

Service Providers Toolkit

Recognising and Responding to Abuse of Older People

*For frontline workers who are in contact
with First Nations older peoples
who may be experiencing elder abuse*



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Introduction

In 2023 UnitingCare's Older Persons Programs developed *Keeping Seniors Safe in Community* in response to elder abuse across regional and remote townships and First Nations communities with limited or no available elder abuse services.

Over an 18-month period the project focussed on communities in Far North West Queensland, Gulf and Far North Queensland regions. The project team understood the importance of visiting communities more than once. Community members appreciate maintaining connection with services and view repeat visits as a measure of commitment to their needs as a community.

Keeping Seniors Safe in Community developed this resource for service providers encountering elder abuse, to assist them in responding to abuse and neglect of older people in regional and remote communities. The service provider toolkit is a quick reference to assist service providers and agencies to recognise, respond and refer when older people are mistreated and neglected. The toolkit includes:

- a directory of services and agencies for support and referral when required
- tips for communicating more effectively with First Nations clients to increase mainstream workers' understanding of First Nations peoples and to assist with more effective communication.

The project team would like to sincerely thank the Queensland Department of Women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships and Multiculturalism (DWATSIPM), in particular the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnership service centres in Mount Isa, Cooktown and Cairns for their collaboration, guidance and generosity in sharing their knowledge of and introduction into the communities they serve across Queensland's regional and remote regions.

The collaboration and relationships built with remote communities will have a lasting effect as we help build community capacity to assist older people/Elders where elder abuse is occurring.

What is elder abuse?

Elder abuse refers to acts occurring within a relationship of trust, which harm an older person. Such relationships may include those that the elderly have with their adult children, spouses, carers or health professionals. Elder abuse can be of a physical, sexual, financial, psychological, or social nature and can also include neglect.

Recognise

Know the signs of elder abuse

Elder abuse is often hidden and goes unnoticed. It's Australia's hidden shame. Signs of abuse are subtle and can be mistaken for illness or ageing. It is important to remember though, signs are just that – signs! Noticing a sign does not always mean someone is experiencing abuse. Taking the time to notice and look out for older people is something we can all do to protect those we know and love.

Recognising changes in person's wellbeing

It is common for someone experiencing elder abuse to be affected emotionally/psychologically, no matter what type of abuse they may be experiencing. Everyone responds differently and people may display a wide range of emotions and changed behaviour.

What to look for

- Withdrawing from family or being reluctant to talk openly.
- Fear or stress. In some cases, this can lead to confusion and/or a person making contradictory statements.
- Loss of interest in self, losing interest in normal daily activities.
- Changes to sleeping patterns/inability to sleep.
- Resigned to '*that's just the way things are*'.
- Often people who feel confused and forgetful might be getting dementia and may wander in community.
- Loss of interest in self, losing interest in normal daily activities.
- Older people feeling sad, depressed, and lonely.

Recognising a person's financial wellbeing

Is the older person being *humbugged* by family? Humbugging is a term used by many communities to describe when family take money on demand, with no intention of paying the older person back.

Elder Abuse Prevention Unit's data suggests abuse of older people occurs with close family members, particularly their sons/daughters.

Signs of financial abuse might relate to an older person's money or key card being taken, leaving them with no money to buy food, medication or pay bills.

A storyboard used for the project, '*No More Humbug*', was produced by the Kimberley Birds in Western Australia and is one example of financial elder abuse in Aboriginal remote communities. View the storyboard at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-GEoHfjcGg>

What to look for

- When older people hide some food in their bedroom or buy another fridge and put a lock on it.
- Using the grandkids to ask for money from their grandparents.
- Childcare – older person always looking after the grandkids and older people are expected to have extra food or pay for everything. In some cases, older people have full-time care of their Grandchildren while not receiving Centrelink payments for those children.
- An older person is not able to afford basic items.
- Sudden changes to living arrangements/when family move in.
- An older person giving money, which is never repaid.
- Family taking the older person to the bank or ATM and making them give family their money (humbugging).
- Bank card or bank book used by others without the older person knowing.
- Helping themselves to the older person's food or possessions.

Recognising a person's physical wellbeing

If you notice an older person's physical health or hygiene seems to be diminished, it may be a sign of neglect.

What to look for

- Poor hygiene could be a smell, dirty clothing, unwashed hair, urine smell, mattresses being aired out.
- The person appears to be heavily medicated or in a daze.
- Sad and depressed.
- Unexplained bruises, cuts or other injuries.
- Sudden weight loss.
- Signs that a person has been restrained (typically around a person's waist or wrists).
- Health concerns that seem to be untreated or easily prevented such as bed sores or untreated wounds.
- Thirsty, dehydrated or dry mouth.

Recognising a person's general living situation

You may also notice something about a person's general living situation. It could be something that seems wrong or missing – typically something that would be normal for the older person to function well and live a quality life.

What to look for

- Lack of or little food in the household for the older person.
- Is the older person free to make their own decisions?
- Are they scared of other family members?
- Lack of support or knowledge about health and aged care services.
- Don't have any way to contact friends and family (or a working phone).
- Older person no longer has visitors or social contact.

Recognising social and spiritual abuse

Cultural, social and spiritual abuse can impact heavily on older people's emotional and psychological wellbeing.

What to look for

- No longer taking older people/Elders (who are able to) to country (their traditional homelands) or to attend cultural events due to family having no time or no interest to do so.
- When the older person's grandchildren no longer visit (could be a form of blackmail from the children's parents to get their own way).
- Older people no longer attending social or recreational events that the older person used to enjoy, for example fishing or camping.
- The older person is no longer attending the local church or prayer group. Historically, First Nations communities were run by faith-based organisations and many First Nations peoples have continued their faith practices.

Respond

It's important to consider the following when supporting someone who may be experiencing elder abuse or neglect. You may need an interpreter in remote First Nations communities if English is their second or third language. It may take a few conversations before you are able to build trust with the person.

- Be mindful the older person may be feeling fearful or confused.

Do they need medical attention? If so, call an ambulance or local health service. There's no need to get permission from the family to call an ambulance.

- Make sure you talk with them on their own, in a safe comfortable place.

For example, if the older person is at home, wait until their family member/s leave the room and are out of earshot before talking to them about sensitive topics. When making home visits, it can be beneficial to take a second worker where possible to distract carers and help make time to talk with directly with the older person.

Listen to what they are saying and ask open ended questions

For example, if you ask someone are they feeling okay they might say yes, but if you say, "you look a bit sad, what's going on for you?" they might tell you a bit more information. Highlighting what you see can be the best way to show that you are truly invested in their wellbeing.

What would they want?

- To just talk – sharing some of their worries might be all they want at this stage.
- Sit with them – sometimes words don't help or they may not be ready to talk. Just being there can be reassuring.
- Act – if they say they want assistance then explore options with them.

Be guided by the older person and what they want, not what you think is best

Sometimes an older person might appear to be unhappy with their family, and a worker could assume they want their family to leave, however, that might not be an option as many have no one else to meet their care needs.

Family or workers can contact the elder abuse helpline if concerned about an older person being abused or neglected. The helpline is confidential and you may stay anonymous if you choose when calling.

Service workers are urged to be older person centred and put the older person's wishes and wellbeing at the centre of all decisions.

Refer

If you think someone needs further support, consider the following options:

- Do they have other family that can support them?
- Can they speak with an Elder or to someone they trust?
- Is there a local health service or group that could support them?

If none of the above options are helpful, consider the following:

- Is the older person in danger of harm?
- Can you call Police?
 - First Nations peoples' poor relationship and association with Police and authority figures is grounded in trauma. Older people may not want the alleged perpetrator in trouble with the legal system.
- Can you take them to a safe house?

Service providers, older people, and family members can call the Elder Abuse Prevention Unit helpline on 1300 651 192 for free and confidential information, support and referral, Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm (excluding Brisbane and Queensland public holidays).

If the older person feels more comfortable speaking with a First Nations person outside of their community, they can contact 13YARN (on 13 92 76). This is a crisis support service where all phones are manned by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander crisis support workers 24/7 – without judgement and is strictly confidential.

You can also contact the Seniors Legal and Support Service (SLASS). See the list of SLASS locations in the contact page.



Image: A waterhole in western Qld
(Dulcie B., 2023)

Introduction to 'Natural helpers'

'Natural helpers' is a term first heard whilst working in remote First Nations communities in Queensland's North West and Gulf communities.

Natural helpers in a community are individuals who are naturally sought out by others for advice, support or assistance, often due to their trusted position within the community, lived experience or strong social connections, such as neighbours, elders or people with similar backgrounds who they turn to for help. Essentially, they are informal community leaders who can facilitate access to resources and support networks without being professional service providers.

Natural helpers often have deep cultural knowledge and understanding which can be crucial in addressing community needs. Community see natural helpers as trustworthy and approachable, making them effective in connecting individuals to needed services.

Living remotely, communities do not have the luxury of services and agencies available to them when help is needed, particularly older people when mistreatment and neglect occur. The absence of technology for many older people in regional and remote locations, and the natural helpers themselves, creates barriers for connecting older people to health and aged-care services.

It is important that support services and agencies work to assist natural helpers when natural helpers need to refer clients for further support. Natural helpers are unpaid and often unrecognised for the help they provide in community. The Elder Abuse Prevention Unit would like to acknowledge natural helpers for their dedication to care for the communities they love.

Tips to improve communication with First Nations older peoples

For mainstream workers in contact with First Nations peoples and communities living in regional and remote Queensland where elder abuse and neglect may be occurring



Connecting with remote communities

Building respectful relationships with community residents (with mob) is crucial to enable effective service delivery, particularly for external services planning to better inform and communicate with First Nations communities.

Services need to consider the importance of visiting the community more than a couple of times to build trust and rapport. Several visits would enable the community to get to know you and your service, and for them to know that they can trust you with their privacy and confidential information. It may take some time, particularly for older people to share their stories of abuse and neglect.

Connecting with local services and government agencies is key to the success of your program or project targeting regional and remote communities.

Most communities have a health clinic and some communities may offer other health and aged-care services (stakeholders). Be sure to introduce your service to stakeholders and invite an online chat (yarn) about working together to get better outcomes for older people.

If working with remote communities across Queensland, contact your nearest Department of Women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships and Multiculturalism service centre who can help guide you with connecting to regional and remote service providers.

To find your nearest service centre, go to

<https://www.tatsipca.qld.gov.au/contact-us/regional-service-centres>

Contact the local community shire council to inform them of your visit and business (if not already invited). Local councils can provide information about protocols when visiting their community.

Workers need to be culturally safe and sensitive when working with mob. If your organisation does not offer cultural training, suggest that cultural training is critical to your role in working with First Nations peoples.

Communicating with older people in remote communities

First Nations peoples meet, sit in yarning circles, share information and prefer to meet outdoors rather than in enclosed areas. If you host a meeting (a gathering) take an informal approach rather than a formal one.

To address older people respectfully – simply ask the community the preference in addressing an older person. For example, if you should address the older person as Uncle or Aunty.

One way to build rapport with older people is to ask about their country or their hobbies, such as fishing.

It is not recommended to start the conversation with what your program provides. Have some 'small talk' to interact and build rapport with the group or individual.

Many older people had little or no access to education. Be aware of your own judgements or cognitive biases and do not let them influence your view of the way they speak or live as you do not know their story, or their journey.

Be patient if community or the older person does not respond straight away, they may need time to think and process before responding. Sit in silence with them until they're ready to respond, or you can repeat your question, perhaps in a different way if clarity is required.

Talk in simple terms – no jargon, no acronyms. Ask the older person how they may be feeling, for example, when close family take money. They may feel disappointed and hurt that family have treated them this way.

Some words are offensive to First Nations peoples. For example, never use the terms ATSI, and Blackfella or half-caste as they are not acceptable words to use.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; First Nations peoples and Australia's First Peoples are acceptable terms as is the word *mob*, meaning the people residing in a community, their mob.

Check-in to see if older people understand what you are saying, if not, explain in a different way and do not rush your words.

Spend a little bit of time with your audience after your meeting or presentation has ended. It is that time when the audience may want to speak with you.

Be mindful not to use language words awkwardly or in a tokenistic manner.

First Nations family dynamics

Aboriginal kinship and law systems differ from Torres Strait Islander societies. Where Aboriginal societies are lateral where men and women share roles and responsibilities, Torres Strait Islander societies have a hierarchy system and some differences in family dynamics, law, customs and protocols.

In First Nations societies, the eldest son or daughter is expected to look after their mother or father and grandparents. They may be asked to do the older person's shopping, pay bills and go to the bank for them.

In today's society, where financial abuse is evident in many (if not all) communities, and research shows that financial elder abuse is perpetrated mostly by the older person's son/s or daughter/s, the traditional roles of family can sometimes cause conflict for the older person. Consider how the older person may react if it is their adult child that is not behaving appropriately.

Have a conversation (yarn) with the older person around who the older person most trusts and who cares about the older person's health and wellbeing.

Change in language – conscious use of the term “elder abuse”

Historically, First Nations peoples did not like the term elder abuse as traditionally, Aboriginal Elders were held in high esteem and respected since time immemorial. Using the word 'abuse' after the word 'elder' did not fit well with them.

You may like to use:

- the mistreatment of older people
- keeping seniors safe from abuse and neglect
- how are older people in community treated?

By using different ways to describe elder abuse, clients may be more open to express what is happening for them.

More recently though, and after many community visits and education sessions, older people and Elders are more accepting of the term 'elder abuse' as they have gained a better understanding about the meaning and implications of elder abuse. This suggests that if services can maintain connection and spread awareness, the more community members understand and prefer to adopt the term elder abuse.

Shame and humility

Australia's black history of colonisation may contribute to shame felt by First Nations older people. Historically, First Nations people's experiences with authorities, Police and child welfare services means that they would rather not be seen or heard, to avoid further mistreatment. This creates a flow-on effect where many older people are not reporting elder abuse as older people could feel a sense of shame and blame that family are treating them that way.

Shame is important to consider when speaking with First Nations peoples. One example is not to single out the person in a crowd. First Nations peoples would rather stay in the background so as to not attract attention.

Humility is a 'shyness, modesty or being humble'. Many First Nations peoples do not like receiving recognition. When working with First Nations peoples, be mindful not to make too much fuss about them.

Cultural load (responsibility or obligation)

Many First Nations older people carry a cultural load with their obligations to family and community.

If working with community, be mindful that family and community responsibility and obligation take priority before your business. Your schedule or appointment may be cancelled as these obligations come before any other arrangements, particularly Sorry Business. Sorry Business is the term First Nations peoples use to explain they are grieving for someone who has recently passed and funeral services take priority.

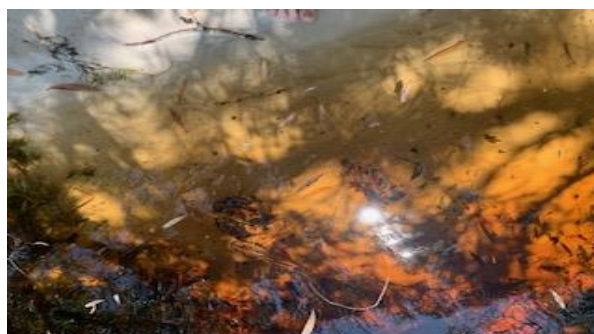
Be conscious that First Nations peoples walk in two worlds and it is not easy for them to adjust to mainstream ways of thinking, being and doing.

It is important to understand that communities suffer grief on a much greater scale and Sorry Business is a frequent occurrence for First Nations communities.

Trauma-informed healing

There is a need for ongoing healing for communities who suffer long-term grief and great loss.

Image: Minjerribah waterhole (Dulcie B., 2023)



Returning to country is one of these healers for mob to draw strength, be grounded on country, to sit still by the water and find peace.

Customs

Shaking hands: It is fine on the first meeting to shake hands, but there is no need to shake hands with the same person in the future, unless there is Sorry Business. Do not squeeze too hard when shaking hands.

When interacting generally, don't be too assertive, loud or overpowering. Listen more than you talk. Ask people, "what do you think?" and give people plenty of time to respond.

If you are a female worker, community prefer you to talk with female community members and a male worker to address male community members where possible.

Collaborating with a cultural advisor or connector

Cultural advisors and connectors can bring you together with the right people in the community and provide knowledge of the communities they serve.

You can also contact the Department of Women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships and Multiculturalism (DWATSIPM) where cultural connectors can help you plan your visit. See the link below to find your closest service centre.

<https://www.tatsipca.qld.gov.au/contact-us/regional-service-centres>

Local Shire Councils

Organisations are urged to advise community shire councils before you visit to inform them of your work with community. Council is likely to meet with you or to direct you to meet with their local services or groups for collaboration.

Police, Child Safety, and other Institutions

Many older First Nations peoples have experienced loss of land, child removal, Stolen Generations, Police disharmony, loss of identity, family and culture. Some are still searching to find family today who were institutionalised as children.

These scars are ones that do not easily disappear, as it is steeped in heartbreak, loss of family, land, culture and injustices that cannot be reversed.

"Be mindful of the painful past Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people still carry."

Useful Resources

Name	Content	Source
No More Humbug (produced by the Kimberley Birds)	A 4-minute storyboard about financial elder abuse in Western Australian Aboriginal communities.	https://kimberleybirds.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/No-More-Humbug-Report-Dec-2020-Kimberley-Birds.pdf
Elder Abuse Prevention Unit and Helpline (EAPU)	Download the elder abuse brochure and other online resources.	Phone 1300 651 192 https://eapu.com.au/
Compass	Ending the abuse of older people campaign.	https://www.compass.info/campaign/beginswithaconversation/
Queensland Government Resources	Contacts for other elder abuse services.	https://www.qld.gov.au/seniors/safety-protection/discrimination-abuse/elder-abuse/support-services
13YARN Queensland	A crisis support line for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander callers available 24/7.	Download 13YARN information and merchandise at: https://www.13YARN.org.au

Contacts

Elder Abuse Prevention Helpline	1300 651 192
<p>Operates a free statewide elder abuse helpline from Monday-Friday 9-5pm (excluding Brisbane and Queensland Public Holidays) for older people, family and service providers who are concerned that elder abuse is occurring. Elder abuse education and training is also available by calling the helpline. Call the helpline to explore relevant referral options.</p> <p>https://www.eapu.com.au</p>	
13YARN	13 92 76
<p>13YARN is Lifeline’s national 24/7 crisis support line staffed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander crisis support workers for members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.</p> <p>https://www.13yarn.org.au</p>	
ADA Law	1800 232 529
<p>ADA Law operates the Seniors Legal and Support Service (SLASS) Outback, to access justice and legal advice for older people across Western and Outback Queensland. SLASS Outback services Queensland Tablelands, Croydon, Mt Isa, Northern Highlands, Far Central West, Longreach, Barcaldine and Blackall.</p> <p>https://adalaw.com.au/seniors-legal-and-support-service/</p>	
ADA Australia	1800 700 600
<p>Provides general advocacy support or guardianship advocacy to older Queenslanders experiencing discrimination, harm or abuse.</p> <p>https://adaaustralia.com.au/</p>	
Traditional Owners in Mount Isa	(07) 4749 2766
<p>Traditional owners contribute to the health, wellbeing and cultural identity of the peoples in the region. Connect with traditional owners to inform of your business if working with local people or groups.</p> <p>E: admin@jalkadoonpbc.com.au</p>	

Seniors Legal and Support Services (SLASS) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Information Line	1300 650 143
<p>SLASS provides free legal and social work support to people who are experiencing elder abuse, mistreatment or financial exploitation. https://www.legalaid.qld.gov.au/Listings/Organisations-directory/Seniors-Legal-Support-Service-SLASS</p>	
Department of Women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships and Multiculturalism	
<p>For your local service centre, go to: https://www.tatsipca.qld.gov.au/contact-us/regional-service-centres</p>	
DV Connect	Womensline: 1800 811 811 Mensline: 1800 600 636
<p>Provide free help for women, men and children affected by domestic and family violence. https://www.dvconnect.org/</p>	
Lifeline	13 11 14
<p>A national 24/7 crisis support line for anyone needing help. https://www.dvconnect.org/</p>	