

ELDER ABUSE: STRENGTHENING VICTIM OUTCOMES THROUGH PROSECUTORIAL LEADERSHIP

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Elder mistreatment and financial exploitation require an array of prosecutorial resources to bring about a resolution. Typically, an end is put to the abuse either through prosecution or through interventions that “stop the bleeding”, as in the case of fraud or theft. While prosecution and victim assistance can stop further victimization, potentially gain restitution and keep victims informed of their rights, it takes the expertise of a multifaceted team of professionals to improve the overall well-being of older victims. Prosecutors are well positioned to provide leadership in pulling together a multitude of community resources to facilitate the best possible outcomes for older crime victims. This is where the prosecutor can grow from a champion of quality justice, to a champion of quality of life. Across the country, Multi Disciplinary Teams (MDT’s) are working in collaboration with prosecutors to fill in the gaps where resolution through the criminal justice system is not enough. In Denver, a dynamic interchange is taking place among district attorneys, city prosecutors, allied professionals, and community members to identify the most efficacious means of restoring quality of life to older victims of abuse and exploitation.

It is estimated that for each case of elder abuse reported, approximately five cases go unreported.

Extreme reluctance on the part of victims to report, ambiguity in laws surrounding the criminalization of elder abuse, and concerns regarding the ability of victims to participate in the prosecution of their offender further complicate the solutions that can be sought through the criminal justice system. That being said, as chief law enforcement officials, city and district attorneys yield significant political clout. They have the ability to generate the human capital and financial resources necessary to build a base of support to better serve older crime victims and they have standing in the community to facilitate effective solutions. Prosecutors, more so than perhaps any other criminal justice professional, understand the impact of trauma. The teams they have built to address victims’ needs, such as in the areas of domestic violence and sexual assault, are ideal models that can be used to form elder multidisciplinary teams.

One example of such a model is the Denver Victim Services Network (VSN). Established in 1997 through the Denver District Attorney’s Office, the VSN brings together a core group of victim service agencies, including first responders, to create a seamless service network for crime victims.

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Using the moniker of “no wrong door”, crime victims are better able to access services and receive more comprehensive care. Another comparable model is the Denver Domestic Violence Triage Team. Consisting of representatives from law enforcement, the Denver DA’s Office, City Attorney’s Office, and community-based agencies, team members review every individual case for risk assessment, offender containment strategies, safety planning and coordination of victim services. Sexual Abuse Response Teams, or SART’s, operate in a similar fashion in other areas of the country. All are examples of models that can be used to form the nucleus of an elder abuse multidisciplinary team.

In 2010, the Denver City Attorney’s Office established one of the first elder abuse Coordinated Community Response Teams (CCRT) to specifically address the gap in services to older victims. They plan to become an organized multidisciplinary team that covers the greater Denver community. Funded with an Office on Violence against Women (OVW) grant and drawing on the resources of other specialized teams such as VSN agency partners, the CCRT includes social workers, housing providers, police, victim advocates, Adult Protective Services (APS), clergy, medical, social service and legal professionals.

Assisted by the Denver DA’s Office and other judicial districts, CCRT is closing service gaps by mapping existing community resources and expertise, calculating the magnitude and scope of elder abuse

within the Denver Community, sharing what has been learned through psychosocial and other assessments, and continuously identifying formal and informal support networks.

The work of CCRT is enhanced by elder abuse prevention education and awareness programs operating out of the Denver District Attorney’s Office, such as the CASE Partnership Program -Communities Against Senior Exploitation. With a focus on preventing elder financial abuse and exploitation, CASE provides seminars throughout the Denver community, primarily through ministries, senior centers, businesses, and through other venues that reach traditionally isolated and underserved older adults. The program’s success has led to its replication in over 35 District Attorney Offices around the country. Today, CASE is an active player in elder fraud prevention and distributes monthly fraud alerts to over 500,000 individuals. [Continued on page 7]



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Another Denver DA program operating in conjunction with CCRT are the Community Cafés run by volunteer DA advocates. Through a series of four- to- six week ‘coffees’ that are held in neighborhoods where elders are particularly underserved, professionals from the Denver DA’s Office train participants on how to spot and report elder abuse and financial exploitation. They are taught strategies that help to deter those who deliberately target older people, and they gain an understanding of the state statutes that are in place to uphold their rights and dignity as they age. Prior to the conclusion of the café, participants are guided through the process of developing individualized documents, such as power of attorney and advanced medical directives. The idea of the Café is to create an environment where older adults feel safe to ask questions and share their concerns. Through structured facilitation, they exchange ideas and devise solution-based strategies that are not likely to be found through more formal, and perhaps more intimidating support systems.

Once established, multidisciplinary teams have the capacity to address critical issues, such as balancing

case planning with the victim’s right to self-determination. In this sense, by maintaining a victim-centered focus, multidisciplinary teams can educate elders and the community at large on elder rights, and on strategies that help older adults combat undue influence by family members and others.

Finally, in collaboration with prosecutors, an effective multidisciplinary team can be an appropriate venue through which its members advocate for change and stay on top of emerging issues. As a testimonial to the work of its members, the Denver CCRT mission statement asserts: “Together we pool our information, resources, expertise and power to respond to elder abuse in a way that provides safety and compassion for victims, as well as accountability for offenders.”



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For more information on all of the Denver District Attorney’s Office’s special programs, visit: <http://www.denverda.org/>

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