



Supporting the Safety and Dignity of Senior Victorians



Victorian Government
Response to the Report
of the Elder Abuse
Prevention Project

June 2006

Supporting the safety and dignity of Senior Victorians

Increased longevity is extending the opportunity for the majority of our community to lead healthy, active and independent lives.

While this is considered one of the great achievements of our society, there are some in our community who experience abuse and neglect. This can dramatically impact on their health and well being and significantly compromise their independence.

It is vulnerable community members who are most at risk of abuse and neglect, and we know that for some, this vulnerability may be associated with ageing.

All people have the right to live their lives free from violence and abuse and the Victorian Government is committed to ensuring the safety, security and dignity of all older people in our community.

In March 2005, I initiated a review of how the Government could better prevent and respond to older people experiencing abuse. An expert advisory committee examined the available evidence and the practical first hand knowledge of those who confront this problem. Extensive consultations were conducted throughout the state to ensure the widest possible community involvement.

Importantly the review was greatly assisted by the contributions of older people during the consultation. I acknowledge this contribution and the efforts of the advisory committee in undertaking the review.

Their report, *Strengthening Victoria's Response to Elder Abuse*, rightly acknowledges the issue is complex and has long been a hidden problem. Many of its aspects are not well understood and it is an issue that many of us find difficult to discuss. Similar barriers once applied to family violence and sexual assault where the need for open discussion was one of the preconditions for progress. It is now time for open and forthright discussion in communities and within families about the abuse of older people.

The Victorian Government supports all of the recommendations from *Strengthening Victoria's Response to Elder Abuse* and is investing in practical resources to improve community awareness and better support and respond to those experiencing abuse and neglect.

The Government supports the right of older people to make their own choices and live independently in their homes for as long as they are safe and able. Our current legislative arrangements and service system provide an effective framework for responding to those who need assistance. We need to monitor the effectiveness of these arrangements. It is clear more training, coordination and support is required.

To deliver this practical assistance the 2006-07 Budget provides \$5.9 million over four years for a range of measures to support the safety, security and dignity of older people.

Education and public awareness strategies are vital in informing the community about the abuse of older people as is the provision of information for seniors about their rights and sources of support. Making well informed decisions about major life issues such as health, finances and lifestyle is integral to the empowerment of older people and their protection from abuse.

In order to deliver this support across Victoria we will establish a service that will provide education for older people and the broader community, a clearing house for research and best practice, as well as a telephone information service.

Financial abuse has emerged as a major issue for older people. Regrettably the evidence suggests this mostly occurs within family networks. We will continue to work with the financial services sector to prevent financial abuse and provide information and support in the area of financial literacy.

The availability of specialised legal support and advocacy will be of increasing importance in both preventing and responding to financial and other forms of abuse. To respond to this emerging need we will establish an older person's community legal service to provide advocacy and legal advice. This service will also support the capacity and knowledge of Victoria's network of community legal services in regard to older persons' legal needs.

Increasing professional knowledge and service capability are fundamental strategies to prevent abuse and respond to incidents. Health and community services staff, along with police, need specialised education and training to assist them identify and appropriately respond to suspected cases of abuse.

Service capability of local area networks will be strengthened to ensure staff are able to respond to individual cases as well as knowing when it is appropriate to seek additional expertise.

The Government will provide funding to support delivery of professional education, an updated guide for health and community services staff and support for strengthening local networks. Combined, these measures will enhance the capability of service providers assist older people who are experiencing abuse.

The links between the abuse of older people, disempowerment and discrimination have been consistently demonstrated in research throughout the world. Our aim must be to enable and empower older people to act for themselves and on their own behalf, exercising their rights confident of the services and resources available to assist them.

Responses to abuse based on the perception that age necessarily brings with it only frailty and vulnerability shows little respect and underestimates older people.

The evidence also indicates that such responses are not effective strategies. Calls for community wide mandatory reporting of suspected abuse without regard to the wishes of older people are a case in point. Older people possess the same rights as other adults to seek redress when they experience abuse.

The Victorian Government's response will support the safety, security and dignity of older people through a comprehensive and balanced set of initiatives. These address prevention and service responses at the levels of the individual, the family, the institution and the community.

Victoria has also joined with the Commonwealth and other State and Territory Governments to better train and support staff within the residential aged care industry and to strengthen incident reporting and investigation.

The funding announced in the State Budget provides for effective implementation of the new initiatives. In establishing the review and accepting its recommendations, Victoria has taken the lead nationally on the prevention of abuse in the community.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gavin Jennings". The signature is written in a cursive style with a stylized, somewhat abstract appearance.

Gavin Jennings MLC

Minister for Aged Care and

Minister responsible for Senior Victorians

Victorian Government Response to Recommendations

Recommendation

Response

1. That the Victorian Government strengthens its response to elder abuse based on current legislative and service arrangements. This approach recognises the right of older people to determine their own course of action, and where required, access practical assistance to support their needs to deal with situations of abuse and regain independence and control over their lives.

Supported: The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring that older people live in safety, with dignity and respect. The 2006-07 Budget provides \$5.9 million to develop a balanced set of initiatives that address prevention and service responses.

Action: Raise awareness of the issue within the broader community and strengthen current service arrangements to improve support for older people. Support older people to exercise their rights.

Monitor current legislative and service responses to ensure continued effectiveness.

Support the recent commitments from the Commonwealth Government to better train and support staff within the residential care industry and to strengthen incident reporting and investigation.

Responsibility: The Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) will lead with the support of the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Department of Justice (DoJ).

2. That the Department for Victorian Communities be given lead agency responsibility for developing and maintaining a whole-of-government policy framework on prevention and responses to elder abuse, and for ongoing monitoring of implementation, evaluation and research.

Supported: The Victorian Government recognises that safeguarding the independence and dignity of older people requires collaboration from a range of its agencies.

Action: Develop and maintain a whole-of-government approach.

Responsibility: DVC

3. That community education programs be developed to raise awareness of the risks of abuse. This should be delivered on an ongoing basis and conducted sensitively in a way that does not unduly alarm senior Victorians or reinforce inappropriate negative stereotypes about ageing.

Supported: The Victorian Government acknowledges the importance of community education and raising awareness in preventing the abuse of older people. These strategies need to highlight the contributions older people make to the community and promote positive images of ageing. Professional education and training is also required to support services responses and improve clinical practice.

Action: Develop, implement and promote a community education and awareness strategy commencing in 2006-07, including extending the availability of financial literacy programs.

Commence professional training initiatives in 2006-07.

Responsibility: DVC

4. That a state wide information and education service be established to provide information and telephone assistance and referral support to older people experiencing abuse. The service would provide community education and also act as a central point for the dissemination of research and materials on best practice to older people, service providers and the general community.

Supported: The Victorian Government accepts the need for readily accessible information and assistance.

Action: Establish a service in 2006-07 that will provide education for older people and the broader community, a clearing house for research and best practice, as well as a telephone information service.

Responsibility: DVC

Recommendation

Response

5. That a broad alliance of government and community agencies be established to promote the prevention of abuse of older people and provide ongoing leadership and advice to the state wide service.

Supported: The abuse of older people is recognised by the Victorian Government as an issue which requires effort and collaboration across all sectors.

Action: Support the efforts of stakeholders to build upon the relationships established in the course of the Elder Abuse Prevention Project to create a broad based alliance which will guide and contribute to prevention strategies and service responses.

Responsibility: DVC

6. That the Department of Human Services finalise the update of its existing guide for funded agencies on elder abuse in consultation with service agencies and support the development of local agency protocols. Resources should be provided to deliver training and support to agencies to complement prevention and community education strategies.

Supported: The Victorian Government acknowledges the importance of training and support for agencies dealing with the abuse of older people.

Action: Produce a revised guide to be published by DHS in 2006-07. Conduct information sessions, commencing in 2006-07 through to 2007-08.

Develop training and support to agencies from 2006-07.

Responsibility: DVC and DHS

7. That assistance is provided to new and existing local agency networks to support and further develop collaboration and cooperation, including inter-agency protocols, to appropriately respond and support older people subject to abuse.

Supported: The Victorian Government acknowledges the importance of support services and community agencies in meeting the needs of older people and will encourage the further development of local agency networks.

Action: Support and extend local agency networks and strengthen their knowledge and capability in dealing with instances of elder abuse.

Responsibility: DVC and DHS

8. That Victoria's approach to the prevention of the abuse and neglect of older people be strengthened to improve cooperation and collaboration of prevention and response services, extending beyond the health and community services sector to include Office of Public Advocate, Victoria Police, financial services, legal and advocacy programs, community groups and spiritual leaders.

Supported: The Victorian Government recognises that the abuse of older people is a complex issue requiring coordinated efforts across all sectors of society.

Action: Advocate and encourage discussion and cooperation between relevant government, community and private sector groups, including the financial sector.

Responsibility: DVC

Recommendation

Response

9. That Victorian communities are supported to be age friendly where older people can feel safe and confident. Communities should also be supported to promote the active participation of older people and to minimise the risk of social isolation.

Supported: The Victorian Government will continue to support strong, resilient communities which encourage participation across generations. Older people will be supported to be safe and confident.

Action: Promote community strengthening activities that help prevent elder abuse by supporting positive ageing and create age friendly communities.

Responsibility: DVC

10. That the Victorian Government works with the Commonwealth and other State and Territory Governments to research both the extent of elder abuse and best practice approaches to prevention, detection and service responses.

Supported: The Victorian Government supports research into the prevention of abuse of older people to ensure services responses are informed by best practice.

Action: Explore joint research efforts with other jurisdictions and continue to cooperate with the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments in the development of best practice initiatives to prevent the abuse of older people.

Responsibility: DVC

11. That consideration be given to the provision of specialised community legal services targeted to the specific needs of disadvantaged older people to improve access to justice.

Supported: The Victorian Government recognises that older people may face barriers to accessing legal services and will establish a community legal service to for older people.

Action: Establish an older persons' community legal service commencing in 2006-07 that will provide general legal education and advocacy services and support the capacity of existing community legal centres to address the legal needs of older people.

Responsibility: DoJ

The Victorian Government wishes to thank the members of the Elder Abuse Prevention Project Advisory Committee for their contributions.

Chair

Mr Barney Cooney

Members

The Ministerial Advisory Council of Senior Victorians -
Ms Lola McHarg

The Office of the Public Advocate -
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Victorian Community Council Against Violence -
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Alzheimer's Association of Victoria -
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