



The National Insurance Institute

Protection of the Elderly in the Rural Sector

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Abstract

Elder abuse has become a recognized social problem and there are growing efforts to study and cope with the problem. In 2003–2004, 12% of the elderly population were victims of some form of violence. In recent years, many programs have been developed to address the problem of elder abuse in Israel and abroad.

State legislation and Israel Land Administration regulations making it possible to transfer/bequeath farmsteads to children, coupled with financial considerations, have resulted in a deep and complex crisis for households in the rural sector and have led to increased elder abuse and neglect by adult offspring. Moreover, the geographical distance between rural localities and the large cities hinders access to services and creates greater dependency on caregivers, which could increase the risk of abuse.

The current study examines a program implemented in the rural sector that is a pioneering attempt to address the problem of elder abuse and neglect in a unique manner. The report summarizes the experience gained in the program implemented from 2004–2006 in two regional councils: Matte Yehuda and Lev Hasharon. The program was funded by the Fund for Demonstration Programs at the National Insurance Institute together with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services.

An evaluation of the program was conducted from 2004–2006 by the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute. The findings are based on an analysis of data from intake forms and evaluation forms completed by the social workers, interviews with participants, professionals working in the program and the community, and observations of the various activities.

The program was implemented on the community, group, and individual levels and it addressed the main dimensions of countering elder abuse: protection, empowerment, and advocacy. The emphasis was on the community level – information and education sessions were arranged in moshavim for elderly and middle-aged persons; meetings were held with program partners; and a group of volunteers responsible for education and information was set up in the moshavim. The group level intervention included a drama group and a support group for women. On the individual level, 102 elderly persons who had been victims of abuse participated in the program.

Similarly to other studies conducted in Israel and abroad, this study reveals that the majority of victims are women, that most victims are over 70, and that they have a high incidence of health problems and poor support networks. In some cases, the abusers are caregivers who are dependent on their parents and live on the same property. Most of the abusers are men and most are the adult offspring and/or spouses of the victim and have financial problems. Twenty-two percent of the participants had experienced physical abuse; 59%, psychological abuse; 45%, financial abuse; 47%, neglect; and 17% had had their rights violated.

We spoke to most of the victims (88%) on the telephone. In 53% of the cases, we spoke to the abuser, and in 23%, to other family members. The agencies involved in the intervention were mainly the health services and welfare officers of the court, who

worked in the shadow of the law and also enforced the law, and day centers that provided support, protection, and follow-up.

At the end of the study (late 2006), the social workers estimated that there had been an improvement in 77% of the cases included in the program, no improvement in 18% of them, and that in 5% there had been a deterioration in the relationships and the manifestations of abuse had become more severe.

In conclusion, it is clear that the program to protect elderly people in the rural sector made a valuable contribution, both on the community level and on the individual level. The program helped to upgrade work processes, to introduce new activities and initiatives, to raise residents' awareness, and to bolster interest on the national level among lawyers, within rural settlement movements, etc.

The pilot programs brought to light several issues that should be considered before the program is implemented nationwide:

- **The role of the program coordinator:** This is a dynamic role that covers a wide range of areas and involves a heavy workload. The ways of coping with the workload and the complex nature of the job include: defining the boundaries of the role and establishing the right balance among its various aspects, increasing the involvement of the other social workers in the department, and structuring work processes. Importantly, there could be a connection between success in meeting the challenges and the background of the coordinators chosen to implement the pilot: experienced social workers and committed welfare officers.
- **Cooperation with agencies in the community:** The program generated greater cooperation among various agencies in the community. In order to strengthen multidisciplinary, multi-system work, it is worth considering setting up a local forum made up of key persons in the moshavim and professionals from different organizations. The forum would help raise awareness of the subject, enhance commitment to addressing it, and would help shape common work patterns.
- **Staff training:** It is very important to give the team of social workers at the social service departments training in abuse and the elderly at the start of the project or before it even begins. Training the staff helps raise awareness about the subject, helps identify and diagnose cases in the social workers' care, provides intervention tools, and inspires the social workers with more confidence to use the tools. Ongoing support and supervision of the social workers (to discuss, consult, and provide moral support) could contribute to professionalization of the use of tools specifically for dealing with abuse.
- **Intervention Tools:**

The information and education sessions arranged at the moshavim were instrumental in the referral of new cases, raised the issue for discussion at home and in the community, and made elderly and middle-aged people think about the problem. It was understood that there was a problem that should be tackled and discussed, that there was someone to consult with, and that help was available. These meetings also helped prevent relationships from deteriorating. It is important to note that the successful organization of activities on the community level requires advance coordination with all relevant parties in order to secure cooperation. It is hard to quantify how far these activities helped identify cases,

since in some cases, a deterioration in domestic relationships was prevented and in some cases, help was sought outside of the program. Moreover, in some cases, the elders' application for services reached the providers a long time after they had already participated in the same community activity.

When the program was established, **mediation** was presented as a potentially suitable tool for dealing with the unique nature of abuse in the rural sector, given the issue of property inheritance. Workshops on the subject of elder abuse were conducted for social workers (multidisciplinary) in the community and they also included the fundamental principles in the language of mediation. However, we did not find extensive use of this tool. The study does not provide enough information to examine the effectiveness of the mediation tool, but if the program implementers are interested in making use of it, it is possible that greater implementation of the tool and more intensive, continuous supervision after the course (practicum) could contribute to increasing the use of mediation.

Support groups/group work. Group therapy helped the participants on several levels: It helped open the subject up and contributed to the participants' growth, improved communications with the family, and led to the identification of new cases and to continued individual therapy at the end of the group activity. The work in the drama group culminated in a theatrical performance, which also helped raise awareness on the community level. The program implementers and members of the support groups have the impression that this is a most effective support and empowerment tool.

Legal advice: As the program progressed, it emerged that there was extensive demand for advice and explanation of the legal procedures and aspects and that these should be given greater emphasis as an essential part of the program. The ways to improve the response to the consumers are: to recruit volunteers to help provide legal advice to the elders; information/education and advice sessions in cooperation with lawyers from the business sector; referral to lawyers specializing in this area and known to the social services and the rural settlement movements, some from the public sector and from nonprofit organizations that provide legal services. However, it may be worth considering how the social services can help the elderly by making legal advice services accessible on the national level.

- **Documentation and reporting tools:** In cases of abuse, in which relationships and situations are by and large dynamic, it is important to strengthen a process of periodical re-examination and assessment in order to check whether the interventions are being effective and to adjust further treatment according to the assessment. Forms should not be completed solely for research purposes; forms are, in fact, part of a systematic, structured work process that is not often implemented.
- **Steering committees:** Given the important role the steering committees played in developing the program, thought should be given to using steering committees of this kind for all new programs, at least in their early stages.