

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

Canadian Association of Social Workers

Founded in 1926, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) is the national association voice for the social work profession.

CASW has adopted a pro-active approach to issues pertinent to social policy/social work. It produces and distributes timely information for its members, and special projects are initiated and sponsored.

With its concern for social justice and its continued role in social advocacy, CASW is recognized and called upon both nationally and internationally for its social policy expertise.

The mission of CASW is to promote the profession of social work in Canada and advance social justice. CASW is active in the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW).



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Canadian Association of Social Workers – May 2021**

BACKGROUND

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) is the national association voice for social work in Canada with a dual mission to promote the profession and advance social justice issues. Our profession emphasizes the inherent dignity, worth, and agency of all persons. We thank you for inviting us to provide a social work perspective on Elder Abuse.

CASW strongly supports and recognizes the urgent need to address and prevent elder abuse. Elder abuse is a single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust that causes harm or distress to an older person (National Centre on Elder Abuse, n.d.). With their varied roles throughout our communities and specialized education in systems perspectives, social workers are uniquely positioned to offer insight on this issue.

In the last number of years, CASW has advanced policy plans and frameworks that align with our social justice mandates, such as a Universal Basic Income Guarantee (uBIG) and the Social Care Act: policies with the power to address and combat the underlying root causes. Foregoing these vital social policies can create and perpetuate situations in which older adults experience abuse.

CASW would like to acknowledge and commend the Federal government's previous and ongoing action towards addressing these serious issues. These actions include expanding the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) and Old Age Security (OAS), increased funds for homecare, the new horizons for seniors' program, the top-up of Goods and Services Tax (GST) at the beginning of the pandemic, directing funding to community organizations that provide practical services to Canadian seniors throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and, the national senior strategy. These are essential steps in the right direction in providing the support this population requires and deserves.

CONTEXT

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms makes it illegal to discriminate on the grounds of age. While several federal and provincial laws apply to elder abuse, Canadian law is not grounded in a single definition that applies to elder abuse or neglect.

The most common risk factors for elder abuse include stress related to caregiving, social isolation, limited cognitive ability, mental illness, poverty, ageism and the overuse or abuse of illicit drugs and/or alcohol (Peterson et al., 2014; Roger et al., 2015). The diversity of the aging Canadian aging population (e.g., newcomers, racialized groups, Indigenous Peoples, and 2SLGBTQ+ groups) further complicates the prevention and intervention of elder abuse. Multiple discriminations, cultural and personal perceptions of elder abuse, and various barriers in accessing support and information contribute to the under-reporting and ineffective prevention and intervention of elder abuse.

Social workers are painfully aware of the prevalence and impact of elder abuse across Canada; however, data and statistics are woefully lacking. The most recent and authoritative national study on abuse against the elderly was conducted in 2004. There are trends of under-reporting, unawareness, and fear that make it challenging for elders to receive the justice and support they require (Department of Justice, 2015). This is only compounded by the lack of specialized services available when abuse is identified.

Throughout Canada, provinces and territories also have several specific acts and legislation to protect residents' safety and rights living in a communal setting, i.e., long-term care and retirement homes. Though the COVID-19

pandemic has brought much attention to the dire long-term care situation in our country, the reality is that most older adults live in our communities, and both contexts must be robustly addressed.

Finally, many excellent existing programs and initiatives are doing vital work, such as local elder abuse networks, but these networks receive no funding. A coordinated approach requires sustained infrastructure.

The current patchwork of laws, regulations, and definitions is a significant problem. The absence of synchronized and comprehensive efforts, stable definitions, and robust tracking and reporting mean Canada will not tackle this issue. Without a coordinated approach to ensure economic and social well-being, older adults in Canada will continue to experience poverty, homelessness and social isolation. Any additional efforts to combat elder abuse will not be successful if these underlying factors are not prioritized.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CASW recommends the Federal government:

1. Develop a funded, multi-year National Elder Abuse Strategy. This overarching strategy must complement and support current federal and provincial efforts and have structural, formal links to work in collaboration with the national homecare strategy, poverty reduction, and housing strategies, as well as the further recommendations forwarded below.

More specifically, this strategy must:

- Bring federal legislation to clearly define all types of elder abuse in institutional, private, and public settings and protection for whistleblowers and witnesses.
- Set forward formal, ongoing data collection and tracking requirements.
- Outline the professions regularly providing services to older adults to develop and deliver training and/or continuing education programs for practitioners and conduct multidisciplinary protection and intervention.
- Develop education for the general public and volunteers in social service and healthcare agencies on signs of elder abuse, ethics, and legal responsibilities related to elder abuse.
- Identify existing programs and create new programs and programs and allocate funding to these initiatives.

2. Move swiftly to implement a Universal Basic Income Guarantee to ensure older adults receive the support required during and post COVID-19. If the government does not intend to implement a uBIG, increases to OAS and GIS should be prioritized to ensure seniors have an economic floor to stand on. Any other efforts to end elder abuse will not be successful if income is not addressed.

3. Adopt a Social Care Act for Canada. This act should include principles like those of the Canada Health Act to help guide the Canada Social Transfer (CST) and other social investments. The structure offered by such an act will be instrumental in working towards the kind of tracking and data collection required for a coordinated strategy on elder abuse.

4. Increase funding to support formal and informal caregivers through taxation, (un)employment support programs and homecare, and reduce the barriers to access such support, benefits and services.

As outlined above, Canada's plan to address elder abuse must comprise a mixture of factors, including prevention, protection, preserving dignity and autonomy, education and awareness, addressing the SDoHs and identifying risk factors. This strategy should also follow National Accessibility Law, be available in multiple languages and, crucially, be co-created through consultation and engagement with older adults in the community and those with lived experience of elder abuse.

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