

Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on
Justice and Human Rights on the Study of Elder Abuse

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INTRODUCTION

AGE-WELL, Canada's Technology and Aging Network, welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights' study on elder abuse. AGE-WELL acknowledges the importance of this study and commends the Committee for giving elder abuse the attention it deserves. As a national network we work with key organizations, including CanAge, the Canadian Association for Retired Persons, the National Initiative for the Care of the Elderly, and the Canadian Centre for Elder Law, to increase awareness of elder abuse and promote mitigation strategies and services. Elder abuse is a common area of concerns that is coming up in our consultations with the public and stakeholders about the future of technology and aging in Canada.

Recently, an environmental scan was performed for our challenge area on Financial Wellness and Employment to better understand issues faced by older adults, including those related to elder abuse. Future research activities in this challenge area aim to explore the implications of increased technology use and how to proactively use technology solutions to address elder abuse.

As Canada's aging population continues to grow rapidly, government policies and programs must prioritize the implementation of evidence-informed prevention and intervention strategies to combat elder mistreatment and financial exploitation. **Our comments will focus on how technological advances can help facilitate elder abuse identification, tracking, response, and prevention; and ultimately better equip communities to support victims of abuse.**

BACKGROUND

Elder abuse, or violence against seniors, is a serious and prevalent issue in Canada that is often overlooked despite its continuous rise, especially due to the detrimental effects the COVID-19 pandemic. Often when we think of elder abuse, we think of examples in which older adults have been victims of financial scams, however, abuse can take many other forms including sexual, physical, psychological, and neglect.

Furthermore, elder abuse often hits closer to home than meets the eye, with cases involving family violence, in which a family member is the perpetrator, making up over 30% of documented cases in 2019.¹ It is difficult to determine precise rates of abuse prevalence because the information is largely anecdotal and often goes unreported.² According to a 2015 estimate, some form of abuse is experienced by 4 to 10 percent of older adults in Canada,³ however, only 20% of these abuses are reported to the police.⁴ As noted above, COVID-19 aggravated an already persistent issue with factors such as increased social isolation leading to more vulnerability, and thus, an increase in abuse—with elder abuse response agencies reporting a ten-fold increase of calls and reports since the beginning of the pandemic.⁵

The Government of Canada has taken significant steps towards creating greater awareness of elder abuse in its many forms over the past decades, such as through the provision of over \$18.3 million in funding to elder abuse awareness projects from 2004 to 2013;⁶ the Federal Elder Abuse Initiative that began in 2008 and allocated \$13 million to raising awareness, helping individuals recognize the signs and symptoms of elder abuse, and providing information on supports;⁷ and the expansion of criteria under the New Horizons for Seniors Program to include elder abuse awareness projects.⁸ There is, however, much more work that needs to be done. The following areas of concerns illustrate what AGE-WELL views as the missing pieces to an

effective and meaningful strategy to go beyond awareness and create real change in the lives of older adults in Canada.

AREAS OF CONCERN

Policy Gap

The adoption of the *Code of Conduct for the Delivery of Banking Services to Seniors* by the banking industry in 2019 was an important step towards aligning services with the needs of seniors,⁹ however, there is still a need for increased regulatory oversight and mandatory requirements for financial institutions to better respond to instances of financial elder abuse. Furthermore, support and protection of elder abuse victims and caregivers is not standardized in policy, and thus, is limited and inconsistent.

Funding Gap

Elder abuse funding is much lower than for other forms of abuse including child and domestic, relative to estimated prevalence rates.¹⁰ Despite a rise in need for more services since the onset of the pandemic, many organizations have lost funding in 2021 at the jurisdictional level. For example, Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario received \$100,000 less in funding during the 2020-2021 fiscal year than it had received previously.¹¹

Outcome-Based Strategy/Research Gap

There is a need for increased outcome-based research that is situated in a Canadian context. Targeted intervention and prevention studies are necessary given the variation in types of abuse and risk factors. Furthermore, most current programming focuses primarily on awareness-building, rather than on the development of prevention or intervention strategies.

Use of Supportive Technology Gap

Using technology to our advantage can help with an abundance of pressing social issues and elder abuse is no exception. The following section will demonstrate existing technologies that can work to enhance our ability to effectively combat elder abuse.

TECHNOLOGY TO COMBAT ELDER ABUSE

Although technology is seen as part of the challenge of increased elder abuse, it can also be part of the solution when it is given the opportunity. The following examples illustrate how existing technologies can help with elder abuse prevention and intervention.

- **Senior Sentry Project** is examining how banking behaviour of older adults can be tracked to send alerts during instances of potential financial exploitation.¹²
- **Texas Elder Abuse and Mistreatment Institute** uses videophone technology to provide virtual assessment of elder mistreatment and exploitation.¹³
- **Elder Abuse Decision Support System** in the United States uses screening forms and standardized measures.¹⁴
- **WellSky Human Services** in the United States offers software that enables better reporting and assessment, increases the identification of trends in the data, and helps to prevent future abuse.¹⁵
- **Video monitoring technology** to detect and deter elder mistreatment of residents in long-term care homes is increasing, however, it is important to note the potential privacy,

legal, and ethical issues that this technology may raise.¹⁶

AGE-WELL continues to work closely with its partners to promote and fund projects and initiatives that support research and development of technology focused on improving the lives of older adults. The following are examples of programs and partnerships that are related to enhancing the lives of older adults in a way that can help reduce elder abuse and mistreatment:

- The **Enhancing Employability of Older Workers** project is focused on improving an existing cloud-based prototype platform that helps older adults overcome employment barriers and thus works to strengthen their financial stability—which could in turn support them to being less susceptible to financial forms of abuse.
- **FamliNet** is an AGE-WELL startup and a communication platform that allows older adults who might have limited computer skills to connect with family to increase social connection and help prevent forms of elder abuse that are exacerbated by social isolation.
- **Cog@Work** is a program that focuses on enabling employers to provide affordable, sustainable and inclusive workspace models for employees with mild cognitive impairment and dementia – which could improve their financial independence and maintain their digital literacy to help prevent future abuse.
- The **Advanced Technologies for Pain Care in Older Adults with Dementia** project can help prevent forms of neglect by improving pain care and assessment for older adults with late-stage dementia who may have difficulty in communicating verbally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Elder abuse remains a policy area that is heavily underserved and under-researched. The use of policy tools in conjunction with emerging technologies can help reduce elder abuse prevalence and offer more robust intervention strategies. AGE-WELL recommends the following to be considered by the Committee:

1. Support academic and community-based research that expands knowledge of technology-based intervention and prevention strategies for elder abuse.
2. Increase funding for prevention and intervention programs that are targeted to specific kinds of abuse.
3. Enhance technology-based services to elder abuse victims through increased funding and research on best practices for creating local elder abuse response systems.
4. Implement a national elder abuse and neglect awareness campaign with a focus on COVID-19 and social isolation.
5. Amend the *Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act* (PIPEDA) to require financial institutions to report elder abuse or suspected mental incapacity.¹⁷

ABOUT AGE-WELL

AGE-WELL is a pan-Canadian network that brings together researchers, older adults, caregivers, partner organizations, and future leaders to accelerate the delivery of technology-based solutions that make a meaningful difference in the lives of Canadians. AGE-WELL researchers are producing technologies, services, policies, and practices that improve quality of

life for older adults and caregivers and generate social and economic benefits for Canada. Currently, AGE-WELL includes more than 250 funded and affiliated researchers from 45 universities and research centres across Canada; 380 industry, government, and non-profit partners who work closely with us on solutions for healthy aging; and 750 trainees who are the next generation of leaders in the field of technology and aging.

NOTES

¹ Statistics Canada. (2021, March 2). *Section 4: Police-reported family violence against seniors in Canada, 2019*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00001/04-eng.htm>

² Conrad, K. J., Iris, M., Riley, B. B., Mensah, E., & Mazza, J. (2013). *Developing End-User Criteria and a Prototype for an Elder Abuse Assessment System*. US Department of Justice. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/241390.pdf>

³ Government of Canada. (2014). *Action for Seniors Report*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/seniors-action-report.html>

⁴ Government of Canada. (2014). *Action for Seniors Report*.

⁵ Sajan, B. (2020, April 15). *Tenfold increase in elder abuse during COVID-19 pandemic, advocates say*. <https://bc.ctvnews.ca/tenfold-increase-in-elder-abuse-during-covid-19-pandemic-advocates-say-1.4896176>

⁶ Government of Canada. (2014). *Action for Seniors Report*.

⁷ Government of Canada. (2012, March 15). *Elder Abuse Legislation*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/news/archive/2012/03/elder-abuse-legislation.html>

⁸ Government of Canada. (2012, March 15). *Elder Abuse Legislation*.

⁹ Government of Canada. (2019, July 5). FCAC to monitor banks' compliance with new voluntary code of conduct to protect seniors. <https://www.canada.ca/en/financial-consumer-agency/news/2019/07/fcac-to-monitor-banks-compliance-with-new-voluntary-code-of-conduct-to-protect-seniors.html>

¹⁰ Dong, X. (2012). Advancing the field of elder abuse: future directions and policy implications. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 60(11), 2151-2156.

¹¹ Stone, L. (2021, February 4). *Reports of elder abuse soar outside of long-term care in Ontario*. The Globe and Mail. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-reports-of-elder-abuse-soar-outside-of-long-term-care-in-ontario/>

¹² Birch, R. (2013, December 20). *Filene Creating New Tech To Fight Elder Abuse*. <https://www.cuijournal.com/news/filene-creating-new-tech-to-fight-elder-abuse>

¹³ Burnett, J., Dyer, C. B., Clark, L. E., & Halphen, J. M. (2019). A statewide elder mistreatment virtual assessment program: Preliminary data. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 67(1), 151-155.

¹⁴ *Developing End-User Criteria and a Prototype for an Elder Abuse Assessment System*.

¹⁵ WellSky. (2021). Protective Services. <https://wellsky.com/protective-services/>

¹⁶ Berridge, C., Halpern, J. & Levy, K. (2019). Cameras on beds: The ethics of surveillance in nursing home rooms, *AJOB Empirical Bioethics*, 10:1, 55-62.

¹⁷ Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act, SC 2000, c 5.
<http://canlii.ca/t/541b8>