

Comments for the Elder Justice Coordinating Council

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Elder Abuse is not an easy subject to introduce to the public. In fact, many professional organizations dedicated to matters on aging struggle to communicate effectively with their members about this issue. In an effort to address this conundrum, the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) is working with the FrameWorks Institute to understand the public's current perceptions on elder abuse. Comparing these perceptions with those of people who are experts in the field helps us understand the opportunities to encourage and enhance public discourse on this topic. The short term goal is to develop, in collaboration with key stakeholders, a communication toolkit that will be widely disseminated and used by all sectors of society. Our long term goal is to have a society that makes informed choices on policies and practices that address elder abuse based on valid and reliable information.

BACKGROUND

The NCEA and FrameWorks Institute are conducting this elder abuse communications project in conjunction with a project on Reframing Aging. In June 2014, a Leaders of Aging Organizations coalition partnered with the FrameWorks Institute to reframe public discourse on aging and the needs of older adults. It was the Reframing Aging project and Kathy Greenlee, Assistant Secretary of U.S. Administration for Community Living that inspired Phase I of the project; researching expert and public understandings on elder abuse. Phase I research was funded by the Administration for Community Living, the Archstone Foundation and the John A. Hartford Foundation and was completed January 2016. Phase II, which is currently underway, will entail the development of an elder abuse communication strategy. The next phase will involve dissemination and adoption of the communication strategy to the elder justice stakeholders and the public.

PROCESS

On January 5, 2016, the FrameWorks Institute published their analysis on expert and public perceptions on elder abuse in *“You only pray that somebody would step in”*: *Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understandings of Elder Abuse in America*. The *Mapping the Gaps* report used expert interviews to understand how elder justice advocates and professionals communicate about the issue as well as cognitive and linguistic anthropology to analyze and identify how the national public’s shared understandings and assumptions on elder abuse impact how they approach the issue. FrameWorks researchers conducted 10 one-on-one, one-hour phone interviews with elder abuse advocates, policy experts, and researchers. FrameWorks researchers also performed 20 in-depth two-hour cultural model interviews with a wide range of people from around the country: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; San Jose, California; Lancaster, California; Phoenix, Arizona and Frederick, Maryland in an effort to identify the people’s understandings, assumptions and patterns of reasoning regarding elder abuse.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The *Mapping the Gaps* Report identified many challenges when it comes to communicating with the public about elder abuse including:

1. The public does not think of elder abuse as its own issue and devotes it little attention;
2. The public excludes self-neglect from the term and concept of “elder abuse”;
3. The public’s discomfort and difficulty thinking about elder sexual abuse prevents constructive engagement with the topic;
4. The public’s paternalism toward older people prevents the public from understanding the importance of engaging and empowering older people;
5. The public focuses on attributes of the perpetrator and victim and largely fails to see how structures and systems shape context;
6. The public is unaware of elder abuse’s effect on the mortality risks of older people;
7. The public tends to focus solely on effects on victims without societal effects;
8. The public seems largely unaware of relevant institutions, including Adult Protective Services and focuses instead on the need to change individual behavior;
9. The public laments how modern life has made elder abuse more common and treats elder abuse as a problem that ideally would be, but cannot truly be, solved.

In identifying challenges with communicating about elder abuse, FrameWorks Institute’s findings help define what kind of communication tactics are needed to effectively raise awareness on the issue. Three key areas that elder justice organizations must address through appropriate communication tactics are:

- cultivate thinking about ways to engage and empower older people;
- promote understanding of the role of public and social services, research and policy in preventing elder abuse;
- boost the public’s sense of collective responsibility in addressing and preventing elder abuse.

ACTION PLAN

Utilizing rigorous methods and a validated process, The FrameWorks Institute’s findings suggest the public lacks awareness of the causes and societal effects of elder abuse and prevention methods. Therefore, it is necessary that elder justice professionals and advocates develop new ways to communicate about elder abuse.

In consultation with the National Center on Elder Abuse, the FrameWorks Institute has already begun creating and testing the effectiveness of different “explanatory metaphors”, messages that reframe how the public conceptualizes elder abuse. To test these metaphors, the FrameWorks Institute will use a variety of methods throughout the year including on-the-street interviews and web-based surveys, as well as persistence trials (which help to assess the effectiveness of a metaphor) and usability match trials (which help to assess if the advocates and experts can utilize the metaphors appropriately). After this testing is complete in December 2016, FrameWorks Institute an elder abuse communication “toolkit” will be made available on line. This toolkit will explain our rationale and research findings as well as practical application methods. Additional funding for dissemination and implementation will be necessary to ensure our long term goals.

As a lead elder abuse information resource for the public and a variety of professionals in medical, legal, policy, and social service systems, the NCEA is committed to ensuring this new communication strategy is being implemented in order to raise the public’s awareness about elder abuse nationwide. In order to do this, the NCEA is in the process of forming a committee

of thought leaders from various sectors to help disseminate the findings and conclusions of the FrameWorks Institute. The NCEA and the committee will;

1. Meet to learn and understand the communication strategy and metaphors designed by Frameworks Institute;
2. Plan a dissemination strategy to influence people and agencies that are in a position to improve policies and services relevant to older adults. This dissemination strategy may include:
 - Creating and conducting spokesperson training;
 - Creating briefs, using social media, websites and blogs for public educations and awareness campaigns;
 - Organizing and facilitating a webinar to create a broad base of advocates
 - Creating and conducting presentations and workshops and;
 - Fundraising to support more outreach efforts or research on public perceptions of elder abuse.
3. Employ the dissemination strategy to encourage new communications practices among elder abuse professionals and therefore influence the public and political discourse on addressing elder abuse.