Elder Abuse
Guidelines for Maine Journalists

MAINE COUNCIL FOR
ELDER ABUSE
PREVENTION

Elder abuse, like most other types of abuse, is difficult to report on and fully quantify. This media packet is designed to help Maine journalists report on elder abuse and its repercussions. It is also intended to provide information on elder abuse, including: helpful statistics, where Mainers can go to get help, and helpful hints on how to approach elder abuse articles.

What is Elder Abuse?

Elder abuse can happen to anyone, regardless of ethnicity, social status, or gender. The following types of abuse are the major categories of elder mistreatment:

- **Physical Abuse:** Inflicting, or threatening to inflict, physical pain or injury on a vulnerable elder, or depriving them of a basic need.
- **Emotional Abuse:** Inflicting mental pain, anguish, or distress on an elder person through verbal or nonverbal acts.
- **Sexual Abuse:** Non-consensual sexual contact of any kind, or coercing an elder to witness sexual behaviors and/or acts.
- **Financial Exploitation:** Illegal taking, misuse, or concealment of funds, property, or assets of a vulnerable elder.
- **Neglect:** Refusal or failure by those responsible to provide food, shelter, health care or protection for a vulnerable elder.
- **Abandonment:** The desertion of a vulnerable elder by anyone who has assumed the responsibility for care or custody of that person.

Although there are different types of abuse, it is common for an elder to experience more than one type of mistreatment at the same or different times.[1]

Statistics

Studies demonstrate[2] that including relevant statistics in articles helps readers think of issues relating to abuse as part of a larger societal problem versus leading them to think that there is something the victim or the victim's family could have done to prevent abuse committed against them. Helping readers understand that individual cases are part of the broader issue of elder abuse is an important part of prevention.

- Elder abuse goes largely unreported. The National Center on Elder Abuse reports that only 1 in 14 cases are reported to authorities.[3]
- Almost 90% of elder abuse is perpetrated by family members.[4]
- Over 33,000 of Maine's elders are abused each year.[5]
- Elders who experienced abuse, even modest abuse, had a 300% higher risk of death when compared to those who had not been abused.[6]
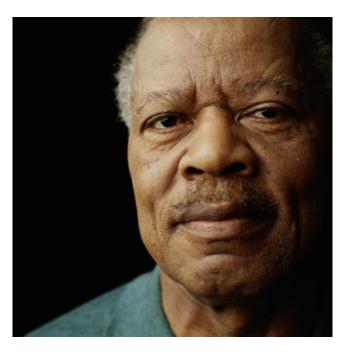
Helpful Hints

Language Choice

In the interest of balance, journalists may use language that unwittingly implies that the victim was an equal actor. In fact, in order to accurately portray elder abuse, it is important to use language that puts the burden of action on the reported offender. Additionally, it's important for journalists to use the most accurate name(s) for the act(s), rather than using euphemisms (see below).

Instead of...	Use...	Because...
Engaged in	Was forced to	The term "engaged in" **assumes that the victim was an active participant,** negating the fact that she/he may have been forced to participate.
Victim admits; Victim confesses	Victim reports; victim reveals	Both "admits" and "confesses" **imply responsibility and shame on the part of the victim** and does not hold the perpetrator responsible.
Accuser	Alleged victim; victim (if perpetrator convicted)	"Referring to the victim as the 'accuser' (means) she is no longer the victim of (the perpetrator's) alleged attack. She is the one doing something - to him. In other words, she is now the perpetrator of the accusation against him.... **He is transformed from the alleged perpetrator of sexual assault to the actual victim of her accusation. The public is thus positioned to identify sympathetically with him – to feel sorry for him – as the true victim."**[7]*

Naming the Victim

In some instances, it may be appropriate to name an elder abuse victim. Some victims want to be named and tell their story. However, as you do with articles on many other issues, it is important to weigh the public's right to know and the victim's right to privacy in each circumstance. Many news outlets have policies about naming victims – especially if they are the victim of sexual or domestic violence. Additionally, consider identifying information and if it is important to include (e.g., "Smith is the alleged victim's son."). Similar policies relating to other types of abuse victims may be applicable. Maine Council for Elder Abuse Prevention members are available to help craft policies in partnership with news organizations.

*The above quote identifies the victim as "she" and the perpetrator as "he." However, we know both victims and perpetrators may be of either gender.

Level of Detail

Although it may seem as though including a high level of detail regarding abuse suffered by an older adult might help raise awareness of the issue, it may result in unintended consequences. Including such details may result in a chilling effect on victims who may fear that such details of their abuse may become public knowledge. Victims may be ashamed at the level of detail in a story written about them, and in some cases may decline to move forward in participating with further investigations or prosecution. Even if details are listed in a police report, it is again important to weigh the public's right to know versus the victim's right to privacy.

Provide Resources

Part of the media's job is to educate the public about issues in the world around them, and in doing so, news outlets have the opportunity to provide a list of resources people may access for help. Including a side bar or shirttail of relevant resources may result in readers getting the help they or their loved ones may need. Resources can range from hotlines to tips (e.g., on how to avoid financial exploitation). Officials or experts interviewed while researching a story can likely provide a good resource or two to include.

Additional Considerations

There are a few additional thoughts to keep in mind:

- Emphasizing infirmities such as dementia may be relevant, but over-emphasis may imply that the victim is not credible and that a crime has not been committed.
- Describing a financial crime as a "potential misunderstanding" diminishes the severity of the crime and the impact on the victim.

What kinds of articles are helpful?

There are many stories about the perpetration of elder abuse, which helps to raise awareness about the issue. Yet, sometimes readers know elder abuse is happening, but may be unaware of what resources are available or what they might do to help prevent it. Articles that focus on solutions to elder abuse and ways to prevent elder abuse may provide readers with tools and ideas once that awareness is raised.

Victims who decide to work with reporters to tell their story do so to help others who may be in similar situations. Someone who is being abused, or knows someone who is being abused, may need information on the steps to take to end it, or to intervene. Listing the organizations throughout the state committed to working with victims of elder abuse can be helpful. You can find a list of those organizations at the Maine Council for Elder Abuse Prevention's website: elderabuseprevention.info.

About the Maine Council for Elder Abuse Prevention

Established in 2011, the mission of the Maine Council for Elder Abuse Prevention (MCEAP) is to support the collaborative efforts to combat elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation. MCEAP is a collaborative volunteer council comprised of over 80 elder abuse professionals that meets every other month to achieve the following primary tasks: improve community response to elder abuse through multidisciplinary collaboration and problem solving; identify the need for systems improvements and advocate for those changes; and increase statewide knowledge and awareness of the problem of elder abuse.

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Additional Resources:

For additional resources, visit
MCEAP's website: elderabuseprevention.info.

Citations:

[1] National Council on Elder Abuse. (2013). *FAQs*. Retrieved from www.ncea.aoa.gov/faq/index.aspx

[2] Coleman, R., & Thorson, E. (2002). The effects of news stories that put crime and violence into context: Testing the public health model of reporting. *Journal of Health Communication, 7*, 401-425.

[3] Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Elder Abuse. (2005). *15 Questions & Answers About Elder Abuse*. Retrieved from: www.ncea.aoa.gov/Resources/Publication/docs/ FINAL%206-06-05%20 3-18-0512-10-04qa.pdf

[4] National Council on Aging. (2013). *FAQs on elder abuse*. Retrieved from http://www.ncoa.org/public-policy-action/elderjustice/faqs-on-elder-abuse.html

[5] Office of Justice Programs. (2011). *Elder abuse and mistreatment*. Retrieved from http://ojp.gov/newsroom/factsheets/ojpfs_elderabuse.html

[6] Dong X, Simon M, Mendes de Leon C, Fulmer T, Beck T, Hebert L, et al. (2009). Elder self-neglect and abuse and mortality risk in a community-dwelling population. *Journal of the American Medical Association, 302*(5),517-526.

[7] Katz, J. (2011, August 20). DSK's alleged victim should not be called his "accuser". Huffington Post. Retrieved from: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jackson-katz/ dsks-alleged-victim-shoul_b_930996.html