



Promoting opportunities. Protecting rights. For older Victorians.

# COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria

*Submission on the next stage of Victoria's  
work to end family violence*

**To:**

Family Violence Reform Rolling Action Plan Development Team

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## 1. About Us

Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria is the leading not-for-profit organisation representing the interests and rights of people aged over 50 in Victoria. For over 70 years, we have led government, corporate and community thinking about the positive aspects of ageing in the state.

Today, our focus is on promoting opportunities for and protecting the legal rights of people 50+. We value ageing and embrace its opportunities for personal growth, contribution, and self-expression. This belief drives benefits to the nation and its states alongside communities, families, and individuals.

In addition to our broad policy advocacy role on aged care issues, COTA Victoria plays an active role in the funded aged care system through delivery of the Care Finder program, building on our leading role in developing and trialling the Commonwealth Government funded and led pilot and program.

Seniors Rights Victoria (SRV) is the key statewide service dedicated to advancing the rights of older people and the early intervention in, and prevention of, elder abuse in our community.

SRV has a team of experienced advocates, lawyers, and social workers who provide free information, advice, referral, legal advice, legal casework, and support to older people who are either at risk of or are experiencing elder abuse. SRV supports and empowers older people through the provision of legal advice directly to the older person.

## 2. About this submission

In introducing the feedback provided in this submission, it is important for COTA Victoria and SRV to acknowledge the commendable efforts of the state government in addressing family violence more broadly.

This submission focuses specifically on elder abuse, a unique form of family violence, and addresses the broader needs and challenges faced by older individuals. The insights and real-world experiences of advocates, lawyers, and social workers who work directly with older people and victims of elder abuse heavily inform this submission. Furthermore, it draws upon years of research and advocacy conducted by COTA Victoria and other branches of the Council on the Ageing Federation, as well as other notable organisations referenced throughout.

The purpose of this submission is to respond directly to the consultation questions while also offering crucial context and discussion regarding elder abuse. It is noteworthy that some of the consultation questions do not directly pertain to elder abuse. This indicates areas where *Building Foundations* and the Victorian Government's work in ending family violence might require additional focus. Nevertheless, we endeavour to provide relevant and constructive responses to each question, contributing positively to this consultation.

### 3. Executive summary

This submission aims to address the critical issue of elder abuse within the context of family violence, drawing attention to the unique challenges and needs faced by older individuals. It acknowledges the Victorian Government's efforts in combating family violence while emphasising the need for specialised focus on elder abuse.

Elder abuse, as defined by the World Health Organisation, encompasses various forms of maltreatment against older individuals within trusted relationships. It is a multifaceted issue, involving financial, emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, or social abuse. Alarmingly, most elder abuse cases involve perpetrators who are known to the victim, often adult children or other family members. This form of abuse is not only widespread but also increasing with the ageing population. In Victoria alone, an estimated 220,000 older adults experience elder abuse annually.

While elder abuse shares commonalities with family violence, it is distinct in its dynamics and motivations. Elder abuse often arises from ageism and the exploitation of trust, diverging from the dominance, control and aggression seen in general family violence. Consequently, responses to elder abuse require tailored approaches, recognising its unique aspects such as the balanced gender distribution of perpetrators and the varying profile of perpetrators.

The submission assesses *Building Foundations* for its insufficient focus on elder abuse, urging for a more detailed exploration of this issue. It recommends several steps to improve its current approach:

1. Promote recognition and awareness of elder abuse as distinct from other forms of family violence, and appropriately factor that into policies and programs.
2. Better incorporate elder abuse as a distinct form of family violence in the existing family violence system.
3. Incentivise training and curriculum to include elder abuse in social work and academic sectors.
4. Engage in awareness campaigns amongst the public and in all levels of schooling, including teaching respectful intergenerational relationships and addressing ageism.
5. Enhance support for elder abuse victims through funding and establishing specialised services, as well as expanding family violence services to better deal with elder abuse.
6. Introduce measures to hold perpetrators accountable and protect victims, especially in situations where the abuse is not reported as a crime, and where time is a significant factor.
7. Make provisions for barriers prevalent amongst older people, such as digital illiteracy, health and cultural.

The submission also emphasises the importance of involving those with lived experiences in policy and service development, ensuring that their unique perspectives shape future strategies. It calls for intersectional approaches that cater to diverse community needs, recognising that elder abuse affects individuals across various backgrounds.

## 4. Elder abuse in the broader context of family violence

Elder Abuse constitutes family violence by definition and under the Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic).<sup>1</sup> It is defined by the World Health Organisation as “a single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person”.<sup>2</sup> It can be financial, emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, or social.

Elder abuse can occur once or many times and can vary in severity from subtle through to extreme. It can include one or a combination of the different types of abuse. Most often, elder abuse is carried out by someone known to the older person, with two thirds of our clients’ abusers being an adult child.<sup>3</sup>

Abusers can also be other family members, relatives, or friends. Elder abuse affects people of all genders and all walks of life. The abuse, however, disproportionately affects women – two-thirds of people seeking help from SRV have, historically, been women.

Elder abuse and family violence share common foundations but differ significantly in their dynamics and requirements. Both elder abuse and family violence often involve family members as perpetrators and survivors. However, the nature of the relationships and the specific circumstances in elder abuse cases necessitate distinct approaches, requiring the need for solutions tailored to its unique characteristics.

### 4.1. Elder abuse prevalence in Australia

The most detailed and rigorous study of elder abuse prevalence in Australia, published in December 2021, found that 14.8% of those 65 and over had experienced at least one recognised form of elder abuse over the previous 12 months.<sup>4</sup> This included 11.7% experiencing psychological abuse, 2.9% experiencing neglect and 2.1% experiencing financial abuse. This translates into some 640,000 older Australians experiencing elder abuse every year.

This is especially concerning, as it places Australia as one of the leading developed nations experiencing elder abuse, ahead of Canada (10.0%),<sup>5</sup> United States (9.5%),<sup>6</sup> and England and Wales (14%).<sup>7</sup>

These figures suggest that 160,000 older Victorians are experiencing elder abuse each year to a level they are willing to identify to researchers – including 126,000 experiencing psychological abuse and

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<sup>1</sup> Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic), s 8(3). Retrieved from: <https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/family-violence-protection-act-2008/061>. (4 January 2024).

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization. 2022. Abuse of older people. Retrieved from: <https://www.who.int/health-topics/abuse-of-older-people> (4 January 2024)

<sup>3</sup> Joosten, M., Gartoulla, P., Feldman, P., Brijnath, B., & Dow, B. 2020. Seven years of elder abuse data in Victoria (2012–2019), National Ageing Research Institute in partnership with Seniors Rights Victoria. Retrieved: <https://www.nari.net.au/elder-abuse-in-victoria> (20 December 2023)

<sup>4</sup> Qu, L., Kaspiew, R., Carson, R., Roopani, D., De Maio, J., Harvey, J., Horsfall, B. 2021. National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study: Final Report. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. Retrieved from: <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/national-elder-abuse-prevalence-study-final-report> (5 January 2024)

<sup>5</sup> Government of Canada, Department of Justice. (2021). Crime and abuse against seniors: A review of the research literature with special reference to the Canadian situation. Retrieved from: <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/fv-vf/crim/index.html> (10 January 2024)

<sup>6</sup> Patel K, Bunachita S, Chiu H, Suresh P, Patel UK. 2021. Elder Abuse: A Comprehensive Overview and Physician-Associated Challenges. National Library of Medicine. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8110289/> (17 January 2024)

<sup>7</sup> Office for National Statistics. 2018. Domestic abuse: findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales. [xix]. Office for National Statistics. Retrieved from: <https://shorturl.at/bkBXZ> (17 January 2024)

28,000 experiencing financial abuse. The prevalence of elder abuse is also only likely to increase as the population ages, which is a well-established structural trend.<sup>8</sup>

#### **4.2. *The Royal Commission into Family Violence on elder abuse***

The 10-year plan to end family violence is a response to the findings of the Royal Commission into Family Violence. This commission specifically identified elder abuse as a unique subset of family violence, characterised by its own distinct challenges and characteristics. These distinctions, outlined in the commission's final report,<sup>9</sup> highlight:

- Their dependency for care can also isolate them, increasing their vulnerability.
- Older individuals face barriers to reporting abuse, such as reluctance to implicate family members, lack of awareness of support channels, and generational views of family violence as a private matter. Their dependency for care can also isolate them, increasing their vulnerability.
- There's a significant lack of understanding within the community and service providers about elder abuse, leading to missed early intervention and prevention opportunities.
- Current family violence services and interventions are not adequately tailored to address the specific dynamics and needs associated with elder abuse.

The Commission proposed improving awareness, education, and prevention of elder abuse, enhancing service responses, and providing better housing options outside of aged care facilities. Its subsequent recommendations include broadening the definition of family violence to encompass elder abuse more explicitly and considering mandatory reporting to protect the safety and wellbeing of older people experiencing family violence.

#### **4.3. *Victorian Government initiatives to end elder abuse following the Royal Commission***

Following the release of the royal commission's final report, three recommendations were made resulting in subsequent measures. These recommendations are:

- Resource the development and delivery of information on family violence for older people
- Scope options for a trial of a dedicated family violence and elder abuse response team
- Fund family violence programs for older Victorians, diverse communities, and people with disabilities.

The implementation of the recommendations led to several measures, including the trial of the Integrated Model of Care (IMOC), an elder abuse short course at La Trobe University's Bouverie Centre, the establishment of the Elder Abuse Prevention Network, funding for Seniors Rights Victoria, and elder abuse mediation and family counselling at five Orange Door locations.

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<sup>8</sup> Department of the Treasury. 2023. Intergenerational Report 2023 – Australia's future to 2063. Australian Government. Retrieved from: <https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/p2023-435150.pdf> (18 December 2023)

<sup>9</sup> State of Victoria. 2016. Royal Commission into Family Violence: Summary and recommendations. Parl Paper No 132 (2014–16). Pg. 1353. Retrieved: [http://rcfv.archive.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/MediaLibraries/RCFamilyViolence/Reports/RCFV\\_Full\\_Report\\_Interactive.pdf](http://rcfv.archive.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/MediaLibraries/RCFamilyViolence/Reports/RCFV_Full_Report_Interactive.pdf) (11 December 2023)

However, these measures have experienced certain shortfalls. The IMOC program and its associated course at The Bouverie Centre were discontinued, with an eLearning page on a DFFH website serving as a limited replacement. Ideally, this training should be an integral part of social work courses across Victoria. Furthermore, while the inclusion of elder abuse services in Orange Door is praiseworthy and necessary, its implementation is considerably limited, with only 5 of the 37 state locations offering this service, a gap observed and felt at SRV, who's funding has also been cut to unsustainable levels.

After the release of the report, the subsequent rolling action plans for the periods 2017-2020 and 2020-2023 included just two action items on elder abuse. The *Family Violence Rolling Action Plan 2017-2020* included only one action item that referenced elder abuse, which was to "Increase the number of therapeutic interventions across the state, providing over 11,000 victims with assistance over four years, including responses to sexual assault and elder abuse," which, given the prevalence of elder abuse, is notably insufficient. The next rolling report, *The Family Violence Reform Rolling Action Plan 2020-2023*, included only one action item to address elder abuse, which was to "Develop and release a Victorian Elder Abuse Statement, to be completed by DFFH, FSV, DJCS". This commitment was never completed, nor subsequently mentioned following the release of the report.

The prevalence of elder abuse in Australia and its growing demand on support services highlights the inadequacy of existing measures to address this critical form of family violence effectively. The release of the Elder Abuse Prevalence Study in 2021 has provided a more informed basis for policy development and implementation. With this improved understanding, the Victorian state government now has a significant opportunity to address elder abuse in a more meaningful and effective manner.

Unfortunately, the wholistic approach of addressing family violence more generally in a bid to address family violence in all its forms doesn't apply to elder abuse, as the distinct aspects of elder abuse limit the effectiveness of this approach.

#### **4.4. Increasing demand for support**

As Victoria's population is ageing, we are also seeing a concerning rise in the incidence of elder abuse, placing unprecedented demand on elder abuse service providers. A prime example of this growing challenge is observed in the activities of SRV, which has witnessed a significant increase in the need for its services in recent years.

In the fiscal year 2022/23, SRV responded to 5,085 calls on the Elder Abuse Helpline, marking a 50% increase compared to the previous year and a 40% rise from 2020/21. This surge in helpline activity is a clear indicator of the escalating issue. Furthermore, the demand for non-legal advice saw a substantial 40% increase, with SRV conducting 374 sessions in 2022/23, compared to the previous year. The organisation also experienced a 20% rise in the number of cases it opened. Historically, about 25% of advices led to legal cases, but over the past three years, this figure has been between 35-38%, reflecting the growing complexity and severity of the issues faced by the elderly.

The trend of increasing demand did not show signs of abating in the 2023/24 period. Early data from July to November 2023 suggests that SRV is on track to receive over 13,000 calls, handle nearly 7,000 voicemails, and respond to more than 3,200 calls during the year. However, following recent funding cuts, SRV's ability to respond effectively has been significantly hampered. The organisation is currently able to respond to only about 24% of total calls and 46% of voicemails, indicating a reduced capacity of the Helpline.

This persistent high demand on the Helpline, coupled with reduced contacts, is adversely affecting SRV's capacity to deliver critical advice and legal support. The situation has necessitated the repurposing of advocates and lawyers to operate the Helpline, undermining the effectiveness of their unique, integrated service model. Projections based on data from July to November 2023 indicate that SRV may only manage to provide 252 advice appointments and open 98 cases throughout the year, figures that are considerably lower than the output levels of 2022/23.

This situation underscores the urgent need for increased support and resources for organisations like SRV, to effectively address the rising challenge of elder abuse in an ageing population. Without adequate resources, the ability to offer timely and effective assistance to this vulnerable segment of society is greatly compromised.

## 5. Key features and challenges in elder abuse

### 5.1. Driving factors

Just as family violence is influenced by attitudes, beliefs, and corresponding behaviours, elder abuse is similarly driven by these dynamics. However, the primary motivators in elder abuse are ageism,<sup>10</sup> intergenerational dependency, and a sense of entitlement.<sup>11</sup> As stated in *Stronger Foundations*, general family violence is rooted in harmful notions of masculinity characterised by “dominance, control, and aggression”. This is reinforced by the fact that the majority of perpetrators are men, and the majority of victim-survivors are women, which is characteristically different from elder abuse.

Approximately 55% of elder abuse perpetrators are men, with women constituting the remaining 45%. On the victim-survivor side, women make up about 60%, while men account for 40%.<sup>12</sup> This pattern contrasts to general family violence, where the gender disparity among both perpetrators and victims is more pronounced. Notably, this was highlighted by the Royal Commission into Family Violence's final report.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> World Health Organization. 2022. Tackling abuse of older people: five priorities for the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030). Geneva: World Health Organization. Retrieved: <https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/9789240052550> (18 December 2023)

<sup>11</sup> Swift, H., Abrams, D., Marques, S., Vaclair, C., Bratt, C., Lima, M. 2018. Ageism in the European Region: Finding from the European Social Survey in Perspectives on Elder Abuse and Mistreatment from Selected Countries and Regions. Springer International Publishing.

<sup>12</sup> Qu, L., Kaspiew, R., Carson, R., Roopani, D., De Maio, J., Harvey, J., Horsfall, B. 2021. National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study: Final Report. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. Retrieved from: <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/national-elder-abuse-prevalence-study-final-report> (5 January 2024)

<sup>13</sup> State of Victoria. 2016. Royal Commission into Family Violence: Summary and recommendations. Parl Paper No 132 (2014–16). Retrieved: [http://rcfv.archive.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/MediaLibraries/RCFamilyViolence/Reports/RCFV\\_Full\\_Report\\_Interactive.pdf](http://rcfv.archive.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/MediaLibraries/RCFamilyViolence/Reports/RCFV_Full_Report_Interactive.pdf) (11 December 2023)



## 5.2. Relationship dynamics between victims and perpetrators

Elder abuse typically involves adult children or other family members exploiting a trust-based relationship with an older person,<sup>14</sup> in contrast to general family violence where perpetrators are more often intimate partners. Further, the response of those experiencing elder abuse is notably different. Unlike other forms of family violence, where victims usually seek separation from their abuser, those experiencing elder abuse often seek to maintain their existing family relationships.

This familial dynamic complicates elder abuse cases, as the older person may rely on these individuals for essential needs like translation, care, and social interaction. Furthermore, the prospect of reporting their children or close relatives to authorities can evoke deep feelings of guilt and shame.<sup>15</sup> This leads to a reluctance in following through with official reports.

### Case Study

**Situation:** After divorcing his wife, Steven's son, Ian, moved in with him and has been helpful with shopping and day to day tasks, although struggles with anger and depression. Recently, Steven discovered \$5,000 missing from his savings. He suspected Ian, the only other person with access to his bank account, might have taken it to gamble. Steven is hesitant to act due to a previous incident in which Ian, in response to being questioned about missing money, restricted Steven's access to his grandson for an entire year.

**Issue:** Steven, grappling with social isolation and relying on family for support, is hesitant to address the abusive dynamics with his son for fear of jeopardising his family relationships.

## 5.3. Underreporting of elder abuse

Elder abuse often goes unreported for several reasons. Firstly, older individuals might not recognise certain behaviours as abusive. This lack of recognition can stem from little to no understanding of what is elder abuse.<sup>16</sup> They may also have a limited definition of elder abuse, often excluding forms like sexual and emotional abuse. Additionally, most victim-survivors often do not self-identify as victims of family violence. They typically deny experiencing elder abuse when asked directly but acknowledge specific abusive acts when described in detail.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Qu, L., Kaspiew, R., Carson, R., Roopani, D., De Maio, J., Harvey, J., Horsfall, B. 2021. National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study: Final Report. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. Retrieved from: <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/national-elder-abuse-prevalence-study-final-report> (5 January 2024)

<sup>15</sup> Jackson, S. L., & Hafemeister, T. L. 2015. The impact of relationship dynamics on the detection and reporting of elder abuse occurring in domestic settings. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, 27(2), 121–145. doi:10.1080/08841166.2015.1039101 (9 January 2024)

<sup>16</sup> Dow, B., Gahan, L., Gaffy, E. et al. 2020. Barriers to Disclosing Elder Abuse and Taking Action in Australia. *J Fam Viol* 35, 853–861. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-019-00084-w> (9 January 2024)

<sup>17</sup> Qu, L., Kaspiew, R., Carson, R., Roopani, D., De Maio, J., Harvey, J., Horsfall, B. 2021. National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study: Final Report. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. Retrieved from: <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/national-elder-abuse-prevalence-study-final-report> (5 January 2024)

### Case Study

**Situation:** Adam, Rue's youngest son, moved back in with her after a breakup. He took control of her finances, stopping her from sending money to her family in Vietnam and instead managed her pension. He pays her bills and gives her a small allowance. Rue felt embarrassed at her senior citizen's club for not having enough money to attend a pageant, and after talking to her friends, she realised she should be receiving more from Centrelink. When she confronted Adam, he got angry and stopped taking her to the social club, leaving her isolated and lonely in her house.

**Issue:** Rue has her finances controlled on her behalf and is likely not receiving her full income. As soon as she suspects something may be wrong, her perpetrator socially isolates her.

Professionals who work with older people, too, might struggle to identify elder abuse, and even when they do, they may be uncertain about the appropriate response. Health professionals generally possess a broad understanding of the various types of elder abuse, however, their proficiency in recognising and detecting signs that a client or patient is suffering from abuse can vary significantly.<sup>18</sup> This highlights the importance of educating community members and professionals working with older people on how to identify signs and properly report elder abuse.

#### 5.4. *Existing family violence services and the family violence system*

Although it is acknowledged that family violence services require special attention to effectively address elder abuse, as evidenced by the enhanced elder abuse provisions at the five Orange Door locations, these services still remain insufficient. While the work done by family violence services are commendable, they usually do not cater well to the specific needs of elder abuse victim-survivors and are often ill-suited for managing such cases. This service gap exists due to a range of factors that also diminish how the family violence *system* handles elder abuse cases more broadly.

For instance, the victim-survivor might be male, which can be atypical in the broader context of family violence. Additionally, the perpetrator might not fit the conventional profile associated with family violence, complicating the recognition and response to the abuse. Moreover, victim-survivors might form an initial impression that family violence services and institutions do not cater to their specific situation, whether due to the nature of the abuse or their personal circumstances, thereby deterring them from seeking the help.

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<sup>18</sup> Dow, B., Vrantzidis, F., O'Brien, M., Joosten, M., & Gahan, L. 2018. Elder Abuse in Australia. International handbook of elder abuse and mistreatment. Retrieved from: <https://ojs.wsb.edu.pl/index.php/bgs/article/download/855/640/1801> (19 January 2024)

### Case Study

**Situation:** Bob, who has a history of intimate partner abuse, as well as twin daughters with behavioural problems, faced several issues while a victim in the family violence system. Bob obtained a Family Violence Intervention Order (FVIO) against one daughter which led her to move out, but the other daughter continued to use violence against Bob leading to police involvement. Unfortunately, the police misidentified Bob as the perpetrator and detained him. Charges were later withdrawn.

**Issue:** Bob was miss identified as a perpetrator as he fit the profile for general family violence, and his daughter fit the profile for a victim survivor. Bob's history of family violence, which is a common factor in elder abuse, likely aided this.

The support system for elder abuse lacks the integration and cohesive reporting mechanisms characteristic of the broader family violence support system. As a result, elder abuse survivors often face the arduous task of recounting their experiences to various support services. This contrasts with the more streamlined process in the family violence context, where reporting and support services are more integrated. The need to either better incorporate elder abuse support into the existing family violence systems, or to develop and implement a dedicated elder abuse system, is evident.

This challenge becomes even more complex for older individuals who face additional intersectional factors, such as limited English proficiency or disabilities. While the increasing use of technology to enhance the family violence system is a positive development, there is a lack of accommodations for the digital illiteracy that exists among many older people. These technological barriers can significantly deter elder abuse survivors from seeking the assistance they need, even when they are ready to do so.<sup>19</sup> In general, older people tend to respond best to support that is offered face-to-face.

### 5.5. *Elder abuse in Stronger Foundations*

The state government's strategy for addressing elder abuse within its 10-year plan to end family violence is fundamentally flawed due to the lack of attention given to these differences. This oversight is evident in *Strong Foundations*, where elder abuse receives minimal attention. Such cursory treatment of elder abuse fails to acknowledge and factor for how a significant portion of the older population experiences family violence in real terms.

By enhancing the focus on elder abuse, the strategy could be more aligned with the specific needs and circumstances of elder abuse victims, ensuring that the measures developed are as effective as possible. The consultation questions could be refined and refocused to better address the complexities of elder abuse, which this submission attempts to do through its responses.

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<sup>19</sup> COTA Australia. 2023. State of the Older Nation Report. COTA Australia. Retrieved from: <https://www.cota.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SOTON-2023-Full-Report.pdf> (16 January 2024)

## 6. Responses to consultation questions

### 6.1. *Drive down family and sexual violence*

Despite its fundamental differences, elder abuse often remains indistinct within the broader campaign to end family violence. There is a pressing need to normalise the recognition of elder abuse as a distinct form of family violence. This can be achieved through concerted efforts in public education, government policy, and professional training.

Additionally, it's crucial to adopt the well-considered strategies employed in the 10-year effort to end family violence, while simultaneously adapting these measures to account for the unique differences and defining characteristics of elder abuse including ageism as its driving factor. This dual approach would ensure a more targeted and effective response to this specific form of family violence.

#### **What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to build a community-wide approach to preventing family and sexual violence?**

1. Normalise distinguishing elder abuse amongst family violence within government policy, educational curriculums, and media representations, ensuring that they are distinctly mentioned and addressed even when discussed in conjunction.
2. Incentivise social work sectors and academic institutions to include elder abuse in their training, curriculum, research, and community outreach programs, given its distinct nature from broader family violence.
3. Develop a wider strategy on educating relevant family violence professionals on elder abuse awareness, prevention, and response, helping individuals recognise abusive behaviours and report on potential victim-survivors or perpetrators.

#### **What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to engage men and boys to change attitudes and behaviours that can lead to violence?**

1. Recognise that elder abuse is not as gendered as other forms of family violence and make provisions for this in gendered-focus policies tackling family violence where appropriate while addressing ageism as the primary driver of elder abuse.

### 6.2. *Focus on children and young people*

Addressing family violence from a young age is particularly important in the context of elder abuse, where correcting attitudes towards ageism and teaching respectful intergenerational relationships should begin. Integral to this effort is the inclusion and empowerment of parents in the educational process, ensuring that the learning extends beyond the classroom.

**What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to engage children and young people to create generational change?**

1. Implement targeted educational programs across all levels of schooling on respectful intergenerational relationships. Address stereotypes, myths, and misconceptions around older people, thereby challenging ageism from a young age.
2. Further to this, ensure learning is not only for children, but also their parents. This can include educational materials for parents that include guidelines on discussing sensitive topics like elder abuse with children.

**6.3. *Strengthen support for victim survivors***

Recognising the distinct characteristics of elder abuse and its divergence from broader family violence, it is imperative for family violence services to be adequately equipped to support victim-survivors. Furthermore, with the growing prevalence of elder abuse, there's an urgent requirement to establish and enhance funding for services dedicated solely to this issue. While the value of an integrated family violence system is evident, the lack of inclusion or specific focus on elder abuse within this framework is a significant concern.

An effective system must be developed to address the hidden nature of elder abuse, the challenges in its reporting, and the existing gaps in reporting mechanisms. This tailored approach is essential to ensure that elder abuse is not just recognised but effectively countered within the larger context of family violence interventions.

**What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to provide all Victorians who experience family or sexual violence with the support they need when they need it?**

1. Provide additional funding for existing support organisations specialised in elder abuse to meet unmet demand for elder abuse support.
2. Modify and expand existing family violence organisations to build a greater capacity to intervene and provide adequate support in elder abuse cases, with staff trained specifically to handle this form of family violence.
3. Develop strategies to centralise and streamline support systems for elder abuse victim-survivors to navigate services without the need to repeat their stories to different providers.

**What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to continue to shift the focus onto people who use violence?**

1. Make provisions for holding perpetrators accountable in cases where victims of elder abuse do not want to report a criminal case.
2. Introduce legal obligations to ensure that all parties involved in an elder abuse case respond promptly to obligations that arise to prevent further harm and provide immediate relief to victim-survivors.

#### **6.4. Respond to change**

Given the Victorian government's past acknowledgment of the need for a tailored response to elder abuse, it is crucial for the government to follow through with its explicit commitment to release a public statement on elder abuse, as well as actively engage in efforts to raise awareness of elder abuse.

This should include the development of a comprehensive strategy, paralleling the broader effort to end family violence. Such a strategy must take into account the unique barriers older people face in accessing support. Key issues include digital illiteracy, health dexterity, and language barriers, all of which can impede access to necessary services.

Furthermore, ageist attitudes within support systems continue to be a significant obstacle, often hindering the provision of appropriate care for older individuals. It's essential to address these attitudes to ensure that support systems are both accessible and effective.

Additionally, the strategy should focus on managing risk factors in urgent situations, particularly those involving cohabitation and dependency. By considering these specific circumstances, the government can create a more inclusive and responsive system that addresses the complexities of elder abuse. This holistic approach is necessary to provide adequate support and protection for older members of the community.

#### **What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to respond to cultural, social, and technological shifts that impact family and sexual violence?**

1. Create accessible and user-friendly resources to bridge the digital divide for older individuals, as well as ensuring that they have alternative ways to access support services besides modern technology, such as landlines and mail services.
2. Prioritise in-person services, as older victim-survivors of elder abuse are often more comfortable and willing to disclose information through face-to-face conversations.
3. Expand options to empower CALD older people by providing free and accessible translation services. This will reduce their dependence on children, relatives, and others for communication, helping to prevent potential abuse as family dynamics evolve over time.
4. Ensure that all government and community services are required and directed to treat older individuals with a default assumption of decision-making capacity.

#### **What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to respond to new forms of family and sexual violence?**

1. Follow through with releasing a Victorian Government Elder Abuse Statement as outlined in the previous family violence plan and commit to a dedicated strategy moving forward.
2. Launch public awareness campaigns specifically addressing elder abuse, emphasising its differences from other forms of family violence and how to identify and report it.
3. Following the earlier commitment, create a comprehensive strategy to address elder abuse, designed to seamlessly transition from the existing 10-year family violence plan. This approach

aims to leverage the momentum gained in combating family violence, channelling it towards effectively tackling elder abuse issues.

**What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to embrace technology in how we prevent and respond to family violence?**

1. Mandate that every technological initiative launched to combat family violence also has alternative non-digital counterparts, and is available in multiple languages, to ensure inclusivity for all demographics.
2. Ensure the location of resources are where older people can easily access and are familiar with.
3. Launch a broad public education campaign to inform older people about available resources, how to utilise these technologies, and their purposes, ensuring they are well-equipped and informed.

**What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to reduce and respond to the risk of family violence during times of crisis?**

1. Create support structures that enable older individuals to maintain independence from perpetrators who may be carers, including access to translator services where necessary.
2. Recognise that prolonged cohabitation and/or dependency - arising out of housing, cost of living and other financial pressures - is a significant risk factor for elder abuse, ensuring that support services consider arrangements for perpetrators, not just victims.

**6.5. *Understand and demonstrate our impact***

Considering the distinct nature of elder abuse compared to general family violence, it is crucial to develop evaluation metrics specifically tailored to elder abuse. Without such specialised measures, accurately assessing the effectiveness of government policies and fine-tuning them accordingly is not feasible. It is important to recognise that many older individuals are overlooked by the current system and require additional follow-up to ensure protective measures, such as ensuring court rulings and intervention orders (IVO) are properly enforced.

Furthermore, to effectively address elder abuse as a public health issue, raising public awareness about what constitutes elder abuse is essential. Initiatives designed to gather feedback on elder abuse should be distinct from those for family violence. To ensure comprehensive and relevant insights, reference groups and panels, unless exclusively focused on elder abuse, must actively include those with lived experience of elder abuse. This inclusion is vital for developing a more effective and responsive support system for elder abuse.

**What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to strengthen how we measure impact?**

1. Develop a set of clear metrics tailored to measure the effectiveness of interventions specifically for elder abuse cases. This should be developed in partnership with the family violence and, specifically, elder abuse sectors.

2. Develop a framework for gauging impact on victims that face contact barriers related to digital blind spots and literacy, language, and health dexterity.
3. Establish a robust follow-up system to ensure that protective measures, such as the removal of an abusive adult child from a home or the enforcement of caveats and intervention orders, are not just prescribed but effectively implemented and monitored for their impact.

**What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to increase opportunities for Victorians to help us improve the system?**

1. Launch widespread education campaigns to raise awareness about the distinct nature of elder abuse and its signs, particularly amongst the public as well as professionals working with older people.
2. Establish platforms for Victorians to offer feedback focused solely on elder abuse and its support systems, distinct from the broader context of family violence. This will ensure that insights and experiences specific to elder abuse are directly addressed and understood.
3. Ensure that advisory panels consisting of victim-survivors include those with lived experience of elder abuse who can provide direct input on policy and program development, ensuring that services are designed with the needs and experiences of those affected at the forefront.

## **6.6. *Our overarching principles***

As emphasised above, it is crucial to ensure that lived experience of elder abuse is used to inform the development of family violence and elder abuse services. Additionally, it is vital to acknowledge the wealth of knowledge and understanding that already exists within organisations working on the front lines of elder abuse.

The most critical recommendation that SRV can provide is the continuous engagement and involvement of both victim-survivors and those organisations specialising in elder abuse in the formation and implementation of government policies. This collaborative approach ensures that policies are informed by direct experiences and expert insights, leading to more effective and responsive strategies in addressing elder abuse.

**Lived Experience: How do you think people who have experienced family violence can be involved in developing policy, services, and activities in the next stage of Victoria’s work to end family violence?**

1. Implement outreach strategies that do not rely on digital technology to gather input from older people. This could include face-to-face interviews, postal surveys, and telephone hotlines, ensuring that these methods are widely publicised in community centres, clinics, and other places frequented by older adults.
2. Partner with organisations that work directly with older peoples and elder abuse victims to facilitate discussions and workshops, ensuring that these victims have a voice in the policy-making process.



3. Create accessible and safe spaces for older people to contribute to discussions on policy and services. This should involve familiar locations such as local community centres, churches, and libraries.
4. Form advisory panels inclusive of victim-survivors of elder abuse who can provide direct input on policy and program development, ensuring that services are designed with the needs and experiences of those affected at the forefront.
5. Incentivise recruitment of staff with lived experience of family violence and/or elder abuse to work within government and the sector, including older workers.

**Intersectionality: What steps can the Victorian Government take to ensure the next stage of Victoria’s work to end family violence addresses the diverse needs of different communities and peoples in our community?**

Be inclusive of older people from diverse communities, especially when consulting for further development and implementation of measures to combat elder abuse and family violence.

### **6.7. Other reflections**

**What has been the most impactful change the Victorian Government has made to date in the way it prevents and responds to family violence?**

Several policies and programs initiated by the Victorian Government show promise in preventing and responding to elder abuse. However, these initiatives are often prematurely discontinued or fail to match the scale and scope required to effectively tackle the increase of, and widespread prevalence of elder abuse.

One notable feature of the Victorian Government was the Commissioner for Senior Victorians, who played an important role in shaping public policy for the benefit of older people, which included helping address elder abuse through their role as the Ambassador for Elder Abuse Prevention. Under the tenure of the former Commissioner, there was notable progress in the development of elder abuse policies and resources. Following the end of the Commissioner’s term in 2023, the position has yet to be replaced. COTA Victoria and SRV have engaged with the Victorian Government around the need for a similar role or function of the Commissioner to support policy efforts related to older Victorians.

Additionally, the development of educational resources and materials aimed at older individuals to raise awareness and understanding about elder abuse was a positive first step. However, adopting a more holistic approach could be more effective. Broadening the scope to promote awareness of elder abuse as a prevalent issue among the general public could lead to a greater adoption of preventive measures amongst individuals. Additionally, there should be additional strategies to educate and train professionals who are likely to work with older individuals. This training would enable them to identify and respond effectively to potential elder abuse cases they might encounter.

The Victorian Government has initiated funding for existing elder abuse services and the expansion of general family violence services, specifically the five select Orange Door locations, but these efforts are

still rudimentary. While SRV received funding following the Royal Commission, this has not proved sustainable or ongoing, despite increasing community need. To adequately meet the rising demand for these services, further funding and supported service expansion are necessary. The increase in older individuals seeking support for elder abuse is significant, as evidenced by the 50% rise in inquiries at SRV alone from 2021/22 to 2022/23. It is essential that funding and service provisions at existing organisations are enhanced to reflect and accommodate this growing need.

Highlighting the utility of such funding is the PWC study on the community dividends of CLCs from January 2023.<sup>20</sup> This report reveals a significant return on investment, with a benefit-cost ratio of \$2.25, indicating that every dollar invested in community legal aid yields substantial economic and social benefits. Particularly in elder abuse cases handled by SRV, these benefits include better outcomes for victim-survivors and earlier intervention due to more easily accessible legal aid and advice. This data strongly supports the case for enhanced and continued funding for elder abuse services to meet escalating community needs.

**Is there anything else you think the Victorian government needs to do for all Victorians to access the support they need and be safe, thriving, and live free from family violence?**

1. A greater emphasis and commitment to integrate elder abuse more thoroughly into the current family violence system. This integration would facilitate holistic support by coordinating healthcare providers, social services, and legal assistance, creating a comprehensive approach to the recovery of survivors.
2. Address the need for specialised training for police officers in handling elder abuse cases sensitively and effectively, ensuring that they can provide appropriate intervention and support. This includes further training for family violence liaison officers in elder abuse.

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<sup>20</sup> PWC .2023. The benefits of providing access to justice: National Legal Aid. National Legal Aid. Retrieved from: <https://www.nationallegalaid.org/resources/benefits-providing-access-justice/> (25 January 2024)

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this submission by COTA Vic and SRV aims to bring critical attention to elder abuse within the broader context of family violence. Our extensive experience and research have highlighted the unique challenges and needs of older individuals facing such abuse. While we value the Victorian Government's efforts in addressing family violence, there is a pressing need to focus more overtly on elder abuse.

Elder abuse, often characterised by the exploitation of trust and the presence of ageism, differs significantly from other forms of family violence. Our recommendations, therefore, call for a distinct approach in policy and practice, tailored to the specific nuances of elder abuse. This includes enhancing awareness, education, and support services, as well as developing comprehensive strategies to address the complex dynamics of elder abuse. We urge for the inclusion of older people's perspectives in policymaking and service development, and for a recognition of the diverse needs of this demographic within our community.

The gap in current strategies, particularly the underrepresentation of ageism and the distinct nature of elder abuse in policy frameworks, necessitates a more inclusive and holistic approach. By addressing these gaps, the Victorian Government can ensure more effective and comprehensive strategies for combating elder abuse. In doing so, it will not only be addressing a critical issue but also upholding the dignity and rights of older Victorians, ensuring their safety, wellbeing, and continued contribution to our society.