

# Someone in her corner:

## Older women's right to be safe at home and in care

The sexual assault of older women is a largely under-recognised problem. Recent Australian research has also documented the occurrence of sexual assault against older women. Norma's Project (Mann et al, 2014) documented 65 stories about the sexual assault of older women in their own homes, in residential aged care, retirement villages, acute care and public places. As is the case with sexual assault more generally, perpetrators were predominantly people known to the victims, such as family members and service providers. It was also clear from this, and other, research that aged care service providers are in a unique position when it comes to identifying and supporting older women who have experienced or are 'at-risk' of sexual assault. Aged care service providers are likely to have access to women who are otherwise isolated and vulnerable, and have the potential to provide a key source of support and intervention.

To build on this support we interviewed and surveyed aged care service providers to identify their strategies for preventing sexual assault of older women and responding to older women who have been sexually assaulted. We aimed to capture the 'good practice' that is already occurring in the field in order to inform the development of a state-wide strategy guiding best-practice responses to sexual assault. The project was funded by the Victorian Women's Benevolent Trust and was a partnership between Council on the Ageing, Victoria and The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University.

### Aged care service provider's prevention strategies

The following section highlights the six key themes identified by aged care service providers who participated in the survey and interviews. Then on page three, key points for responding to a report of the sexual assault of an older woman is presented. The final two pages include a list of support services that can assist older people, family members and service providers when an older woman has been sexually assaulted in Victoria.

#### 1. Listening to older women

Aged care service providers noted it is important to listen to older women who report sexual assault. The characteristics of listening in this context were reported to involve suspending judgement or debate about whether or not a sexual assault took place. Listening was reported to validate women's experience and give them back some control in the aftermath of sexual assault. Strategies for listening included: responding immediately; using empathetic tone; making eye contact and communicating a sense of concern. Active listeners were seen to effectively give older women permission to talk about sexual assault.

Listening to older women was an important prelude to activating appropriate service responses – including contacting sexual assault services to ensure appropriate physical care and emotional support.

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Investing in Women and Girls.

## **2. Undertaking skilled assessment**

Skilled assessment of older women who are at risk of - or who are experiencing sexual assault was considered important. Assessment included identifying changes in older women's behaviour or mood and identifying when older women appeared frightened of their partner or other another person. Good practice in assessment also involved identifying older women at risk of sexual assault because of social or geographical isolation, cognitive impairment, communication difficulties, disability or frailty. Skilled assessors understood that older women experience sexual assault and were aware that sexual assault could occur in the broader context of family violence.

## **3. Building trust**

Several aged care service providers highlighted the importance of building a relationship of trust with older women who were experiencing sexual assault. Developing relationships of trust enabled older women to feel that they would be heard if they disclosed their sexual assault. This was considered particularly important where an older women had previously disclosed to a family member or other service provider and her experience had been discounted.

## **4. Building confidence**

A number of aged care service providers described the importance of building the confidence of older women who were experiencing sexual assault by their intimate partner. This was considered particularly important for older women who did not feel empowered to change their situation (social or geographical isolation, frailty, limited housing options, financial dependence on the perpetrator). Strategies to build confidence included increasing services, social engagement, providing information about alternative housing. One participant summarised this strategy as 'putting someone in her corner' – or helping women to feel empowered or supported to take the actions they wanted to take.

## **5. Understanding local support services**

Understanding local services to support older women who were experiencing, or who were at risk of sexual assault was considered important. This included sexual assault services, police, family violence services and aged care advocacy services. Some aged care service providers engaged these local services to deliver staff education and reported that they built confidence in utilising these services as a result. Victoria based services are listed on the last page of this document.

## **6. Demonstrating organisational leadership**

Organisations with clear policy and procedures related to sexual assault, and those that provided supportive environments (support from management and collegial support) were seen as well placed to prevent the sexual assault of older women. Organisational policies around the sexual rights of older people in residential aged care were considered important to clarify when sexual activity constituted sexual assault and what staff responsibilities were. Organisational policies were also viewed as important to ensure staff and clients understood the organisations expectations related to sexual boundaries in the provision of home services – and the consequences of sexual boundaries being crossed.

Staff debriefing following sexual assault was reported to assist in opening up conversations about sexual assault and educating staff about organisational expectations. It also provided the opportunity to encourage staff to report concerns and enable organisations to proactively address situations where older women were at risk of sexual assault. Appropriate responses to reports of sexual assault were seen as critical to preventing the sexual assault of older women.

## Key points for responding to sexual assault of older women

Appropriate responses to allegations of sexual assault are important in preventing further sexual assault. Responses need to be individualised to each situation and the needs of the older woman reporting sexual assault. However, the following principles are provided to help ensure that all the available services are considered:

1. **Secure safety:** ensure the older woman is safe from further sexual assault by the alleged perpetrator
2. **Seek medical treatment:** determine if the older woman requires medical attention. If urgent, contact '000' (triple zero) and arrange attendance of Ambulance Victoria or if less urgent arrange suitable medical treatment
3. **Contact the Police:** ring your local police Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Team (SOCIT). If sexual assault is alleged to have occurred in aged care an approved provider must report to the Department of Health and the police incidents within 24 hours
4. **Listen to the older women:** suspend judgement about whether or not you believe an assault has occurred – it is important to listen
5. **Provide emotional support:** contact your local Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA) to identify support options. Older women have the right to support – whether or not a perpetrator is charged and convicted
6. **Develop a Safety Plan:** make sure the older woman is safe from further assault. Contact Family Violence Services to help plan for safety in the home. Consider contacting Victims Assistance Program for support to improve home safety
7. **Promote community safety message:** consider whether other older people feel unsafe as a result of the assault and offer community information sessions to provide reassurance. Consider inviting your local SOCIT or CASA to assist in promoting sense of community safety
8. **Consolidate strategies for prevention:** organise staff debriefing to discuss what worked well and what you would do differently. Provide safe spaces for staff to talk about how they are feeling and how they could prevent further sexual assaults.

## Victoria based services

There are a range of support services in Victoria that can assist older people, family members and service providers when an older woman has reported a sexual assault. These services are free, confidential and can provide information on options for responding.

### Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASA)

There are 15 Centres Against Sexual Assault in Victoria that work with the person who has experienced the assault (including people living in aged care services) as well as non-offending family members. The CASAs can provide information, support and education to aged care service providers. Service providers or family members who are concerned about an older person can ring their local sexual assault service for information and advice. Older women who experience sexual assault can find it helpful to talk to a CASA counsellor – it is important that all women are offered CASA Services. To find your nearest CASA you can call the [Sexual Assault Crisis Line](#) on 1800 806 292.

### Police Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Teams (SOCIT)

In Victoria there are 29 Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Teams (SOCIT) of specialist detectives who are trained to investigate the complex crimes of sexual assault. Their role is to investigate crime, apprehend offenders, initiate prevention strategies and Work in partnership with other services to ensure an empathetic, professional and comprehensive response to victims of sexual assault. Police have the capacity to document an assault – whether or not the alleged perpetrator is charged and convicted.

Find out more about your local SOCIT on the Victoria Police website ([www.police.vic.gov.au](http://www.police.vic.gov.au)) or call one of the following SOCITs:

Western Victoria: Ballarat: (03) 5336 6055; Bendigo: (03) 5444 6752; Colac: (03) 5230 0044; Geelong (03) 5223 7200; Horsham: (03) 5382 9241; Ararat: (03) 5355 1500; Mildura: (03) 5023 5980; Swan Hill: (03) 5036 1600; Warrnambool: (03) 5560 1333.

North-West Metropolitan: Brimbank: (03) 9313 3460; Diamond Creek: (03) 9438 8320; Epping: (03) 9409 8174; Fawkner: (03) 9355 6100; Footscray: (03) 8398 9860; Melbourne: (03) 8690 4056.

Southern Metropolitan: Dandenong: (03) 8769 2200; Frankston: (03) 8770 1000; Moorabbin: (03) 9556 6128.

Eastern Victoria: Bairnsdale: (03) 5150 2677; Benalla: (03) 5760 0200; Box Hill: (03) 8892 3292; Knox: (03) 9881 7939; Morwell: (03) 5120 0351; Wonthaggi: (03) 5671 4100; Sale: (03) 5142 2200; Seymour: (03) 5735 0208; Shepparton: (03) 5820 5878; Wangaratta: (03) 5723 0848; Wodonga: (02) 6049 2673

### **Family Violence Services**

Some older women experience sexual assault in the broader context of sexual violence. In Victoria *Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre* provides support services for women experiencing violence and abuse from a partner or ex-partner, another family member or someone close to them. Services include: risk assessment, crisis accommodation, safety planning, information and advocacy. Call the 24-hour response line on 1800 015 188 or go to: [www.safesteps.org.au](http://www.safesteps.org.au)

### **Victim Assistance Program**

The Victorian Government's Victims of Crime Helpline can provide advice about rights; reporting a crime; emergency home security; communicating with police and making a report; applying for financial assistance. Open: 8am-11pm, 7 days a week. Phone: 1800 819 817 or go to: [www.victimsofcrime.vic.gov.au](http://www.victimsofcrime.vic.gov.au)

### **Aged Care Advocacy Services**

In Victoria there are two aged care advocacy agencies that provide free and confidential aged advocacy services to assist consumers of aged care services and other representatives who are acting on behalf of, or in the interests of, the older person:

Seniors Rights Victoria is the primary, government-funded destination for older Victorians, their friends and family members seeking information and support relating to elder abuse. Phone: 1300 368 821 or Web site: [www.seniorsrights.org.au](http://www.seniorsrights.org.au)

Elder Rights Advocacy (ERA). Phone: 1800 700 600 or website: [www.era.asn.au](http://www.era.asn.au)

### **National 24 hour help line**

The National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service provides a professional 24-hour telephone and online, crisis and trauma counselling service to anyone whose life has been impacted by sexual assault, domestic or family violence.

Phone: 1800 Respect (1800 737 732)

Website: [www.1800respect.org.au](http://www.1800respect.org.au)