

By Louise Forster

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COVID-19 coincided with an alarming increase in elder abuse across our nation, with Western Australia unfortunately mirroring the national trend.

Advocare operates the WA Elder Abuse Helpline where older people can seek help, advice and advocacy if they're experiencing or are at risk of abuse. Over the past three years, calls to the Helpline have surged. Financial abuse calls, the most common form, increased by 85 per cent from 2017/18 to 2019/20. Calls about psychological abuse more than doubled. This trend has intensified over the past 12 months with the number of calls continuing to climb.

Elder abuse has been enabled by the pandemic. Risk factors include social isolation, a history of family conflict, and mental and physical disability or illness. Add the effect of lockdowns increasing social isolation, plus financial pressures facing some of the younger generation, and there is a recipe for potential elder abuse.

The calls we receive are just the tip of the iceberg. Elder abuse is underreported and this likelihood of cases remaining hidden is intensified while older people are not able to simply walk into a bank or somewhere they feel safe to report abuse. Spending more time at home with their abuser, they have fewer opportunities to call Advocare's helpline.

Advocare recently received a call from an older gentleman seeking help with a nephew who had lost their job. Unable to pay rent, the nephew had moved in with the uncle in what was supposed to be a temporary arrangement. Soon the nephew was demanding money and refusing to leave. The uncle, who is quite frail, said he had given his nephew thousands of dollars but it was never enough. He said he felt he had a right to say no to handing over more money and to ask his nephew to leave. However, when he did, the nephew refused to go and became so aggressive it made his uncle feel unsafe in his own home. We were able to help through our partnership with Legal Aid WA who supported the uncle to get a restraining order. The nephew has since moved out and the uncle feels safe again. This case is one of many similar ones in WA.

Despite the rise in calls for help with elder abuse, the pandemic has brought with it green shoots of hope by revealing the vulnerability of older people and providing opportunities for others to connect.

During lockdown last year, when visits were not allowed in residential aged care facilities, Advocare received an unprecedented number of calls from younger family members who were prepared to go to great lengths to stay connected with their older relatives. They wanted to know what they had to do – and were prepared to drive hours for a fifteen minute visit on the other side of a fence, get a flu shot, wear protective equipment, whatever it was, they were prepared to do it to show their older loved one they were there and they cared.

At the same time, many young people in lock down at home, met their older neighbours for the first time, realised how isolated they were and offered to help. The pandemic also coincided with an increase in people of all ages stepping up to volunteer for Advocare's Community Visitors Scheme. The scheme connects volunteers with older people who are socially isolated with the aim of improving their quality of life through companionship. Working with volunteers in this way is aligned to Advocare's focus on increasing awareness and understanding of the rights of older Western Australians. We can also reduce harm by providing a trusted point of contact. Our new volunteers range in ages from their early twenties to their eighties, including one gentleman in his eighties who enquired about having a volunteer visit him because he was so lonely, then ended up registering to become a volunteer himself.

So yes, the pandemic has brought out the vulnerability of our older citizens and some of the best and the worst in the younger generation. I'm happy to say the surge in people wanting to volunteer and find other ways to help older people parallels the rise in elder abuse cases. We've also noticed an increase in calls to our helpline from friends, neighbours and carers concerned about the welfare of an older person and wanting to know how to help them.

It is through educating everyone in our community about what elder abuse actually is and that it's wrong, that we can reverse the trend in rising cases. Many young Western Australians are already helping to turn this around, and I thank them.

If you're concerned about elder abuse call the WA Elder Abuse Helpline on 1300 724 679 or to volunteer call (08) 9479 7566.

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