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# IMPROVING RESPONSES TO AND PREVENTING

# SEXUAL ABUSE OF OLDER WOMEN IN AGED CARE

This document outlines a proposal to improve responses to and prevent the sexual assault of older women (and older people more broadly). The proposal encompasses residential and community aged care settings. Research shows[[1]](#footnote-1) that older women are sexually assaulted in residential aged care by other residents, staff, family members or visitors. There is also evidence that older women are sexually assaulted in their own homes by intimate partners or other family members and by service providers.

In both settings, aged care service providers have a pivotal role to play in preventing sexual assault – but many not have the skills, confidence or guidelines to enable this to occur.

Without appropriate skills and resources, service provider’s responses to reports of sexual assault are often inadequate. This is evident by the feedback from some family members who contact the media to share their story because they feel they are not being heard and cannot achieve accountability in any other way. The lack of education and information for service providers contributes to a context where older women are vulnerable to sexual assault by perpetrators who are not held to account.

There is a need for an urgent action to address the risks and ensure that older women are not at risk of sexual assault in aged care services or their own homes. The research is clear we have a problem – inaction at this point makes us complicit.

A submission to the Royal Commission into Quality and Safety in Aged Care, developed by Dr Catherine Barrett, identified the nature of sexual assault of older women in residential aged care and home-based services.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Submission called for a systems-based strategy to engage key stakeholders and develop effective, long term change. Such a strategy will take many years to achieve - and so immediate action is required alongside the strategy to manage existing risks and improve safety.

The proposal outlines such a Strategy. It begins by building a safety net for older women through education and resourcing service providers. It then details a process for engaging key stakeholders in developing systems for change. The proposal has been structured around the successful model adopted for the National LGBTI Ageing and Aged Care Strategy[[3]](#footnote-3) which involved stakeholder consultation, development of principles, implementation of reforms and then evaluation.[[4]](#footnote-4) This approach recognises that adopting changes without consulting key stakeholders or taking a systemic approach is unlikely to be effective.

# Details

The proposal outlines a six-stage process undertaken over a two-year period. More details will be provided if there is interest.

## Stage One: Build a safety net

This stage develops resources to improve responses to and reduce risk of sexual assault immediately. The resources will be targeted to aged care service providers; elder abuse services; aged care quality assessors; general practitioners, nurses and older women’s groups. It will include the following:

1. Consultation with key stakeholders including those the resources are developed for and others including: sexual assault services, police and family violence services
2. The development of an online knowledge hub
3. Resources including include powerpoint, film and print resources
4. Information to improve detection and reporting
5. Strategies for prevention
6. A map of support services
7. A map of responses.

## Stage Two: Document responses

Document existing responses to older women (and their advocates) who report sexual assault. To further clarify needs.

## Stage Three: Establish a National Advisory Group

Establish a National Advisory Group of key stakeholders, including aged care service providers, peak bodies, professional groups, older women and family members to undertake the following:

1. Develop Terms of Reference
2. Identify and engage key stakeholders
3. Develop a strategy
4. Advise on implementation of the Strategy
5. Establish a process of reporting against the Strategy
6. Evaluate the Strategy.

## Stage Three: Develop a strategy

Develop a Strategy that outlines key issues and provides a blueprint for change. This could include:

1. Outline of key issues
2. Key principles underpinning the Strategy
3. Strategic goals and actions including: research required, policy changes, legislative reforms, education and other capacity building
4. Resources list
5. Key reading lists.

## Stage Four: Implement plan

Launch the Strategy and implement the activities outlined in the Strategy, which may include the following:

1. Commission research on key gaps identified
2. Develop policies to guide service responses
3. Recommend legislative reforms as required
4. Update educational resources and roll out education
5. Implement a process for resourcing change champions (in all states and territories) to roll out education to their colleagues.

## Stage Five: Evaluate

National Advisory Group to oversee evaluation of the Strategy to measure intended and expected outcomes and make improvements to the Strategy.

# Authors

This proposal has been developed by Dr Catherine Barrett and Tonye Segbedzi. Dr Barrett is the Director of the Celebrate Ageing Program, a social enterprise building respect for older people. The Celebrate Ageing program includes the OPAL Institute, which promotes the sexual rights of older people – including their right to be free from sexual violence (more information on next page). Tonye Segbedzi is the Senior Policy and Research Officer for the Australian Association of Gerontology. Contact details:

Dr Catherine Barrett

Phone: 0429 582 237

Email: [director@celebrateageing.com](mailto:director@celebrateageing.com)

Web: opalinstitute.org

Tonye Segbedzi

Senior Policy and Research Officer

Phone: 03 8506 0525

Email: [tsegbedzi@aag.asn.au](mailto:tsegbedzi@aag.asn.au)

Web: aag.asn.au

## Experience related to sexual assault prevention: Dr Catherine Barrett

Dr Catherine Barrett is an experienced researcher and well regarded for her capacity to engage and work with key stakeholders and reach marginalised groups. Dr Barrett’s research is grounded in a capacity building approach – or framing research as a catalyst for change.

As a Senior Research Fellow at La Trobe University, Dr Barrett was the recipient of a DACS grant for a two and a half year project supporting the development of LGBTI inclusive services in Australia. She was also cochair of the committee which developed the National LGBTI Ageing and Aged Care Strategy and worked on the strategy implementation and evaluation for a seven year period.

Dr Barrett has been working to prevent sexual assault of older women for the past two decades and some of the key initiatives include:

* 2019 (November): workshop on [Unlawful Sexual Contact - compliance, resourcing and prevention](https://www.aag.asn.au/documents/item/2849) with the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission prior to the Australian Association of Gerontology Conference in Sydney
* 2019 (August) developed a [submission](https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/sexualabuse.pdf) to the Royal Commission into Quality and Safety in Aged Care, on the sexual assault of older women
* 2019 (August): presented the perspectives of older women at a National [Forum](https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/sexual_violence_racs_seminar_program.pdf) on preventing sexual assault in residential aged care. Forum hosted by the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine at Monash University
* 2019 (July): worked with 97 year old Margarita Solis to deliver a [plenary presentation](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dLxRPwyOpLxjK4Sg-ZKZ4j6ZA-WCkHEx/view) on her experience of sexual assault and her strategies for prevention at the National Elder Abuse Awareness Conference in Brisbane
* 2019 (July): participated in a panel on elder abuse (reflections on sexual assault) at the National Elder Abuse Awareness Conference in Brisbane
* 2019 (August): worked with the Australian Association of Gerontology on a [paper](https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/aag056_-_a_fair_future_for_older_women_who_experience_sexual_abuse.pdf) outlining the outcomes of the November pre-conference workshop on sexual assault
* 2019 (March): worked with Margarita Solis to launch a social media campaign and online resource called [#SheToo](https://www.opalinstitute.org/shetoo.html) which raises awareness of the importance of listening to older women who report sexual assault and developed strategies to improve listening
* 2018 (March): co presented a webinar for the Australian Association of Gerontology on the role of aged care service providers in preventing the sexual assault of older women
* 2018 (November): Facilitated a preconference workshop on sexual assault prevention at the Australian Association of Gerontology Conference in Melbourne
* 2017: produced a film called [Margarita](https://www.opalinstitute.org/margarita.html) which documents the experiences of Margarita Solis after her sexual assault, as a tool to educate service providers and community members
* 2017 (November): participated in a forum hosted by Senior’s Rights Service NSW on [Older Women, Ageing and Disadvantage](https://seniorsrightsservice.org.au/projects/women-ageing-and-disadvantage/)
* 2017: coedited a [book](https://www.opalinstitute.org/rights.html) on the Sexual Rights of older people including their right to be free from sexual violence. In a world first, the book takes the World Association for Sexology’s Charter of Sexual Rights and applies them to the lives of older people
* 2017: coordinated an interdisciplinary panel on sexual assault at the National Elder Abuse Awareness Conference in Sydney, which was hosted by Virginia Trioli. [Video](https://youtu.be/e5mvnI7pNpQ) produced from panel and also [podcast](https://youtu.be/GEWzvy6RWL4) on sexual assault with Ellen Fanning
* 2017: developed training and a [policy](https://www.opalinstitute.org/tools.html) for aged care service providers on addressing sexual rights of older people and on sexual boundaries in home services. Made the policies available free online and delivered the training
* 2017: delivered presentations on sexuality and aged care at the Better Practice conferences in four states/territories
* 2016-2017: Older Women's Right To Be Safe At Home and in Care: researcher on a [project](https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/finalreport.pdf) being conducted by the Council on the Ageing, Victoria and ARCSHS to document aged care service providers strategies for preventing sexual assault and to work with peak bodies on the development of a state wide strategy to prevent sexual assault. Project funded by Victorian Women's Trust
* 2015-current: member of Victoria Police’s Community Consultation, Seniors Advisory Group to present issues related to sexual assault
* 2015: Its Gone Wild Out There: chief researcher for a [project](https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/wildoutthere.pdf) in partnership with Women's Health in the South East (WHiSE) that documented older women's experiences of sexual wellbeing and safety
* 2014-2015: Norma's Project: chief investigator for [Norma's Project](http://normasproject.weebly.com/) which documented the first evidence base in Australia on older women's experiences of sexual assault - and strategies for the primary prevention. The project was conducted by ARCSHS in partnership with Alzheimer's Australia, Council on the Ageing, National Ageing Research Institute and the University of Melbourne and was funded by the Federal Government
* 2007-2011: researcher at La Trobe University working on projects addressing sexual safety for people living with a disability and project for White Ribbon Foundation
* Victoria Police's Senior's Working Group (2015 - current): working group member.

1. See Norma’s Project: <https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/researchreport.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See: <https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/sexualabuse.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See: <http://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/national_ageing_and_aged_care_strategy_lgbti_print_version.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)