

**To: The House of Commons' Standing Committee
on Human Resources, Skills and Social
Development and the Status of Persons with
Disabilities (HUMA)**



Re: Study of the impact of COVID-19 on seniors

From: Kathy Majowski, Board Chair, Canadian
Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (CNPEA);
Benedicte Schoepflin, Executive Director.

**CANADIAN NETWORK for
the PREVENTION of ELDER ABUSE**
**RÉSEAU CANADIEN pour la PRÉVENTION
du MAUVAIS TRAITEMENT des AÎNÉS**

Date: June 22, 2021

Elder abuse has long been nicknamed the “silent pandemic”. It was rampant in our communities long before COVID. Like gender-based violence, it flared under Covid and emerged as a “shadow pandemic” in 2020.

We all experienced the stress and impact of the pandemic. What helped many of us rise to the challenge every day was a supportive family or social group. For many older Canadians, these crucial bonds were obliterated by the pandemic. The necessity to stay home and socially distance whittled away opportunities for social interactions and access to core services.

During the first few months of the pandemic, we ran a survey to evaluate the immediate impact of Covid-19 on our members. We asked elder abuse prevention folks and senior service providers what they were experiencing and observing. When asked about the impacts on the seniors they served, respondents listed *increase in elder abuse and domestic violence* as the number one issue; followed closely by *decreased access to services and supports* (such as food, health care, transportation and information), and *increase in social isolation*.

Social isolation is a serious public health risk, with life-threatening consequences. It can be as damaging to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It incurs negative health behaviours and decreased mental health. It is also a risk factor for elder abuse, neglect, and self neglect. An isolated senior may

- lack access to necessities like groceries and medication,
- be more vulnerable to scammers, online and on their doorstep,
- be trapped at home with their abuser, with no access to support

Almost 65% of our survey respondents reported the impact of Covid 19 on their programs and operations as high, with 83% reporting a disruption of services to clients. 46% reported an increased demand for services.

This was the perfect storm: increasingly isolated older adults in greater need of support services that were highly disrupted by the pandemic. Social-distancing became a double-edged sword. We all know what followed: older adults living at home reported higher rates of isolation and mental health struggles, the Seniors Safety Line in Ontario reported a 250% increase in calls about elder abuse. Meanwhile, in some long-term care homes, residents endured appalling abuse and neglect.

The past year was a stress test that exposed the weaknesses in our system. Older Canadians have borne the brunt of this pandemic, through deaths, isolation, and decreased safety and

quality of life, and they are not willing to be sacrificed and ignored anymore. Around 90% of older Canadians live at home, and most of us hope to age in place. For this to happen safely, we need to be addressing abuse and neglect in our communities.

Recommendations

- **Improved training and educational programs across sectors.** Providing adequate care for older adults in their homes and communities is not only about making sure that there are enough human resources to complete the assigned tasks. Older adults should have a network of supports and community services that work well together and are trained and educated in recognizing ageism, in elder abuse awareness and prevention, and are familiar with the local, regional, and national resources available. This training needs to include trauma- and violence-informed principles and practices with an equity orientation, to act as a bridge across sectors and mandates, for a more inclusive and collaborative approach to prevention and response
- **Encourage the development of age-friendly communities** and ensure that the age-friendly effort has an elder abuse prevention lens.
- **Personal Support Workers** (also known as Health Care Aides) have the most consistent and frequent contact with older adults receiving support in their homes and have inconsistent levels of education, training, and oversight. Regulation of this role would increase protection for the public through professional responsibilities, would have minimum standards for entry to practice, and processes in place for responding to complaints. It would also increase safety by verifying qualifications and competencies for safe practice via a public registry and complaint information, similar to other regulatory bodies. A key element would be minimum educational requirements and standardization of educational programs, including trauma-informed care, dementia care, and elder abuse awareness, prevention, and response (including information about the reporting process if there is suspicion of elder abuse). This would also foster safety and stability for these professionals who are often women from racialized communities who are themselves more vulnerable.
- **Provide sustained and appropriate funding for elder abuse and neglect response sector** on par with domestic violence funding. Particularly provide dedicated support and funding to the CNPEA to ensure that there is a national organization dedicated to elder abuse prevention and awareness that will foster the exchange of reliable information among stakeholders and services providers across Canada.
- **Establish a Federal Office of Seniors Advocate.** It should provide systemic oversight and leadership on issues related to the current needs of Canadian seniors, as well as provide insight, analysis, and direction to the government on the future needs of our aging population. Elder abuse and neglect awareness and response should be a key and ongoing mandate of this office.

About CNPEA

CNPEA is a pan Canadian network supported by leaders in the fields of aging, research, health care, and elder abuse prevention and response, among others. CNPEA connects people and organizations, fosters the exchange of reliable information, and advances program and policy development on issues related to preventing the abuse of older adults. We do this work at the local, regional, provincial/territorial, and national levels through our knowledge-sharing hub: www.cnpea.ca