



Older Battered Women: Providing Shelter and Services

Presented by Linda A. Osmundson
Executive Director, CASA

Serving older battered women is challenging for many reasons. Shelter is a difficult place at best for young women. For older women it is noisy and so many children are create high stress. Top bunks are impossible and a lack of privacy makes older women uncomfortable.

Most shelter services are generally geared towards younger women. Available referrals for housing and jobs are not useful and shelter workers are less familiar with low-income housing options especially designed for seniors. Younger women in support groups may dominate and talk about issues that are of relatively low interest to older women. They may use language or discuss sexual matters that make an older woman uncomfortable. Some older women lack trust in younger women who are advocates.

Health issues take on a new dimension. Medical insurance is in the abuser's name. She may have special dietary requirements the shelter is not prepared to meet. She may be taking many different medications that are expensive and difficult for the shelter to replace. She may have failing eyesight or poor hearing causing her to feel confused. The abuser may manipulate her due to her disability. Transportation becomes a big issue. She may not be able to negotiate a bus easily and empowerment model shelter advocates may not understand her reluctance to use public transportation. She may need a caretaker or she is a caretaker for her partner. Separating out guilt and anxiety around caretaking is challenging.

Her income is wrapped up in the abuser's retirement package. She may be reluctant to abandon a paid-for home where she has lived for many years. If home making has been her identity she is stressed and worried about what the abuser may do to her comfortable abode if she is not home to protect her investment.

Family members, including adult children, may not be supportive. They deny the abuse they witnessed as children and expect their parent to remain in the relationship. This becomes further complicated if she is his caregiver. The children may not want to take over this responsibility, even to keep their mother safe. Sometimes the children live far away, especially in Florida. Adult children have their own children and families. She may have little or no support system outside family because her friends are no longer living or have moved to small apartments without a spare bedroom. Long-time pets that have been a support and comfort over the years are not able to come to shelter with her. She misses her pet and worries about it.

General understanding about domestic violence is limited because it was a private matter and not discussed when she was a young adult. Dating violence becomes an issue with the elderly during a second relationship after she becomes a widow.

Lethality in the forms of suicide and homicide may be significantly higher risks. Murder-suicides are often seen as suicide pacts even though research indicates that the woman did not agree to being killed.

This is a description of some of the many challenges that older women face when they decide to leave their abusive partners. Domestic violence centers need to invent better solutions to serve older women. As the baby boomer population continues to age, we will inevitably see older women in our programs. This workshop is activist based and will be participatory in discussing ways to serve older women that are sensitive and effective. ###

Linda A. Osmundson is the Executive Director of CASA (Community Action Stops Abuse), PO Box 414, St. Petersburg, FL 33731. Telephone: 727-895-4912; Fax 727-821-0171; e-mail:

losmunds@casa-stpete.org; www.casa-stpete.org

The following list has been compiled by Loree Cook-Daniels (consultant with the National Center on Elder Abuse) and Bonnie Brandl. More information can be found on the National Electronic Network on Violence Against Women (VAWnet), a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.

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