

FORUM IV

Sensitizing the Community to the Problem of Elder Abuse: A Community Education and Public Awareness Approach

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Raising public awareness about social issues is hardly a simple undertaking. A disturbing phenomenon such as family abuse often evokes strong resistance and a reluctance to deal with it. Such is the case with elder abuse, which remains largely a hidden problem that is far less likely than other forms of family abuse to come to the attention of the authorities (Quinn & Tomita, 1986). More than a decade has passed since the elderly were first identified at public hearings and in the literature as being at risk of victimization within the family. With time, evidence has accumulated showing elder abuse to be a significant and growing problem (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1989).

This article describes the history and development of JASA/Project AEGIS, an innovative 4-year program of community education and outreach designed to increase both public and victim awareness of the problem of elder abuse. The Jewish Association for Services for the Aged (JASA) is a multiservice agency providing casework, group work, recreational programs, home care, and housing to the elderly throughout New York City and Nassau and Suffolk Counties. Organized in 1968, JASA serves over 51,000 elderly persons annually. It is a member agency of the United Jewish Appeal-Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of Greater New York.

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THE PROBLEM

Both literary and historical sources demonstrate that mistreatment of the elderly is not only a problem of contemporary society, but one that probably has always existed (Reinharz, 1986). Familial conflict is confirmed in the Bible in a passage that recognizes that children behave insolently toward their elders (Isaiah 35). The potential for elder abuse is hinted at in the Book of Proverbs, which includes warnings against the mistreatment of old parents (Smolar, 1985).

Abuse of the elderly received public attention in the late 1970s and early 1980s at a series of public hearings held by the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Aging. Since the 1981 publication of the committee's report, "Elder Abuse: An Examination of a Hidden Problem," the subject has come under increasing investigation by researchers.

In general, research has focused on defining the nature and extent of elder abuse. A great deal has been learned in recent years, but because of the complexity of the problem, the picture is still not clear and uncertainties remain. There are no accurate statistics on the incidence of elder abuse, although the National Aging Resource Center on Elder Abuse did report that in 1988 nearly two million older people nationwide suffered some form of abuse (Tatara, 1989).

Recent research, the focus of which has shifted from the victim to the characteristics of the abuser, is shedding new light on the causes of elder abuse. A somewhat different picture has emerged recently of

the victim, the perpetrator, and the circumstance surrounding elder abuse. The earlier characterization of elder abuse—a dependent, frail, very old woman who is mistreated by a well-meaning but “stressed out” daughter—has been broadened to one showing a “much more complex set of players and relationships” (Wolf, 1986).

Although much is still not known about elder abuse, research has yielded some important findings about the problem. Elder abuse and neglect are now seen to occur primarily within the family (Hudson, 1986). When family relationships of the elderly are conflict-laden, family life can become very oppressive, and situations can escalate to threaten the health and well-being of the older person (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1989). It is now understood that elder abuse is a problem that touches us all; it shares a common thread with other forms of family abuse in that “no group is immune. . . . The problem affects all social classes and all racial, ethnic and religious groups. It is a problem in both urban and rural areas of our country” (Highlights, 1987).

Elder abuse in Jewish families has been confirmed in at least two studies. The O’Malley study, which identified the religious affiliation of participants in 183 instances of elder abuse, cited 3% of cases as occurring in Jewish families (Quinn & Tomita, 1986).

Currently there are an estimated 975,000 Jewish elderly in the United States; this figure is expected to increase by 11.9% by the year 2000. One-third of Jewish elderly are over age 75, and 10% are older than 85 (Glicksman, 1990). The proportion of aged will continue to grow. As older people continue to experience greater life expectancy, it is expected that the incidence of elder abuse will continue to rise.

There are differing approaches to the prevention and identification of abuse and potential abuse and neglect of the elderly. Many states have enacted statutes mandating the reporting of elder abuse. These laws have become the focus of debate, which has raised many questions of a phil-

osophical and practical nature, including whether they serve to encourage or to deter identification of situations of abuse. New York State chose not to enact an elder abuse mandatory reporting system—a position strengthened by the results of the 1980 Metropolitan Commission on Aging study, suggesting that “the most effective way to identify potential abuse situations is through implementation of an effective public education campaign” (New York State, 1980).

JASA/PROJECT AEGIS (ABUSED ELDERLY—GUIDANCE, INFORMATION, SERVICE)

Early in 1986, the New York State Department of Social Services/Children and Family Trust Fund issued a request for proposals for the development of local elder abuse demonstration projects; outreach and community education efforts were top priorities. With support from the Nassau County Department of Social Services and the Nassau County Department of Senior Citizen Affairs, JASA submitted a proposal to conduct a community outreach and education program. The proposal was favorably received and was funded for 4 years. Project AEGIS reaffirmed JASA’s commitment to fulfill the biblical commandment to “Honor thy father and mother,” and it shared with JPAC-Joint Public Affairs Committee for Older Adults (JASA’s social action division) a common aim: “to stimulate increased community interest in the problems of the elderly” (Duhl, 1983).

Established in December, 1986, JASA/Project AEGIS served Nassau County, a “graying” Long Island suburban community of 1.3 million persons, of which an estimated 292,000 are 60 years and older. AEGIS had a clear mandate and a well-defined purpose, with very specific goals, and a work plan and schedule setting them into motion. JASA had been providing services to older persons in Nassau County for over 16 years, which gave AEGIS the advantage of building on the good working relationships the agency had established with the voluntary and public agencies

servicing the elderly.

The primary purpose of Project AEGIS was the development of a campaign of community education and outreach to increase both public and victim awareness of the problem of elder abuse. The specific goals were to:

- establish an advisory committee and subcommittees to support and help implement the campaign
- develop a trained corps of volunteers to meet with community groups on the subject of elder abuse
- publish and distribute posters, pamphlets, and a newsletter
- engage the media through radio and television news and talk shows
- convene an all-day conference on elder abuse for the professional community

The secondary purpose of Project AEGIS was to provide some direct service to elderly victims and their family members. All cases of actual abuse were to be referred to the Adult Protective Services Unit (APS) of the Nassau County Department of Social Services. APS would continue its role as the primary component in the service network, working in collaboration with AEGIS in this and all aspects of the program.

The original grant from the Trust Fund provided for a full-time MSW project director, a part-time secretary, and a part-time social worker. JASA's Nassau County District Director and district clerical staff contributed significant support to the project. Additionally, many individuals recruited from the community joined with AEGIS, forming a large volunteer staff.

Developing the Campaign Committees

The first step was to organize an advisory committee and subcommittees. Because AEGIS was embarking on a campaign that had few precedents and was dealing with a sensitive issue that frequently met with skepticism, an informed and concerned lay group was critically needed to discuss ideas and objectives and to advise staff on the

development and continued progress of the campaign. Volunteers were vital to the success of the program insofar as many functions could not be implemented without their help. It was felt that the project would best be served through a diversified membership, with a core group whose participation and time were not bound by job constraints or agency restrictions. Members were recruited from older adult and retiree groups, service organizations, and public and voluntary agencies through letters of invitation describing AEGIS and participation on the advisory committee. From the 52 invitations sent, more than 35 affirmative responses were received, indicating concern and offering support and "full cooperation." Individuals from a variety of disciplines—education, health, law enforcement, legal services, medicine, nursing, psychology, and social work—agreed to serve on the advisory committee. The fields of sales and public relations were also represented.

From the outset, the advisory committee was a working committee. Members assumed lead roles, chaired meetings, and prepared minutes; many joined subcommittees, such as the Volunteer/Training Committee, Newsletter Committee, and the Conference Committee. Others helped with mailings and the distribution of outreach materials. Although the full advisory committee met four times a year, more than half the members met more frequently with staff through subcommittee meetings.

Volunteer Speakers Bureau

I used to reject the thought (of elder abuse) because it was such a terrifying idea to think of old people, weak and dependent, subject to fear.

These are the words of a woman who had worked with the elderly for 30 years before her retirement and now, at age 75, was a volunteer with the AEGIS Speakers Bureau (Ommerman, 1987). Most of the 19 members of the Speakers Bureau were in their sixties and seventies and had diver-

sified backgrounds and experience. Some joined, as one volunteer did, because of experience with elder abuse in his own family, but most participated because they were generally concerned and wanted to help.

Volunteers had to undergo vigorous training; be available for assignments, supervision, and in-service meetings; and do a minimum of six presentations. Training was offered in a five-session workshop. The first four sessions dealt with practical and concrete information on aging, elder abuse, the role of protective services, and legal issues. Videotaped materials supplemented classroom discussion. The final training session was devoted to the "how to's" of public speaking and preparing individual presentations. For this workshop, the prestigious public speaking institute, *Dale Carnegie Associates*, provided, at no cost, the services of one of their trainers.

When the training was completed, press releases and announcements were sent out announcing the availability of the Speakers Bureau. Contacts were initiated with local civic, fraternal, and religious groups; libraries; and senior centers to arrange for AEGIS presentations. Although most groups were receptive to scheduling a speaker, occasionally the opportunity was rejected because the "subject was too depressing."

Outreach Materials

Posters, brochures, and a newsletter were developed to increase awareness of elder abuse and to publicize that AEGIS was available to help with problems of elder abuse. At the suggestion of the local United Way, staff met with an advertising and marketing firm that agreed to provide services on a pro bono basis. Initially, there were differences in perspective between program staff and the ad agency consultant; later, problems developed when delays in completing the material caused that aspect of the campaign to fall behind schedule. However, for their AEGIS poster design, the ad agency won the annual BOLI (Best

on Long Island) Award in the public service category in a competition sponsored by the Advertising Graphic/Arts Public Relations Community. That award generated excitement and valuable publicity, giving elder abuse greater visibility and AEGIS a wider audience.

The Newsletter

Four months into the program, AEGIS began printing a quarterly newsletter that provided information on elder abuse and all matters relevant to the issue, including progress reports on all AEGIS activities and the developing outreach campaign. Editions of 2500 copies were distributed throughout the Nassau County human service network and to libraries, universities, physicians' offices, hospitals, and other public sites. In addition to being a good information and educational tool, the newsletter helped establish AEGIS as *the* program in the county associated in the public's mind with the problem of elder abuse.

Media Activities

Media activities began almost immediately after the start-up of AEGIS when staff participated in a Long Island Cablevision Talk Show called "Social Security and Beyond." A two-part series, hosted by staff from the Social Security Administration, was devoted to the topic of elder abuse and included panelists from AEGIS, the Nassau County Department of Social Services, and the Family Court of Nassau County. This show sparked similar opportunities to appear on several Long Island radio interview and talk shows.

Public service announcements and press releases appeared regularly in the local press. Articles with considerable human interest appeal were featured in major publications, such as the *New York Times*. "Fighting Abuse of the Elderly" which focused on the activities of AEGIS's volunteer speakers bureau, appeared in the "Life Over 60" column in *Newsday*, which has

a readership of almost 1,500,000 Long Islanders. Other articles appeared in various community newspapers and bulletins.

Conference

Toward the end of the first year, AEGIS convened a major all-day conference, "Elder Abuse and Neglect: The Problem and Approaches Toward Solution." Although the event was open to the public, it was geared primarily to the professional community. The keynote speaker, a geriatrician, was well known for his work in elder abuse, as were the panelists, who spoke on topics ranging from legal and ethical issues to family relationships and clinical issues. Following the keynote presentation were six workshops, which provided the more than 200 conference participants with practical ideas that they could apply directly to their current work.

Direct Services

Although Project AEGIS focused on community education and outreach, it did provide some direct services. All cases of actual abuse were referred to the Nassau County Department of Social Services/ Adult Protective Services Unit (APS) for immediate action. In situations of potential abuse or where the acute question of abuse had been handled, AEGIS either provided the necessary services or else referred the case within JASA or to another agency. A few stabilized cases in need of ongoing counseling were carried jointly by APS, AEGIS, or JASA's other social service programs. With the elimination of the part-time social work position after Year II of AEGIS, a Telephone Help Line was established in the third year so AEGIS staff and volunteers could continue to provide an information and referral service.

Case Studies

The following two case studies are drawn from the agency records. The first describes

a situation of longstanding marital conflict, which, exacerbated by the infirmities of advanced age, erupted into abuse. In the second case, dependency plays a critical role (Pillemer & Sutor, 1988), with the adult children dependent on the parent for financial assistance. All the names used in these case studies are pseudonyms.

Mrs. G and her husband lived in their fairly well-kept two-story house in a middle-class suburban community for 30 years. She was 76 years old, and Mr. G was 86, and until her recent stroke they had managed to do their own chores without household help. Mrs. G was receiving physical therapy at home, as the stroke had affected the use of her left arm and leg. She was making progress and getting around with the aid of a walker; nevertheless, she required the 5-day-a-week assistance of a home health aide. Other than an interested neighbor, the couple, who were childless, had few if any visitors.

The home health aide called APS reporting that Mr. G had abused his wife. A home interview with Mrs. G confirmed that her husband was verbally abusive, frequently screaming and cursing at her. On several occasions, he became physically threatening, pushing her. Mrs. G complained that her husband had taken her bankbooks and had refused to give her money, denying her the necessities she required and preventing her from calling for food to be delivered when there was no weekend aide. There was also some concern about overmedication.

Mrs. G confided that her husband used her illness as an opportunity to gain control of her assets. Their relationship had been acrimonious, with their constant bickering often exploding into loud arguments. Mrs. G no longer wanted to live with her husband and asked that he be removed from the house; nevertheless, she would not press charges.

With Mrs. G's consent, APS assumed financial management, and a representative payee was appointed who became responsible for paying all of Mrs. G's expenses. In consultation with the protective service worker and the financial manager, the JASA caseworker visited frequently, providing supportive counseling and other needed assistance.

Mr. and Mrs. G continued to live together. Mr. G remained aloof and resistant to help, but was more restrained in his abusive behavior toward his wife.

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Mrs. L is 75 years old, widowed, and in good health. She lived in a modest two-family house in a working-class suburban community. The house was jointly owned with her daughter Evelyn and son-in-law Larry, who lived there with their two children. All parties had agreed to share equally in the expenses. Problems escalated after Mr. L's death, with Evelyn becoming more aggressive toward her mother.

The original request to JASA was for financial assistance. Mrs. L needed reassurance from the social worker before she felt free to talk about the abuse. She was afraid of her daughter and feared retaliation. Mrs. L's grandchildren were of great concern to her. She asserted that her mission was to be there to help raise them because Evelyn was inadequate and neglectful and because Larry had a poor work history and had trouble keeping a job.

There was a lot of fighting in the house. Evelyn made excessive demands on her mother, pressuring her to do the family laundry and prepare breakfast for the children while she slept. In addition, Mrs. L was given the responsibility of getting the older child to the bus stop each morning, regardless of the weather. Evelyn constantly badgered her mother for money for her household expenses and for personal use. If Mrs. L resisted or could not meet her demands, Evelyn had violent outbursts, yelling that Mrs. L was useless, and cursing and threatening to get rid of her.

The situation worsened during the times when Larry was unemployed. Mrs. L depleted her savings. She was carrying full responsibility for the mortgage and taxes and would often borrow money from her brother for food. Despite the situation, Mrs. L was unwilling to leave.

Counseling with Mrs. L continued over a 4-year period. With support, she became more assertive about her own needs. Mrs. L was encouraged to develop outside relationships and joined a local senior center. While her decision to remain in the house with her

family was respected, counseling was centered on helping her separate. Mrs. L is just beginning to be able to talk about living elsewhere.

The situation remains volatile. Marital problems have escalated, and school problems are emerging with the children.

Program Accomplishments

The accomplishments of Project AEGIS in the four years of operations are substantive. In addition to continuing with the activities established during the first year, new initiatives were added each year. In Year II, a training program on all aspects of elder abuse was developed for professionals and paraprofessionals working with the elderly. Through case discussions and presentations, a series of workshops presented guidelines for working with elder abuse cases and intervention strategies. The goal of the training was to raise the professionals' awareness of risk factors for abuse and to enable them to identify and handle situations of elder abuse. During the third year, a volunteer Telephone Help Line was established to provide information and referral services. In Year IV, under a special grant from the Nassau County Department of Social Services (DSS), AEGIS and DSS collaborated in conducting a study to help expand the body of knowledge on elder abuse in Nassau County.

The objectives of the program have clearly been met. Training has been provided to 355 workers; the Telephone Help Line has responded to 472 calls; about 29,500 copies of the quarterly Newsletter have been distributed; volunteers and staff have made presentations to 108 community groups reaching close to 4000 persons; and many Nassau County residents have learned about elder abuse through newspaper articles, television and radio, and posters and brochures.

The impact of the AEGIS community education program has clearly been felt. The Nassau County DSS reported a nearly 90% increase in referrals to the APS Unit by the end of 4 years. There is anecdotal

evidence of AEGIS' impact as well. One senior center director, referring to the Volunteer Speakers Bureau noted that "as a direct result of the presentation, one of our senior members has already approached us concerning her problem."

The Future

With the expiration of its funding and having met all its goals, Project AEGIS ended in December 1990. The AEGIS Advisory Committee, which has been renamed the Council on Elder Abuse, along with JASA and other public and voluntary programs in Nassau County continues to address the problem of elder abuse.

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