

**Responding to Older Victims of Sexual Abuse:  
Promising Practices from OVW Abuse in Later Life Program Grantees**

By Bonnie Brandl and Madeline Kasper

*May and George have been married for 57 years. George has physically and sexually abused May throughout the marriage. Most recently, George forced May to have sex with him shortly after returning home from the hospital after treatment for breast cancer.*

*A stranger stole most of Juanita's (age 63), life savings. The perpetrator was charged and sentenced. No one asked Juanita if she had been sexually assaulted. If someone had asked the right questions, Juanita could have been referred to a rape crisis center.*

*Katherine (age 82) was sexually abused by her uncle when she was a child. After he died, she disclosed the child sexual abuse for the first time to her daughter. Her daughter brought her to the local rape crisis center where she benefitted from talking about how the trauma had affected her life.*

*Saul (age 92) lived in an assisted care facility because he had moderate dementia. He was molested by a certified nursing assistant (CNA). The CNA was charged with unlawful sexual contact and physical endangerment. In this case, law enforcement, the local sexual assault program and adult protective services worked closely together to support Saul and his family and to hold the offender accountable.<sup>1</sup>*

As these cases illustrate, sexual abuse in later life is complex and diverse. The offender can be an intimate partner, adult child or other family member, caregiver or stranger. Sexual abuse can occur in private dwellings or in facilities. The sexual abuse may have occurred recently or many years ago; either way, the trauma symptoms may be present.

Why focus on older victims of sexual abuse?

- **The population is aging:** Between 2011 and 2030, about 10,000 baby boomers will turn 65 every day (Pew Research Center, 2010). Some 5.4 million Americans have dementia, and people 85 and older are the fastest growing segment of the population. They also are most vulnerable to elder abuse, neglect and exploitation.

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<sup>1</sup> These examples are based on actual cases. The names and some of the details have been change to protect the privacy of the victims.

- **Sexual abuse in later life is often violence against women:** Most older victims are female; however male victims have been reported in almost every study (Burgess et al., 2008; Ramsey-Klawnsnik et al., 2008).
- **Older victims experience significant trauma:** Victims, ranging from age 60 to 100, may experience psychosocial trauma, regardless of whether or not they are able to discuss the sexual assault. Persons with dementia may also experience post-abuse distress symptoms (Burgess et al., 2008; National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2010).
- **Many older sexual abuse victims are not receiving help:** Social stigma may prevent older individuals from discussing sexual activities or reporting sexual violence, especially if the perpetrator is a family member (Burgess & Clements, 2006; NSVRC, 2010). Older survivors of sexual abuse may also be reluctant to report out of a fear of further harm.

The Office on Violence Against Women addresses sexual abuse in later life, along with other forms of elder abuse, by providing funding to communities under The Enhanced Training and Services to End Violence Against and Abuse of Women Later in Life Program (OVW ALL Program). The National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (NCALL) has provided technical assistance and training to grantees of the OVW ALL Program since 2002. The OVW ALL Program promotes a comprehensive approach to enhancing the safety and quality of life of older victims and holding offenders accountable. Using grant funds, grantees:

- Provide training for justice system professionals, social services staff, victim advocates and others on elder abuse. Sexual abuse in later life is covered in all training curricula.
- Create a coordinated community response team to focus on systems change. Coordinated community response teams often include rape crisis center staff and others key players in elder sexual abuse cases.
- Develop victim services tailored specifically for older adults. Victim services are funded to provide assistance to older survivors of elder abuse, including sexual assault, domestic violence, stalking and dating violence.

For this article, NCALL staff talked to some OVW ALL Program grantees about the process of working to improve services for older survivors of sexual abuse. Based on their experiences, grantees offered the following tips on training, coordinated community response and victim services.

### **Training on Sexual Abuse in Later Life**

Professionals, older adults and community members generally need more information about elder abuse, particularly sexual abuse in later life. Providing educational opportunities can raise awareness and understanding about this complex and deeply painful and personal issue, ultimately resulting in improved services for older survivors.

- Consider including the topic of elder sexual abuse within an educational event that addresses a broader issue. For example, it may be easier to get participants to an educational event on “Safety for Older Adults” that includes elder sexual abuse than to have a stand-alone training on sexual violence in later life.
- Train with your community partners. Use a multi-disciplinary training team rather than having a single agency present on sexual abuse in later life.
- Be flexible, particularly when training law enforcement officers, health care providers and others with complicated schedules. Consider offering trainings at different times, during different shifts, so that more participants are able to attend.
- Identify confident and competent trainers who can debunk any misunderstandings that may arise. For example, be prepared to discuss misconceptions about the dynamics of elder sexual abuse or about mandatory reporting requirements.
- While training, keep in mind that participants may feel uncomfortable about the issue of sexual assault. Often it can be especially difficult for people to think about an older person being sexually molested. Law enforcement officials and prosecutors may have a hard time equating an older adult with being a victim of a sex crime. Consider using video clips of older survivors of sexual abuse to raise awareness and generate discussion. (e.g., Miss Mary segment from In Their Own Words (OVC) or AI from Maine Public Broadcasting. For more information about potential videos, please visit NCALL’s video list at: <http://ncall.us/sites/ncall.us/files/resources/2013%20EA%20Video%20List.pdf>
- Be sure to include content on working with victims with cognitive capacity limitations, such as dementia, given that considerations of capacity and consent are especially important in sexual abuse cases.

## **COORDINATED COMMUNITY RESPONSE (CCR)**

Elder abuse, especially sexual violence in later life, cases are often complicated. In many cases, multiple agencies (e.g. adult protective services, law enforcement, rape crisis centers, health care) are involved. Therefore, professional collaboration and the development of protocols to provide a seamless, victim-centered response are vital.

- Develop working relationships with organizations that work with older adults such as adult protective services, the aging services network, leaders in the faith community and ombudsmen.
- Consider participating in home visits with nurses and adult protective services, aging services organizations and other groups that work with older adults.

- When creating an interdisciplinary, community work group (such as a CCR or SART team), start small. Consider starting out with three or four of the major players in the community by developing a steering committee. Once that has been established, begin to incorporate additional members.
- Keeping victim confidentiality in mind, strive to make sure community partners are fully informed and engaged.
- Be patient with each other. One discipline can't dominate the discussion. There has to be equality at that table
- Have a vision. Talk about where you are headed and where your community wants to go with elder abuse issues.

## **PROVIDING VICTIM SERVICES**

Most victim services organizations were created to provide services for younger women. If you are a sexual assault service provider, be willing to honestly explore whether or not you are truly serving everyone. To create new services, you may need to push organizational boundaries. Instead of saying, "we've always done it this way," consider taking the risk to make positive changes.

- Evaluate your services. Do you have materials in large print? Is your agency truly wheelchair and walker accessible? Do you have images of older adults on your brochures and posters? Do you work closely with adult protective services and aging services professionals so you are aware of age-appropriate referrals? Are you prepared to serve older victims who live in facilities?
- Listen more. Consider surveying or using focus groups consisting of older adults to learn more about how to tailor sexual assault services to meet their needs.
- Consider bringing outreach and services to older adults rather than waiting for them to reach out to you. Many older sexual assault survivors do not call 1-800 numbers. Consider leaving your office and meeting older adults where they were already gathering, such as senior centers and congregate meal sites.
- Recognize that some older adults may come to a rape crisis center to discuss trauma reactions from early life sexual assault as well as a current event.
- Consider creating classes and support groups designed specifically for older adults. For example, in Maine the local sexual assault support services organization developed a program titled "Tea and Tips." This program is a series of presentations on various topics such as nutrition, accessibility, emergency preparedness and other issues that may be of interest to older adults. One of the final presentations is on sexual abuse. Twenty-five percent of participants

generally disclose some form of sexual violence at these meetings. They also created a “Life’s Journey” group for older adults to come in and celebrate their lives and who they are. About 1/3 of participants in these groups generally disclose some form of victimization.

As the number of older adults continues to increase, cases of elder sexual abuse will continue to rise. You have a unique opportunity to make a difference in the lives of older victims of sexual abuse. Consider how to enhance your existing services to better meet the needs of older victims. By engaging in training and collaboration, you can address these complicated cases with partners in your community. For more information about abuse in later life and NCALL, please visit: [www.ncall.us](http://www.ncall.us). For more information about the OVW ALL Program, go to: <http://www.ncall.us/grantees/landing>.

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