

To: Senate Special Committee on Aging
March 16, 2011

The California Elder Justice Workgroup welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the challenges facing the nation in responding to elder and vulnerable adult abuse and neglect. The California Elder Justice Workgroup (CEJW), which was launched in 2009, is a coalition of service providers from various disciplines involved in the identification, response, and treatment of elder and vulnerable adult abuse and neglect. Our goal was to identify the gaps, problems, and needs of California's response to this abuse and to map out a comprehensive plan of action to improve the state's ability to safeguard its vulnerable residents. The result of our work was "Improving California's Response to Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation: A Blueprint," portions of which are attached. While California was the focus of our work, California is a microcosm of the issues facing the nation in addressing elder and vulnerable adult abuse and the major problems, challenges, and needs in California are the same as those every state is wrestling with. The following are some of the most pressing issues that require federal involvement to resolve.

Lack of Consistency

Widespread variations exist in how agencies charged to respond to abuse reports interpret their responsibility, carry out investigations, and define eligibility for protective services. Consequently, where one resides is the determining factor in the assistance an abuse victim will receive. Without a federally established baseline for the protections to be afforded these victims with national guides and standards, they can have no expectation of assistance or protection. Moreover, without federal requirements, states are free to completely eliminate protective services for abused elders and adults with disabilities. California, for example, is considering the elimination of Adult Protective Services because of the state's difficult financial straits, and if the program survives it will be relegated to the counties to implement as they see fit.

Lack of Coordination

It is widely accepted that successful intervention in elder and adults with disabilities abuse requires an array of disciplines and services, and these providers are more effective when they cooperate with each other and coordinate their activities. While agencies are free to share information if they have clients' consent, many clients are unwilling or unable to give consent; often, their ability to give consent is unclear. Certain professional groups operate under particularly stringent federal confidentiality restrictions, such as personnel from mental health programs, Veterans Administration programs, Ombudsmen, attorneys, and banks, which makes collaboration challenging. Improved communication and coordination among these entities is essential to achieve a more seamless and holistic response and the states are looking for federal leadership to coordinate the activities of the multiple agencies involved in abuse prevention, set priorities, provide guidance in interpreting or implementing federal mandates, and respond to the need for new federal policy, research, training, and technical assistance.

Lack of Data and Awareness

Despite the rapidly growing rate of abuse of elders and adults with disabilities, it remains a largely invisible problem. This is due in part to the lack of data about its prevalence and incidence. Even though every state has an APS program which gathers data about the clients served, the lack of consistency in definitions, responses, and findings makes compiling reporting and response data virtually impossible. This complicates our ability to document the extent of the problem. A national plan for elder abuse prevention is needed to elevate elder abuse to national prominence. This would include standardizing definitions; gathering data; strengthening protections; and providing leadership and guidance to state and local programs.

Lack of Training

All professionals, paraprofessional, volunteers, caregivers, and others who have contact with elders need training to help them recognize and report abuse. This training needs to reflect specific job settings, the types of abuse that trainees are likely to observe, their roles, and their levels of education and experience. In addition, APS needs standardized “core” training which would include the basic skills needed to investigate, evaluate, and treat elder and vulnerable adult abuse and neglect.

Lack of Research

Elder abuse research is desperately needed. Program developers need information on effective, cost-efficient services to guide them. Forums are needed to promote exchange among researchers, practitioners, and program developers that could generate new practice focused research. Policy makers, program developers, service providers, and advocates need credible information to guide policy and practice and justify requests for resources. Support for and coordination of this research needs to happen at the federal level.

Lack of Adequate Funding

These are extraordinarily difficult financial times. The national, state, and local governments are all struggling with deficits and not having enough funds to cover current expenses. So we are mindful that this is not a good time to be seeking additional funds, however, elder and vulnerable abuse intervention, prevention, and treatment services are in crisis. Every day victims are being left in unsafe, risky situations because the programs mandated to protect them are being reduced or eliminated. APS are experts in stretching a dollar since all they have ever known was inadequate funding, but a dollar can only be stretched so far. APS is experiencing dramatic increases in the numbers of seniors and vulnerable adults needing help, the baby boomer tsunami is on the horizon, the inadequate initial funding can't meet the need, and now funding has been reduced. This is creating a perfect storm. The victims cannot wait, the states are tapped out; federal funding must be found.

In summary, with the passage of the Elder Justice Act we have finally recognized elder and vulnerable adult abuse as the national problem that it is. With that recognition comes the responsibility for federal leadership, guidance, and direction. Carpe diem, or as Mickey Rooney said to Senator Kohl and the Senate Special Committee on Aging members, “You need to stop elder abuse. Stop it now!”

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for the record.

California Elder Justice Workgroup

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Attachment: “Improving California’s Response to Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation: A Blueprint,” Chapter 11, National Needs