

# Addressing Elder Abuse in Alberta

A Strategy for Collective Action

November 2010







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## MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTER



I am pleased to present *Addressing Elder Abuse in Alberta: A Strategy for Collective Action*. This Strategy provides a plan for the Government of Alberta, in collaboration with community partners and all Albertans, to work together to prevent and address elder abuse. All sectors and citizens can contribute to an Alberta where seniors are able to feel safe and participate in all aspects of community life.

Elder abuse has devastating consequences. It jeopardizes the health and well-being of seniors and has significant implications for the health, social support and justice systems.

Elder abuse can take on many forms — it can be emotional, financial, physical or sexual in nature. Preventing and addressing elder abuse starts with knowledge. All Albertans need to know the signs of elder abuse and where to go for help.

Eliminating elder abuse starts with creating a positive change in society's attitudes by dispelling common myths and stereotypes about seniors and the aging process. Seniors deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, just as all citizens do. They make significant contributions to our province as neighbours, caregivers, volunteers, grandparents, employers, employees and taxpayers, and these contributions are vital to our social fabric. By fostering a culture of respect for and appreciation of seniors, among all generations, together we can prevent elder abuse.

As we continue to celebrate our province as a place that values and honours seniors, I encourage you to join me, my colleagues and our community partners in implementing *Addressing Elder Abuse in Alberta: A Strategy for Collective Action*.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary Anne Jablonski". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mary Anne Jablonski  
*Minister, Seniors and Community Supports*





## INTRODUCTION

Seniors make important contributions to Alberta society in their roles as parents, grandparents, caregivers, volunteers, mentors, employers, employees and taxpayers. Their experience, knowledge and skills enrich their communities and society as a whole. Seniors add to the diversity and vibrancy of Alberta.

Like all citizens, seniors deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. However, various studies indicate that between 4 per cent and 8 per cent of older adults in Canada are likely to experience abuse. Elder abuse can take many forms, and it can affect any senior, regardless of socio-economic background, health status or cultural heritage. However, those seniors who are older in age, are more socially isolated, have reduced cognitive capacity, or have a disability may be at higher risk of abuse.


Elder abuse is a serious social and public health issue. It undermines a senior's independence, dignity and sense of security, and it damages lives and destroys relationships in the process.

As in many other jurisdictions around the world, the number and proportion of seniors in Alberta is expected to steadily increase over the next several decades. This is largely due to longer life expectancies, lower fertility rates and the aging of the "baby boom" generation. By 2031, when the last member of the "baby boom" generation reaches 65 years of age, it is projected that one in five Albertans will be a senior.

The Government of Alberta's *Aging Population Policy Framework* provides an overall context for how the government will work with other governments, the private and non-profit sectors, communities, families and individuals to meet the needs of seniors in effective and sustainable ways. The Framework sets out a series of key policy directions in eight theme areas of importance to an aging population. Safety and security is one of the theme areas

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identified. Its associated policy directions are focused on increasing public and service provider awareness of elder abuse and enhancing the ability of communities to respond to these situations.

To address the issue of elder abuse in a meaningful way, collective action is required on the part of all sectors of society, including governments, communities, businesses and individuals. Informed by research and the input of stakeholders, *Addressing Elder Abuse in Alberta* sets out an approach for this collective action, recognizing the vital roles that all partners share in supporting the safety, security and dignity of Alberta seniors. The Strategy identifies goals and associated outcomes in four key areas: improved awareness; skilled service providers; coordinated community responses; and protective laws and policies.

*Addressing Elder Abuse in Alberta* builds on the province's existing and ongoing efforts in preventing family violence and bullying. As part of the implementation of the Government of Alberta's *Strategy for the Prevention of Family Violence and Bullying*, the associated *Cross-Ministry Action Plan* is updated each year, setting out a series of priorities developed by partnering ministries. Actions focused on preventing and addressing elder abuse are identified as a priority in the *Cross-Ministry Action Plan* with Alberta Seniors and Community Supports being responsible for providing leadership in this area.



## ADDRESSING ELDER ABUSE IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS

As a complex social and public health issue, elder abuse has significant personal, social and economic implications for victims, families, local communities, and for taxpayer-funded services, including the health and justice systems. In some cases, victims of elder abuse may experience declining physical and mental health, including depression and even suicide.

There are numerous misconceptions regarding elder abuse, including the notion that elder abuse only happens to very old, very frail seniors and those in institutional care. Though seniors in these situations may be at greater risk of abuse because of complex medical conditions, which may include cognitive impairment, the larger reality is that **any senior can be affected by elder abuse.**

The two most frequently identified and reported types of elder abuse in Canada are financial and emotional.


According to statistics, these two forms of abuse represent 40 to 70 per cent of all reported cases.<sup>1</sup> However, elder abuse can take many different forms, including:

- *Emotional abuse* — Actions or statements that cause emotional anguish, fear, diminished self-esteem or dignity.
- *Financial abuse* — The misuse of a senior's funds or property through fraud, trickery, theft or force.
- *Medication abuse* — The intentional or unintentional misuse of medications and prescriptions, such as withholding or providing doses that cause bodily harm, sedation or other adverse effect(s).
- *Physical abuse* — Actions that cause physical discomfort, pain or injury.
- *Sexual abuse* — Unwanted sexual behaviours including sexual comments, exploitive use of pornography, fondling or sexual assault.
- *Neglect* — The active (intentional) or passive (unintentional) failure to provide a senior with a basic level of care.

The two most frequently identified and reported types of elder abuse in Canada are financial and emotional.

These two forms of abuse represent 40 to 70 per cent of all reported cases.

<sup>1</sup> *An Environmental Scan of Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults in Canada: What's Working and Why.* Report prepared for the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Committee of Officials (Seniors), September 2003.



Not all forms of elder abuse can be considered criminal in nature, as set out in the *Criminal Code of Canada*. Verbal abuse, for example, is only a criminal offence if there is a threat to kill or harm someone. The effects and consequences of non-criminal abuse, however, can be just as serious as criminal forms of abuse.

Elder abuse is a multifaceted issue and there a number of factors that make it challenging to effectively address.

■ *The extent of elder abuse is difficult to determine.*

There is limited data about elder abuse in Canada, and throughout the world. A key reason for this is that many cases of elder abuse go unreported. Data from surveys and police records only capture what victims are willing to disclose, and community service providers may not collect or track data, or do so in a standardized manner.<sup>2</sup> In fact, only one in five abuse situations involving older adults comes to the attention of authorities.<sup>3</sup>

Those who suffer elder abuse can be reluctant to report the abuse or seek help. Shame or guilt may prevent some abused seniors from revealing their abuser while others may be fearful of the repercussions that could occur as a result of reporting the abuse, especially if the abuser is a family member. An abused senior may also fear that reporting the abuse will result in the loss of their caregiver, loss of access to grandchildren or other family members, loss of their home, or result in their relocation to unfamiliar surroundings or an institution.

Victims of elder abuse may also regard the abuse as “normal” behaviour, or may mistakenly or wrongly believe they did something to bring on the abuse. In some cases the victim may not understand or be aware they are suffering abuse. Sometimes those suffering elder abuse do not have the capacity to report the abuse, while others simply do not know where to turn for assistance.

Elder abuse is often committed by someone known to the victim, such as a family member, friend, or caregiver. Approximately 25 per cent of crimes against older adults are committed by family members, usually a spouse or adult child.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization & International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (2002); Statistics Canada, *Family Violence: A Statistical Profile, 2004.*; Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, *What is Senior Abuse?*

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



■ *Complex family or relationship dynamics.*

Like other types of family violence, the dynamics of elder abuse are complex. Elder abuse is often impacted by the mental and physical conditions of both the abuser and the victim, with these factors interacting in ways uniquely dependent on the individuals involved and the situation.

Elder abuse is often committed by someone known to the victim, such as a family member, friend, or caregiver. Approximately 25 per cent of crimes against older adults are committed by family members, usually a spouse or adult child.<sup>4</sup> Family and relationship dynamics may act as barriers to identifying, reporting and addressing situations of elder abuse. Some individuals who suffer elder abuse by family members may care deeply for their abuser, which can lead to conflicting feelings about the abuse. Some victims may choose to downplay the abuse, attributing it to bad temper on the part of a family member, while others may recognize the behaviour as abuse but not report it for fear of the consequences for or from the family member.


Elder abuse may also arise in the context of a new relationship or in relationships with persons who are in positions of trust or authority, such as a landlord or service provider.

■ *Cultural differences add complexity to the issue.*

Seniors from different cultural backgrounds, particularly Albertans from immigrant communities, can face additional challenges when it comes to elder abuse. Language barriers, limited social connections, and a lack of familiarity with their surroundings can result in social isolation or greater emotional dependence on their abusers. Without a broad and strong support network, seniors in these situations may be reluctant to report abuse by family members or friends.

Although incidents of elder abuse often occur behind closed doors, it is essential that all Albertans realize elder abuse is not a private matter. Elder abuse is everyone's business, and we all need to work together to prevent and address it.

<sup>4</sup> *An Environmental Scan of Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults in Canada: What's Working and Why.* Report prepared for the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Committee of Officials (Seniors), September 2003.



Seniors from immigrant communities may also be more financially dependent on family members, as they may lack savings or a source of income. This combined with a lack of familiarity or fear of the Canadian justice system can create additional obstacles when it comes to seniors reporting abuse. Additionally, seniors who are recent immigrants or refugees may incorrectly believe they will be deported, institutionalized or punished for disclosing abuse.


Aboriginal communities also face unique concerns related to elder abuse. This holds true not only for seniors who live in rural and remote Aboriginal communities, but also for those living in urban settings. Given the growth rates and increasing urbanization of Aboriginal populations, there is a need to ensure that the unique perspectives of Aboriginal peoples are reflected in the policies and programs aimed at preventing and addressing elder abuse.

■ *Elder abuse is often a hidden and tragic secret.*

Although incidents of elder abuse often occur behind closed doors, it is essential that all Albertans realize **elder abuse is not a private matter**. Elder abuse is everyone's business, and we all need to work together to prevent and address it.

Elder abuse is any action or inaction by self or others that jeopardizes the health or well-being of any older adult and is divided into six categories: physical, neglect, emotional, financial, sexual, and medication. It may include the infliction of physical injury, restraint, financial exploitation, threats, ridicule, insult or humiliation, forced isolation (physical or social), or forced change in living arrangements. It may also include neglect, that is, the refusal or failure to care for the older person whether intentional or unintentional. This could include abandonment, withholding or not providing food, healthcare, companionship or assistance.

— *Adapted From the Alberta Elder Abuse Awareness Network website*



The complex nature of elder abuse means that no single organization can address the challenge alone. Preventing and addressing elder abuse requires broad engagement and collective action on the part of all sectors of our communities — including all levels of government, the private and non-profit sectors, communities, families and individuals.


*Addressing Elder Abuse in Alberta* sets out a strategy for this collective action, to help prevent and address elder abuse in Alberta.



## BUILDING ON OUR WORK

The Government of Alberta currently works in collaboration with other government and community partners to facilitate the safety and security of seniors through a number of mechanisms:

- *Alberta Elder Abuse Awareness Network (AEAAN)* — The AEAAN is a province-wide network of professionals who are working to increase community understanding and awareness of elder abuse. The Government of Alberta is an active member of AEAAN and has also partnered with AEAAN to support the development and dissemination of awareness-building resources that have gained national and international interest and recognition. Informed by a strong group of partners, AEAAN provides Alberta with a unique opportunity to unite policy development and front-line service delivery expertise.
- *Strategy for the Prevention of Family Violence and Bullying* — Elder abuse often occurs within the broader context of family violence and bullying. Initiated in 2004, the Strategy provides for a coordinated provincial response to issues related to family violence and bullying. Nine Alberta government ministries work in partnership to address key priorities, based on a three-year action plan that is updated annually. Developing strategies to address elder abuse is a key priority in the *2009 – 2012 Cross-Ministry Action Plan*, along with other actions aimed at strengthening community-based responses to support victims of family violence.
- *Legislative frameworks* — The governments of Alberta and Canada have enacted considerable legislation to help prevent and address elder abuse. This includes legislation relating to personal and financial decision-making, such as the *Adult Guardianship and Trusteeship Act*, the *Personal Directives Act* and the *Powers of Attorney Act* and legislation designed to protect and safeguard persons under the care of others, such as the *Mental Health Act* and the *Protection for Persons in Care Act*. In addition, the *Protection Against Family Violence Act* provides for the protection and support of victims of family violence, including elder abuse. The federal government's *Criminal Code of Canada* addresses criminal aspects of elder abuse.
- *Intergovernmental collaboration* — The Government of Alberta works with other governments throughout Canada to examine shared issues of importance relating to the safety, security and health of seniors. Under the



direction of the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors, an interjurisdictional working group has led a number of projects aimed at preventing and reducing elder abuse in Canada, including the development and distribution of education and awareness materials; sponsoring pan-Canadian forums on elder abuse and financial abuse; and supporting research on the associated social and economic costs.

- *Social services in communities* — The Alberta government provides funding to many community agencies and organizations that provide services and supports to seniors, including those related to emergency shelter, counselling and home supports. Much of this funding is provided through the Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) program to support community-based, preventive social programming. FCSS is an 80 per cent to 20 per cent funding partnership between the Government of Alberta and municipalities or Métis Settlements. The Alberta government also supports a wide range of programs and services in Alberta communities that help residents adopt and maintain healthy lifestyles and strengthen their capacity to deal with crisis situations.
- *Aging Population Policy Framework* — Alberta's new *Aging Population Policy Framework* provides an opportunity for the Alberta government to encourage collaborative and integrated approaches in a variety of related policy areas, including elder abuse. One aim of the Framework is to improve the alignment and coordination of policies, programs and supports for seniors amongst ministries that provide direct and indirect services and supports to Alberta's seniors. A number of the Framework's key policy directions are focused on elder abuse including: increasing public and service provider awareness and prevention efforts; enhancing community capacity to respond to abuse; encouraging Albertans to undertake advanced planning through a variety of mechanisms; promoting awareness of the new provincial *Adult Guardianship and Trusteeship Act*; and supporting family and community caregivers who assist seniors.
- *Addressing Elder Abuse in Alberta* builds on the Government of Alberta's work to date. It also takes into account input provided by older Albertans who have been directly impacted by elder abuse, service providers involved in responding to and supporting victims of elder abuse, health professionals, law enforcement personnel, social workers, and other individuals regularly involved in providing services, support and care to seniors.



Input was provided by these key stakeholders during community sessions held in Grande Prairie, Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat. Participants shared their perspectives on how to best prevent and respond to elder abuse and also provided input about:

- services and supports that are currently provided in Alberta communities to prevent and respond to elder abuse;
- opportunities to enhance collective efforts in preventing, reducing and addressing elder abuse; and
- ways in which governments, communities and individuals can work together to enhance efforts and protect older adults from abuse, fraud and neglect.

Participants described the need for better understanding, at the community level, about the issue of elder abuse and its devastating impact. They also emphasized that Albertans require a better understanding of how to identify elder abuse and where to turn for assistance. Additionally, they articulated the need for service providers to receive consistent training and to have well-coordinated community-based services with the capacity to support victims of elder abuse.

Most of all, participants called for a shared recognition that elder abuse can happen to any senior in any setting — whether they are in a care facility, in the care of family members, or living in their own home. Alberta’s approach must reflect that regardless of where it occurs, elder abuse is wrong and will not be tolerated.



# ADDRESSING ELDER ABUSE IN ALBERTA

## VISION AND PRINCIPLES

*Addressing Elder Abuse in Alberta* is structured around the following vision:


**Alberta seniors are free from abuse and neglect.**

The Strategy is designed to support associated directions and outcomes under Alberta's *Aging Population Policy Framework* including:

- *Safety and Security* — Alberta seniors are supported in maintaining optimum independence in decisions about their lives and are free from abuse.
- *Access to Government* — Alberta seniors are able to easily access Alberta government programs, services and supports.
- *Supportive Communities* — Alberta seniors are engaged as full and welcome participants in their communities.
- *Healthy Aging and Health Care* — Alberta seniors are supported in maintaining optimum health as they age.

The goals and actions in the Strategy are based on principles that have been adapted from the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors' *National Framework on Aging* and articulated in *The Seniors Policy Handbook*. The principles are also consistent with those underlying Alberta's *Aging Population Policy Framework*. They include:

- *Dignity* — Everyone has the right to be treated with respect, regardless of their age and situation.
- *Independence* — Seniors value their independence. They value being in control of their lives, making their own decisions and doing as much for themselves as circumstances permit.
- *Participation* — Seniors value getting involved, staying active and taking part in their community. They value being consulted and having their views considered.

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- *Fairness* — All Canadians are entitled to fair and equal treatment and to equitable access to available services and resources. Discrimination on the basis of age is never acceptable.
  - *Security* — Seniors value many types of security — the financial security that comes from having an income adequate for their daily needs; the physical security afforded by safe, pleasant living conditions in communities where crime is not a worry; and the comfort and personal security that comes from access to family, friends and a network of support.

These principles will form the basis of collective action to address elder abuse.

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES


Preventing and addressing elder abuse is a shared responsibility and requires engagement and action on the part of all sectors of society including governments, the private and non-profit sectors, communities, families and individuals.

Knowledge is a powerful tool in preventing and reducing elder abuse. It is important that all Albertans are aware of and sensitive to the issue of elder abuse and report suspected cases of abuse to the authorities.

By understanding the nature and scope of elder abuse, seniors and their family members can take proactive steps to help prevent situations where it could occur. For example, by utilizing available decision-making tools such as a power of attorney, Albertans can help to protect their financial and property interests. Being well-informed also enables individuals and families to identify and report instances of abuse and to seek appropriate assistance when needed.

Front-line staff working in the public, private and non-profit sectors who have frequent contact with seniors also need to be knowledgeable about elder abuse and have the required skills and competencies to serve seniors in safe, caring and dignified ways. The provision of appropriate knowledge and training can support service providers in:

Preventing and addressing elder abuse is a shared responsibility and requires engagement and action on the part of all sectors of society including governments, the private and non-profit sectors, communities, families and individuals.



raising public awareness of elder abuse; preventing instances of elder abuse from occurring; and developing appropriate responses to disclosures and incidences of abuse. Health professionals, for example, are often best positioned to identify situations of physical, sexual or emotional abuse, and can connect an abused senior with the services and supports they may require. Individuals providing financial services are also well-positioned to recognize signs of financial abuse among their senior clients and provide appropriate counsel.

*Addressing Elder Abuse in Alberta* recognizes that responses to elder abuse are best created at the community level. Communities are in an ideal position to identify their specific needs and circumstances and respond to them appropriately. Municipal governments, as a key funder of community-based programs and services, have an important role in facilitating and supporting the ability of local organizations to develop and implement creative, coordinated and productive approaches to preventing and addressing elder abuse.


The role of the Government of Alberta is to **support and facilitate these community-led efforts**, through provincially coordinated policies, strategies and resources. The Government of Alberta can exercise leadership in raising awareness about elder abuse and setting broad policy direction to prevent, address and respond to elder abuse. The Alberta government can also foster coordinated community leadership by helping bring together key stakeholders in Alberta communities, and by supporting education and training that helps build local capacity to take collective and integrated action.

*Addressing Elder Abuse in Alberta* recognizes that responses to elder abuse are best created at the community level. Communities are in an ideal position to identify their specific needs and circumstances and respond to them appropriately.

## A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

*Addressing Elder Abuse in Alberta* outlines four key goals and associated outcomes:

- *Improved awareness* — All Albertans are aware of elder abuse, including financial abuse, and are aware of how to prevent it, how to identify it, and where to go for assistance.

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- *Skilled service providers* — Alberta’s service providers and caregivers have the knowledge and skills needed to effectively serve and support seniors and to help prevent, identify and address elder abuse appropriately.
  - *Coordinated community responses* — Alberta communities have the capacity to work with other partners to provide coordinated supports that prevent and respond to elder abuse, including effective intervention resources.
  - *Protective laws and policies* — Albertans have access to legal tools and other mechanisms that help protect seniors from abuse and fraud, effectively address situations of elder abuse, and uphold the rights of seniors.

Achieving these goals and outcomes will help reduce elder abuse in Alberta and better support individuals impacted by elder abuse. The result will be stronger Alberta communities that help foster seniors’ independence and facilitate their safety and security.



# GOALS AND ACTIONS

## GOAL ONE

### Improved Awareness

*All Albertans are aware of elder abuse, including financial abuse, and are aware of how to prevent it, how to identify it, and where to go for assistance.*

Preventing and reducing elder abuse starts with knowledge. All Albertans need to be aware of the factors that contribute to elder abuse, how to recognize it and where to go for assistance if it happens. Existing stereotypes of seniors as frail, weak and dependent can cloud understanding of the issue. In some cases, cultural differences can also contribute to challenges in recognizing elder abuse. To improve awareness, all of Alberta's communities, including Aboriginal and immigrant communities, must be engaged to ensure awareness raising tools and resources reflect and resonate with diverse populations.

Increasing awareness can also help health professionals, service providers, family members, neighbours or friends to better prevent, identify and report abuse. This is especially important in the context of seniors who are at risk of or experiencing elder abuse, but who may be reluctant to seek assistance or may not have the knowledge or capacity to seek assistance on their own. The observations of individual Albertans can make a crucial difference in keeping Alberta seniors free from abuse and helping those who are being victimized.

An important component of preventing and reducing elder abuse also includes facilitating age-friendly attitudes and environments in our communities which foster respect, appreciation and inclusion of seniors.

### Actions We Will Take

- Identify and address gaps in knowledge and resource materials to address elder abuse, including identification and prevention by working closely with community partners.
- Work with community partners to develop and implement province-wide, multi-pronged public awareness campaigns, to better inform seniors and all Albertans about elder abuse, including financial abuse.

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- Collaborate with community partners to facilitate the development of a central repository of materials and resources to assist community-led awareness and prevention initiatives and programming.
  - Work with community partners to develop and share culturally-appropriate and relevant awareness materials and resources concerning elder abuse, including financial abuse.
  - Facilitate the gathering, analysis, and sharing of evidence-based research regarding elder abuse prevention with service providers and community stakeholders.
  - Facilitate sharing of best practices, resources and materials between governments, community-based organizations and service providers.
  - Work with community partners to connect with formal and informal seniors' networks to raise awareness about elder abuse.
  - Partner with appropriate organizations, including schools, to foster a culture of respect, appreciation and inclusion of seniors amongst Albertans of all ages.

## GOAL TWO

### Skilled Service Providers

*Alberta's service providers and caregivers have the knowledge and skills needed to effectively serve and support seniors and to help prevent, identify and address elder abuse appropriately.*

Health professionals, social service professionals, and staff and volunteers of non-profit and voluntary sector organizations often have the most frequent contact with Alberta seniors. Many other Albertans, working in various capacities, also have regular contact with seniors. This includes those working in the private sector, such as bank tellers, financial advisors, barbers and hairstylists, customer service personnel in grocery and retail stores, and staff and owners of local businesses.

For some seniors, service providers may be the only regular contacts they have outside of family members. As such, these individuals are often uniquely positioned to identify and respond to suspected instances of elder abuse, and in some cases, to help prevent it from occurring. Health professionals, for instance, may




be in an optimum position to identify signs of elder abuse and to help victims obtain assistance.

Service providers require the right training, skills, competencies and resources in order to take proactive action to help seniors avoid elder abuse and to assist those who may be experiencing it by connecting them with effective supports and services. The provision of appropriate education and training opportunities is an important way to achieve this.

Alberta's informal caregivers will also need to acquire necessary knowledge, skills and competencies to provide care to seniors. It is expected that the number of family and other informal caregivers will increase significantly as Alberta's population ages. Empowering family and other informal caregivers with appropriate education and counselling, as outlined in Alberta's *Continuing Care Strategy*, will help support them in managing their responsibilities.

### Actions We Will Take

- Work with community partners to support the delivery of cross-sector training on elder abuse prevention and intervention for service providers and key stakeholders that is aligned with the *Strategy for the Prevention of Family Violence and Bullying's Cross-Ministry Action Plan*.
- Explore mechanisms, such as distance learning, to enhance the availability of training about elder abuse prevention and intervention amongst service providers in rural and remote Alberta communities by collaborating with community partners.
- Work with community partners to support the development and sharing of training resources for service providers (e.g. social service professionals, financial services personnel, seniors housing providers, etc.) who can help identify and respond to elder abuse.
- Partner with appropriate organizations to facilitate the development of a repository of culturally-appropriate training resources to build knowledge and skills about elder abuse prevention and intervention amongst service providers in Alberta communities, including those with a significant proportion of Aboriginal and immigrant residents.
- Work with appropriate partners to provide health care workers and professionals in government-funded settings (e.g. hospitals, long-term care



facilities, home care settings, etc.) with the appropriate knowledge and training to help prevent, identify and respond to elder abuse.

- Collaborate with municipal governments and police agencies to support the inclusion of training for law enforcement personnel on the identification, assessment, and appropriate responses to situations of non-criminal elder abuse.
- Support informal training and networking opportunities for community partners, such as regular conferences and workshops to enhance and sustain knowledge, skills and competencies in the area of elder abuse.
- Support education, skills training and counselling programs for caregivers to help support them in managing their responsibilities and avoiding burn-out, consistent with Alberta's *Continuing Care Strategy*.

## GOAL THREE


### Coordinated Community Responses

*Alberta communities have the capacity to work with other partners to provide coordinated supports that prevent and respond to elder abuse, including effective intervention resources.*

Effective community-led efforts that prevent and respond to elder abuse are those that help foster and maintain collaborative partnerships among key community organizations and service providers. These relationships are critical to supporting coordinated and integrated actions focused on preventing, identifying and responding to instances of elder abuse.

Successful community-led efforts also involve client-centered approaches, such as the use of skilled assessment and case management. These approaches recognize that individuals and families impacted by elder abuse are unique individuals with unique circumstances. They work to connect individuals and families with the necessary services and supports to address their specific situation.

Community-led efforts would also benefit from policies and protocols for managing elder abuse situations that are “non-criminal” in nature. An example of this situation is where a senior is pressured by a family member to provide money in order to continue to have a relationship with this family member. Although such situations are serious, they cannot be addressed under the *Criminal Code of Canada*. The Government of Alberta has a role in facilitating research on possible options and best practices to support community partners facing these situations.



Providing appropriate and responsive community-based supports and services to informal caregivers is also of key importance. As outlined in Alberta's *Continuing Care Strategy*, support and respite care services can help caregivers effectively cope with the stresses and challenges that can accompany caregiving, which can, in turn, help prevent and reduce the risk of elder abuse.

Research has shown that seniors who are living on a low-income, have a disability, or have a health issue, including an addiction or mental health challenge, may be at a higher risk of elder abuse. These seniors may also have a limited support network and in some cases, could be experiencing relationship challenges with the abuser or other circumstances that contribute to the abuse. In certain situations, a senior may need to leave his or her home and familiar surroundings and seek emergency shelter and supports.

In collaboration, the Government of Alberta, municipalities, and local non-profit and voluntary sector organizations, including those serving Aboriginal communities and immigrant communities, offer a variety of services and supports to help seniors avoid abuse, to stop abuse from occurring, and to restore seniors' safety, security and stability if they have experienced abuse. These services and supports may include counselling, dispute resolution, legal aid, crisis response, health services, shelter services, safe and affordable housing, or financial assistance.


To be efficient and effective in preventing and addressing elder abuse, it is important that these services and supports are delivered in well-coordinated and integrated ways. By developing and implementing coordinated response models, rooted in collaborative partnerships, communities can leverage the knowledge, services and expertise of multiple agencies and individuals.

### Actions We Will Take

- Support mechanisms to collect information and data on elder abuse in Alberta, including financial abuse, to support policy and planning activities at provincial and community levels.
- Support and encourage the development and implementation of coordinated community response models<sup>5</sup> across Alberta, which are sensitive to unique geographic and cultural perspectives, including those of Aboriginal and immigrant communities.

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<sup>5</sup> Coordinated community response models will assist organizations in developing and supporting comprehensive responses to elder abuse, which are rooted in best practices associated with: prevention, skilled assessment, case management and the development of partnerships.

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- Through the adoption of a housing first philosophy,<sup>6</sup> work with community partners to appropriately link provincially funded affordable housing programs and other supports and services to assist victims of elder abuse.
  - Develop and support a systematic approach for funding seniors' shelters in Calgary and Edmonton (Kerby Rotary House and Seniors Association of Greater Edmonton Safe House).
  - Work with community partners to gather and share research regarding effective practices and protocols for intervention in non-criminal cases of elder abuse, including situations of financial abuse.
  - Support the expansion of resources and supports for family caregivers, consistent with Alberta's *Continuing Care Strategy*.
  - Support the review of research regarding caregiver issues and risk factors in relation to elder abuse, and explore evidence-based strategies for mitigating these risks.

## GOAL FOUR

### Protective Laws And Policies


*Albertans have access to legal tools and other mechanisms that help protect seniors from abuse and fraud, effectively address situations of elder abuse, and uphold the rights of seniors.*


There are currently a number of legislative frameworks in place, provincially and federally, that contribute to preventing and responding to various forms of elder abuse. These include:

- *Protection Against Family Violence Act* — This Act provides protection and assistance to victims of family violence and enables victims to obtain protection orders against perpetrators of violence. The legislation also provides law enforcement personnel with legal tools to search for and assist individuals who may have been victims of family violence. The Act was amended in November 2006 to protect vulnerable individuals, such as seniors, who are being abused by a family member, even in cases where they do not live in the same residence.

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<sup>6</sup> *Plan for Alberta, Ending Homelessness in 10 Years*. Prepared for Housing and Urban Affairs by the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness, October 2008.

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- *Protection for Persons in Care Act* — This legislation promotes the safety and well-being of adult Albertans who receive services from publicly-funded agencies such as hospitals, seniors' lodges or long-term care centres. Under this Act, these agencies are required to protect Albertans from abuse and maintain a reasonable level of safety. This Act also provides for investigation of reports of abuse or safety concerns for adults in these publicly-funded facilities. Recent updates have expanded the scope of publicly-funded facilities covered by the Act. In addition, these updates strengthen the requirements of service providers, and their employees and others, to take additional due diligence to assure the safety of individuals in their care.
  - *Adult Guardianship and Trusteeship Act* — Replacing the 30-year old *Dependent Adults Act*, this new legislation provides additional options and safeguards to protect vulnerable adults who have reduced capacity to make their own decisions. Rather than an “all or nothing” approach to substitute decision-making, the new legislation enables individuals to receive a continuum of decision-making assistance based on their needs, thereby helping them maintain as much autonomy as possible and reducing their exposure to fraud and abuse.
  - *Powers of Attorney Act and Personal Directives Act* — The use of enduring powers of attorney and personal directives help protect individuals from abuse by providing legal mechanisms for substitute decision-making. This can include the management of finances and property or decisions regarding personal care and health care.
  - *Mental Health Act and Public Health Act* — These statutes make a number of provisions to help safeguard and protect the health and well-being of individuals who are in the care of health professionals and Alberta's health care system. These mechanisms include the *Mental Health Patient Advocate*, which is responsible for investigating complaints from or relating to mental health patients and their treatment.
  - *Criminal Code of Canada* — This federal statute sets out a variety of criminal offences that can occur in the context of elder abuse. These include offences against a person, such as physical or sexual assault; offences against the rights of property, such as property theft, forgery and extortion; and other offences such as breach of trust and fraud.



Together, these legislative frameworks offer a number of legal mechanisms to help keep seniors and other Albertans safe and free from abuse. Broadening the public's knowledge about the availability and use of existing legislative frameworks can help prevent incidents of elder abuse, including instances of financial abuse.


As Alberta's population continues to grow older and more diverse, it will be important to regularly review these legislative frameworks to ensure they reflect the changing needs of seniors. For example, seniors are increasingly receiving health care and other services from publicly-funded agencies in community settings, including their homes, as Alberta implements its *Continuing Care Strategy*.

It is also important to note that protective legislation can only go so far in helping prevent elder abuse. Legislation must balance the need to protect Albertans with the need to preserve Albertans' personal autonomy and individual decision-making. For legislation to be successfully enforced, the participation of individuals is often required. For example, the *Criminal Code of Canada* makes physical assault a criminal offence, but successfully prosecuting an assault requires a victim or other witnesses to report the assault and cooperate with authorities. Alberta's *Powers of Attorney Act*, meanwhile, offers a legal mechanism to help Albertans protect their finances and personal property, but for the Act to offer effective protection, an individual must take the initiative to create a power of attorney.

Legislation forms only part of the toolkit that Alberta communities have at their disposal to prevent and address elder abuse. Alternative remedies are also important, recognizing that some seniors are reluctant to make use of legal mechanisms in situations involving family members. Examples of alternative remedies include counselling, mediation services and restorative justice; all of which can play an effective and valuable role in preventing and addressing instances of elder abuse, including situations of financial abuse.

There is also a need to examine ways of reducing barriers to information sharing among community partners who are working to assist seniors at risk of or experiencing elder abuse. While the protection of privacy of individuals and families must be preserved, it is important that these privacy provisions do not act as a barrier to timely and effective assistance for Alberta seniors.

There are also a number of barriers relating to federal privacy legislation and their application to federally-regulated financial institutions (such as national banks). This presents an opportunity to work with the federal government to examine ways of



enabling these institutions to identify and respond to suspected cases of financial abuse, while respecting the privacy of individual seniors and their families.

### Actions We Will Take

- Work with appropriate community partners to provide and enhance opportunities for service providers to learn about the legal tools and mechanisms available to help prevent, respond to and reduce elder abuse.
- Work with appropriate community partners to enhance public knowledge and awareness about civil remedies that are available to individuals and families impacted by elder abuse.
- Ensure that issues related to elder abuse are considered when new legislation is proposed or amended that relates to seniors' safety and security.
- Work with community partners to develop protocols for police involvement in elder abuse cases that do not proceed to criminal charges.
- Examine ways of reducing barriers to information sharing among service providers to better assist individuals and families impacted by or at risk of elder abuse, while protecting the privacy of clients.
- Work with the federal government to examine ways of enabling federally-regulated financial institutions to help prevent, identify and respond to instances of financial abuse among their clients.
- Work with appropriate community partners to support the dissemination of best practices in elder law amongst members of the legal profession.



## WORKING TOGETHER TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS

*Addressing Elder Abuse in Alberta* lays the foundation for how the Government of Alberta will work with all sectors to prevent and reduce the incidence of elder abuse over the long term.

The actions identified in the Strategy will be implemented in coordination with ongoing initiatives regarding the safety and security of seniors. These include the Government of Alberta's cross-ministerial efforts under the *Strategy for the Prevention of Family Violence and Bullying* and the *Aging Population Policy Framework*. The Strategy will also build on existing initiatives being undertaken with other government and community partners.

Effectively implementing the Strategy's actions will also involve ongoing collaboration with Alberta's network of dedicated and caring community-based organizations that are committed to serving and protecting Alberta's seniors.

Most importantly, the awareness and engagement of Albertans will lie at the core of our success. It will take collective action on the part of all citizens to help keep seniors free from abuse; to support them in maintaining optimum independence, dignity and security; and to ensure the province's communities remain open, friendly and engaging places for seniors to live.

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