bystander approaches need to frame elder abuse as a societal issue that can be prevented by coordinated action rather than an individual problem. It can be framed as protecting the rights of older people, being a good citizen or a fair go for all.

### Useful principles for bystander programming

- Older people must be involved in the development of programs and there should be an underlying theory of change.
- Programs should situate older people as lively and significant community members and reinforce their capacity to act and make decisions.
- Case studies need to be embedded within a discussion that includes the societal factors that increase the vulnerability of older people and illustrate how it can be prevented through systemic responses. Otherwise individual stories may reinforce the perception that elder abuse is a private matter.
- Examples of neglect, physical or emotional abuse are more likely to assist people in understanding elder abuse and thinking about it productively. Audiences may need to be assisted to make the link between financial exploitation and other forms of abuse.
- Training for bystanders needs to incorporate interactive and skills based components.
- Theatre based or edutainment (education and entertainment) and other creative approaches which engage audiences emotionally as well as cognitively can be effective.
- Brief programs can be useful but not long lasting so refresher or booster training is important. Consider how this can be integrated into existing programs so there is on-going reinforcement.
- Programs may not be directly transferable across socio-cultural and inter-generational contexts. They will need to be piloted and adapted for different situations.

### What does evidence about bystander programming tell us?

Wider social norms of age discrimination may undermine bystander programs, however, evaluations suggest that it is not necessary to train everyone to bring about change and reduce the social acceptability of the exploitation of older people. The art is to identify who within the community will be most influential with older people. Further research is needed to assess the applicability in different communities and with groups including Aboriginal people, CALD groups and those who have experienced LGBTI discrimination.

### References

Frameworks Institute (January 2016). Strengthening the Support: How to Talk about Elder Abuse. Retrieved from <https://frameworksinstitute.org/pubs/mm/elderabuse/index.html>

PWC (November 2015). *A high price to pay: The economic case for preventing violence against women*. Paper produced for Our Watch and Vic Health. Retrieved from

<https://www.pwc.com.au/publications/economic-case-preventing-violence-against-women.html>

Ann Taket and Beth R. Crisp (September 2017). *Bystanders for Primary Prevention: a rapid review* Knowledge Paper produced for VicHealth. Deakin University. Retrieved from

<https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/bystander-research-project>

### Further information and support

Seniors Rights Victoria can provide training on *Conversation Seeds* to provide guidance on how to start informal conversations on elder abuse in community settings.

The Vic Health website has a wide variety of resources on the role of bystanders in prevention of family violence.

July 2018

