

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 2

Consultation with Indigenous Elders

A joint initiative with the Law Society of New South Wales

7 March 2016

*Inquiry into Elder
Abuse in NSW*



Elder abuse inquiry – Indigenous consultation

On 7 March 2016 the General Purpose Standing Committee No 2 conducted a consultation with Aboriginal Elders as part of the inquiry into elder abuse. The consultation was a joint initiative with the Law Society of New South Wales's Indigenous Issues Committee.

The discussion was facilitated by Mr Rick Welsh and Ms Bobbi Murray, members of the Indigenous Issues Committee. Counsellors from Link-Up were also present to provide support to participants, if required. 30 participants attended the consultation which was held at the Law Society's premises in Phillip Street.

Key themes and messages

Participants identified the forms of elder abuse they have seen or experienced in Indigenous communities including financial, psychological, emotional and physical abuse, as well as neglect. Some participants suggested that the experience of elder abuse might be different for Aboriginal people.

Some participants suggested that the perpetrators may not be aware they are being abusive, particularly in the case of psychological and emotional abuse. Elders also identified a need for better supports for families who have members affected by drugs, alcohol and gambling, and noted that these issues can contribute to elder abuse.

Further, several participants said that among Indigenous Australians issues of elder abuse are linked to a level of community disconnectedness and dysfunction which stems from dispossession and the dismantling of Indigenous communities and culture since the arrival of Europeans in Australia. Participants told the committee that political and societal disenfranchisement among Aboriginal people means that you 'keep your family close'. Therefore when elder abuse situations occur in the family, there is a lot of shame and secrecy around the abuse.

Ageist attitudes and lack of respect for older Aboriginal people among younger Aboriginal people

Several elders stated that ageist attitudes are common among Indigenous youth in their communities. They said that they have experienced openly rude and disrespectful behaviour, which they found demeaning and offensive. This contrasted sharply with the way many of the participants were raised to respect their Elders and older Aboriginal people. A number of matters were raised by participants who said that:

- Indigenous Elders attain their status because they are considered to be teachers and leaders in their communities.
- When participants were young they were taught to respect older people in their communities. Age and life experience were esteemed. Younger people now do not value age and experience, which manifests in disrespectful attitudes and actions, and sometimes leads to elder abuse within families.

- There is a disconnection between Indigenous youth and their Elders which some participants attribute to the dismantling of Indigenous culture and dispossession. Opportunities to connect, teach and learn between older and younger Aboriginal people that existed as part of the fabric of traditional Indigenous culture are not being fostered in society today, and it is difficult both for Elders and young people to find their place and their value in an urban environment.
- Young Aboriginal people see that Elders are not respected by government and therefore see no reason why they should respect them either. Many identified addressing the issue of elder abuse to be integral to rebuilding communities and Aboriginal culture.
- Elders need to be empowered to act and support their own communities and government must play a key role in providing support.

Financial abuse

Financial abuse was identified as often being linked to other forms of abuse, particularly emotional and psychological abuse. Several participants identified that an often unacknowledged consequence of financial abuse is when older Aboriginal people are subjected to other forms of deprivation, resulting in emotional and physical suffering or neglect, when monetary resources are drained by relatives and they are forced to go without.

Participants raised a number of issues including that:

Grandparents caring for grandchildren

- A key issue is grandparents caring for grandchildren, particularly where their parents are affected by alcoholism, drug addiction or mental health issues. Gambling can also be connected to elder abuse. Gambling was described as being an invisible addiction, easily hidden but a motivator to access money.
- In many cases grandparents are expected to care for their grandchildren but are unable to access financial assistance because the parents are collecting Centrelink payments. Without proof of care or custody Centrelink cannot change the payments.
- Grandparents are reluctant to alert authorities such as the Department of Family and Community Services in order to obtain the required evidence of care, because they fear that this will result in the removal of children from their family and community, and this deters them from seeking financial assistance and results in financial hardship and suffering for the older person.

Children and older grandchildren as perpetrators of elder abuse

- Children and grandchildren are often perpetrators of financial abuse and this type of abuse can be linked with emotional and psychological abuse, such as threats to welfare and safety, or threats to withdraw care for the older person where an adult child or grandchild is the carer.
- The traditional culture among older Aboriginal people in sharing resources and caring for their families and communities includes sharing money in an open and informal way, including giving access to bank cards. This generosity is not reciprocated and is often abused by young people who take advantage of their older family members and often

drain accounts leaving older people without money for basic needs. Stand-over tactics to demand money were also identified by participants especially where addiction is an issue.

- One participant who works in home care stated that many of his older Aboriginal clients are too scared to say no to family members asking for or demanding money. Instead they resort to withdrawing all their funds and literally sleep on their money so that when family members take them to ATMs to withdraw money there are no available funds.
- One Elder said that he and his wife were viewed as cash cows by their grandchildren and one of their daughters. Several participants concurred that among younger people in their communities, older people are valued only in so far as they are a source of cash by their family members, and that there is a culture among young people of wanting and expecting hand-outs from older relatives.

Resources/services available

Participants identified that victims of abuse are often too frightened to report it. Others stated that many families are not aware of services that are available to provide support or advice. Participants agreed, however, that Aboriginal communities benefit most from local services that are run by local Aboriginal people, and that access to local services provides community support, helps to prevent against isolation and can be a means of facilitating positive interactions between younger and older people.

Elder Abuse Hotline and Police

In utilising the services of the police and the Elder Abuse Hotline in cases of elder abuse, participants observed that:

- The elder abuse hotline is ineffective because it is not an intervention service. Some participants said that giving callers a referral number is 'pointless' and 'not of value'. Older Aboriginal people will usually only call when they are in a desperate situation and then intervention is needed, not advice.
- An intervention service is urgently needed that is separate from the police because the stigma of needing police assistance, mistrust of police or concern for the perpetrator (usually a child or grandchild) deters older Aboriginal people from seeking police help.
- Conversely, some older people become habitual callers to the police and the police do not act, or are not empowered to act, either because the abuse is not a criminal act or because the older person does not want to proceed with formal charges.
- Shame is a huge barrier to seeking help, even from within one's own community.
- There are deep cultural issues associated with involving authorities in family or community problems.

De-funding of community services

The committee was told that:

- Many Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations that facilitated interaction between Elders or older Aboriginal people and young people have lost government funding.
- The work for the dole scheme fostered positive intergenerational relationships by providing transport and equipment for young people who would visit older people and help them by mowing lawns or other types of maintenance. When the scheme ended,

young people lost their sense of purpose and pride, and without access to equipment and means of transport, no longer visited or assisted elderly family members.

- Aboriginal people are pushed out of service roles. Aboriginal people want to be supported by members of their own communities, not by outsiders.
- There is a disconnect between funding regulations and the types of services that are beneficial to fostering positive relationships between Elders and young people. For example, one Elder used to put on a lunch for older Aboriginal people, and employed young Aboriginal volunteers to cook and serve. It taught them skills, gave them pride and offered an opportunity to speak with Elders and see their Elders being treated with respect.
- Services in rural communities are relocated and become out of reach for many people or require people to move away from family to access them.

Possible recommendations

Participants put forward several potential recommendations to address the issue of elder abuse in Aboriginal communities.

- Establish an intervention service for older Aboriginal people experiencing elder abuse to provide safety and support without the stigma and fear associated with calling the Police or community services.
- Conduct an education campaign to inform the Indigenous community about elder abuse, its forms, how to recognise it, where to get help and to challenge ageist attitudes.
- Empower Aboriginal Elders by including them as a key stakeholder group in the strategic plans of government agencies and local governments.
- Create programs where local Elders could access funding to provide services for their communities and young people.
- Ensure funding regulations are in step with offering services or providing opportunities to rebuild community connections as well as longer funding timeframe for programs.
- Provide healing places for the community on country to heal together.
- Establish a NSW State Aboriginal Elders organisation funded by the NSW Government. The organisation should be a representative body for the Aboriginal Community and an advisory body for the NSW Government, and be responsible for implementing the recommendations identified above.