

*Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL) & DisAbled Women's Network  
(DAWN)/Réseau d'action de femmes handicapées (RAFH) Canada*

## **Preventing and Responding to Elder Abuse in the Lives of People with Disabilities and Deaf People**

A component of InFocus: Bringing People with Disabilities into the Picture:  
A National Pan-Canadian Anti-Violence and Health & Wellness  
Community Leadership Initiative

### **Elder Abuse and Older Adults with Disabilities & Deaf People**

We know that people with disabilities, particularly people with intellectual disabilities are experiencing an increased life expectancy beyond what was typically mid-life.<sup>1</sup> With this increasingly aging population comes a wide range of housing, legal, financial, care giving, health care, transportation, community support and access issues, all of which have implications regarding the extent to which aging people with disabilities are safe and included in society.<sup>2</sup> The current policy framework cannot adequately fulfil the financial and support needs of aging people with disabilities. This has resulted in aging people with disabilities in situations of increased vulnerability and a lack of access to appropriate services and supports in both the disability and seniors' sectors.

Research has clearly indicated that both people with disabilities and seniors are more likely than others to be subjected to acts of violence and/or to live in abusive situations.<sup>3</sup> Studies indicate that women with disabilities are sexually assaulted at a rate at least twice that of the general population of women.<sup>4</sup> The rate for women with intellectual disabilities and Deaf women is even higher than other women with disabilities.<sup>5</sup> Research affirms that sexual offence is the most common type of abuse against women with disabilities.<sup>6</sup>

Among men with intellectual disabilities, 32% to 54% have been sexually assaulted.<sup>7</sup> The nature of abuse against people with disabilities and Deaf people differs from the non-disabled population due to systemic socio-economic exclusion and a related lack of appropriate supports and services. Like seniors, people with disabilities, particularly from marginalized groups (i.e. immigrants) experience an increased dependency on others for primary care and financial support, which makes people with disabilities more vulnerable to abuse.

<sup>1</sup> Seniors on the Margins. National Advisory Council on Aging. *Division of Aging and Seniors, Public Health Agency of Canada* 1st printing, 2004© Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada 2004

<sup>2</sup> See Crawford 2004; Salvatori 2003; Hammel et al. 2001; Bray 1997; Heller 1997; The Roeher Institute 1997.

<sup>2</sup> See Crawford 2004; Salvatori 2003; Hammel et al. 2001; Bray 1997; Heller 1997; The Roeher Institute 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Please see The Roeher Institute, 1995 and MacLean, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> The Roeher Institute. Violence Against Women with Disabilities Fact Sheets. Health Canada. Ottawa: 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Dick Sobsey. Violence and Abuse in the Lives of People with Disabilities: The End of Silent Acceptance? Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes. 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Canadian Association for Community Living. The Right to be Safe – Community Safety Audit. 2006

<sup>7</sup> Canadian Association for Community Living. The Right to be Safe – Community Safety Audit. 2006

Another important issue is the need to develop safe and affordable housing options for aging individuals. Assistance in the transition to independent living is a preferable option than residential or long-term care for seniors with disabilities.<sup>8</sup>

This is because it is a well documented reality that institutional and congregated living settings for people with disabilities, particularly women, people with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities and Deaf people have been environments where abuse is wide spread and ongoing.<sup>9</sup>

In addition elder abuse in seniors' residences, long-term care facilities and nursing homes has been identified over the last 10 years as a critical issue.<sup>10</sup> The potentiality of abuse occurring in congregated and/or institutional settings ironically occur for the very same reasons that bring people to live in such settings, i.e. the need for support with everyday living. Abuse can and does occur when other people are making all decisions for the residents, where people's wishes are denied and where attitudes and practices deny people of their respect and dignity.<sup>11</sup>

Older people with disabilities and Deaf people are at a double disadvantage and extremely vulnerable to abuse with an increased need for health and social supports, different communication styles that often makes it difficult to express themselves, and a lack of knowledge of how age related conditions effect people with disabilities.

## **What is the InFocus Initiative?**

While the extent and nature of abuse against people with disabilities and Deaf people has been researched, much less work has been done on the development of practical strategies that work towards prevention, appropriate crisis intervention, and long term planning to break the cycle of abuse. There has been some tools developed to-date, however what is missing is the strategy to "move" that information into the community where men and women with disabilities and Deaf people live, and services/supports exist.

The project uses a local-level community development approach to assist communities to organize around two areas of concerns for people with disabilities and Deaf people; health and wellness and combating violence against women, men and seniors - thus a primary focus of this project is to address the issue of elder abuse for older people with disabilities and Deaf people. The InFocus project is being implemented in one demonstration community in each of the 13 provinces and territories across Canada.

<sup>8</sup> See Heller, T., & Factor, A. (2004). Older adults with developmental disabilities and their aging family caregivers. Chicago: RRTC on Aging with Developmental Disabilities, University of Illinois at Chicago.

<sup>9</sup> See Sobsey, D. (1994). Violence and abuse in the lives of people with disabilities: The end of silent acceptance? and Systems of Control - The Global Legacy of Institutional Child Abuse By Roch Longueépée - Founder & President, Internations' Justice Federation.

<sup>10</sup> Please see Elder Abuse in Nursing Homes Needs to be Tackled from the Top Down. The Ontario Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse. November 18 2011. [http://www.acupoftea.ca/ONPEA\\_MEDIARELEASE\\_NURSINGHOMEABUSE.pdf](http://www.acupoftea.ca/ONPEA_MEDIARELEASE_NURSINGHOMEABUSE.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Please see Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse: Abuse in Institutions [http://www.cnpea.ca/abuse\\_in\\_institutions.htm](http://www.cnpea.ca/abuse_in_institutions.htm) last updated Friday April 24, 2009

InFocus builds on the knowledge, research, and limited resources that have been developed to-date, by implementing a strategy that works with older people with disabilities, their advocates and relevant local sectors (such as seniors' and disability services, police, shelters, family services, etc.) to develop a coordinated response to addressing the issue of elder abuse and other violence against people with disabilities and Deaf people, as well as the issue of health access.

## **Our Objectives for Reducing Elder Abuse**

- ✓ To establish a national representation of key stakeholders to form a National Reference Group, project team and prospective local demonstration sites.
- ✓ To raise awareness about the issue of elder abuse and establish local infrastructure in each demonstration community.
- ✓ To identify the prevalence and nature of elder abuse i.e. when and how abuse may be occurring, for people with disabilities and the Deaf community in Canada.
- ✓ To identify the barriers, challenges and gaps in the existing violence prevention, seniors' and disability sectors in addressing elder abuse for people with disabilities and Deaf people.
- ✓ To identify promising practices, program reforms and community strategies in addressing elder abuse for people with disabilities and Deaf people.
- ✓ To use information on the nature, barriers and promising practices to develop disability sensitive information sessions and workshops to be offered to front-line service providers from relevant sectors in local communities who are involved in the prevention and response of elder abuse for people with disabilities and Deaf people.
- ✓ To use information on the nature, barriers and promising practices to develop workshops relevant to the circumstances of seniors with disabilities and Deaf seniors on the signs and effects of elder abuse and what they can do and where they can go for help.
- ✓ To bring seniors with disabilities and Deaf seniors together with key sectors in local communities to identify the places where older people with disabilities and Deaf seniors are at risk of abuse in order to establish a coordinated community response to addressing elder abuse for these populations.
- ✓ To bring seniors with intellectual disabilities and their families together with their local community to develop a "plan" towards a safe and interdependent life that is not dependent on the aging parent or other family caregivers.

## **Project Phases**

### **Phase 1 - Research with a Purpose - April 2013 to March 2014**

Through an applied research process, discussions with people with disabilities/Deaf people and key stakeholders will occur, resulting in the development of information resources and tools. These resources will then be piloted through information sessions and workshops in the 13 demonstration communities, to key local sectors and people with disabilities/Deaf people.

### **Phase 2 - Educating and equipping the community - April 2014-March 2015**

Distinct information sessions/workshops will be targeted to front-line service providers from specific sectors, i.e. programs for seniors, justice, etc., and modules that share information on elder abuse, rights and how to stay safe, will be developed for working with older people with disabilities and Deaf people. There will be a second phase of workshops where sectors will learn how to examine their agencies internally to see where older people with disabilities and Deaf people may not be properly served, and individuals and their families can work on long-term person-centered safety planning.

## **Learn more and get involved!**

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