

Follow-Up Questions and Answers

From NCEA Webcast¹:

Media Moxie: Informing the Public About Elder Abuse

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These questions were posed during the April 30, 2009 webcast and have been answered by the webcast presenters. If you would like to contact the presenters, they may be emailed at:

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1. For Tracy or Dan: How important is it to have actual victims tell their own stories (about elder abuse), and what have been your experiences in finding individuals willing to talk?

Dan: It's very important to have actual victims tell their own stories. For this issue, though, that may not always be possible. So I would suggest having a strategy for 1) cases in which victims can tell their own stories and 2) cases in which you rely on family members or others.

Tracy: It is important to have actual victims tell their stories though sometimes court records - if there are any-and others who know the victims well can provide much of the information. Obviously, if a victim suffers from cognitive impairment, I would not do an in-depth interview with him or her because that would be unethical. But I'd want to meet him or her anyway so I could get a better feeling for the subject I'm writing about. That's what I did in the Eifrig case - I went with her lawyer-guardian to the assisted living facility where she lived. And that's what I did when I was writing about the two New York women in their 90s who were ripped off. We didn't talk about the rip-off, just about who they were. Friends and relatives can provide crucial information.

I've found some victims are willing to talk - such as Mary Goulios, the elderly woman who was almost killed by her niece in a bleach attack-but others don't want the publicity. Sometimes they are ashamed at being victimized; others don't want to get a family member in trouble if a relative is the perpetrator.

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2. What about approaching editorial boards and publishers - can this spur interest in coverage?

Dan: Yes...although editorials often follow news coverage, not the other way around. Nevertheless, it is worth contacting the editorial board. You might even try calling first to find out if anyone has a background in writing about this issue.

Tracy: I doubt that would be very fruitful unless the editor or publisher serves on the board of an organization that promotes elder causes. Reporters are the people to be contacted.

Scott: It can't hurt to approach an editorial board. Publishers may or may not be involved in what is covered in their newspapers. And journalists bridle at their interference in the news room.

3. Many reporters are working on a variety of different topics at once, and all on deadline. How do we initiate a relationship with a reporter in order to build trust in the first place?

Dan: Call them in the morning – not late in the day when they are more likely to be on deadline!

If you reach them, introduce yourself briefly. Ask if it's OK to send a brief background piece on this issue – a one-pager is best. Give them a web site address to check out if you can (the website for the National Adult Protective Services Association, or NAPSA, is <http://www.apsnetwork.org>).

Do some research – try to find a reporter who has actually covered elder abuse (or, at least, interpersonal violence) in an effective way.

Adjust your expectations. It may be a matter of weeks or months, not days, before a reporter gets going on a story. Be respectful but persistent.

Tracy: Call a reporter whose work you admire and ask to set up a time to have a coffee or invite her or him to an event that you believe to be newsworthy. When the Meals on Wheels people in RI sent over a press release saying they had 200 people on a waiting list in Rhode Island because of state budget cuts, that caught my attention and resulted in a front-page story.

Scott: It really depends. Some print reporters cover a lot of meetings and you can introduce yourself to them that way. Or, in some cases, they list their e-mails at the ends of articles, so drop them a line and share an opinion, praise or criticism.

4. How do agencies know when a reporter is merely looking for a hot story that will get on page 1 as compared to a balanced thorough story that helps people understand the problem? What are the signs?

Dan: Is the reporter being rude? Does the reporter make time to talk to all sides? Is the reporter asking the right questions – i.e., background about the individual or family, information about this issue....I think you'll know the difference because to really "get" this story requires a lot of in-depth work. You'll know if someone is taking that extra step.

Tracy: The length of an interview, whether the reporter actually listens to what you are saying, asks for additional sources of information and genuinely seems interested in the subject matter. There is nothing wrong with a hot page-one story. The question is whether the reporter is fair, balanced and brings context to the piece. These are not quick and easy stories to report.

Scott: That's really difficult to fathom and even the pros in media relations sometimes get burned. But, if there is a crisis and you know that there is one, that's a hint that they might be pursuing what "really" happened. Best advice is to have your antennae up when talking to a journalist and follow the steps we suggested in terms of sticking to your messages.

5. What is the difference between covering elder abuse stories in nursing homes vs in the community?

Tracy: Elder abuse in nursing homes seems, at least in Rhode Island, more often result in criminal prosecution or other governmental scrutiny. Elder abuse within the home is often not reported and rarely results in a successful criminal prosecution. In both forums, however, there are issues of libel to be considered. If the police don't prosecute and there are no official documents to confirm the abuse, we can't publish stories about it.

Scott: The journalist knows that nursing homes are not popular and easy to attack. The same is not true of family abuse. They have to tread lightly because of libel laws and such. However, if it is news from the court docket or from a court case, they can write what they see and hear.

6. Could you provide some idea or examples of effective ways to package/pitch elder abuse to the media?

Dan: See answers to question #3. I would also add points about growing number of elderly in the community, lack of funding for elder abuse services....and, if you can document this, the growing number of elder abuse cases in your community or county.

Tracy: Elder Fact Books That Contain Statistics - both on a state and national level - are really helpful as are handouts with web site addresses where useful information can be found. There's a senior coalition here in Rhode Island that puts out a great book jammed with elder statistics every year. One of the hot stories right now-one that will hopefully get more reporters to cover elder issues -is the criminal trial of Brooke Astor's son. That is certainly shining a light on elder exploitation, dementia and guardianship abuse.

You're apt to get more coverage of elder issues if there is a high percentage of elderly in a newspaper's area of circulation.

Scott: An example would be a case of someone whose case is not being followed or taken care of. Journalists are interested in something that has not been covered.

7. What if your staff doesn't care to cooperate with the media?

Dan: It's common for staff working with vulnerable populations to hesitate when it comes to cooperating on these stories. I would suggest bringing up the issue before you go the media –

explaining why media coverage can benefit families, the community and the agency. It can really boost public awareness. All of that said, agencies should also know why staff might not want to cooperate.

Tracy: If APS workers don't tell reporters what they are finding out in the field, the public won't know. You don't have to always be on-the-record to give reporters story tips. We want to shine a light on what's happening in the community you serve, not get you fired.

Scott: Rely on a single spokesperson. Staff should be kept informed if there is a crisis about what's going on, for example, but they should not talk to the media unless management gives them permission.

8. APS budgets in many states have been decimated...many jobs eliminated. This slows down the investigation process and puts the emphasis on prevention methods. How do we get media to write about community workshops for seniors to help educate and identify ways in which they can protect themselves? This isn't as "sexy" as reporting actual situations.

Dan: Good point. But it's a good side story, the "what you can do" piece that can go well with the investigative story.

Tracy: Community weeklies might be more apt to cover these workshops. Unless an elder victim is there speaking, you probably won't get many reporters to cover these forums.

Scott: You may find that getting into a community calendar is the best you can do. If you invite a city councilman, a state legislator or someone like that, it might up your chances.

9. I'm considering contacting a radio talk show (already know they address critical issues such as domestic violence, sexual assault, etc) which has national reach. Who do suggest to make an initial contact to initiate possible coverage for World Elder Abuse Day, June 15th? Local station? Or email via the website for the talk show?

Dan: I would try the personal route first. Try to get someone on the phone who can provide information (someone who has authority at the station). Try reaching a local station first, and asking them if they have any national contacts.

Plus, make sure you can provide media with contact information (and a sentence or two of background) about a range of sources – people with your agency, families (if possible), other agencies that address this issue.

A week or two after you send that info, follow up with another phone call or email to see if they need anything else.

10. Many APS workers are not allowed to talk to media. Do any of you have any advice or recommendations for these people?

Dan: Make sure you at least have information available for media....and that you can refer them to others in the community (i.e., agencies that work on this issue, etc.). Maybe someone from another agency can be a good spokesperson on this issue.

Tracy: Meet with a reporter on background, not for attribution after hours. A reporter might then go to someone who is authorized to speak as part of researching the story.

Scott: They should work with the spokesperson who does have permission to get their stories straight!

11. I think we need more than stories. Stories without analysis and commentary can confuse the public. We need to expose the problems and root cause of the problems. Comments? Advice?

Dan: If you can provide background on any/all of the following, that could help:

- How this issue is tied to financial need (i.e., does your data show most cases are related to poverty or hardship?)
- Availability of mental health services in the community;
- Data on violence in the community related to elder abuse;
- Information on services (or lack of services) for elders in the community...

...and so on. If you can find public data that backs up your claims, that can help. Plus: Try to identify a reliable source who can speak about these issues (for example, if there is an increase in poverty-related crime in the community, find someone who can speak about that).

Tracy: Good stories provide context so the reader will understand elder abuse and exploitation. I did on-line chats with experts - including a geriatric psychiatrist, a geriatric social worker, police officer and elder law expert to supplement my stories.

12. We need to explain what elder abuse is and get the definition of abuse out in the media. Many people do not even know what is considered abuse. If financial exploitation abuse? Is it abuse regardless of who does it? When should you report abuse? Do today's presenters find this to be true?

Dan: When you get information about this issue to the media, make sure that explaining what elder abuse is a priority...and that it's easy for the media to understand. A straightforward one-pager should answer key questions.....just make sure that staff at your agency are in agreement about key points.

Tracy: Financial exploitation is a form of elder abuse. Some people with cognitive impairment don't even know when they are being abused. The media needs to be educated on what constitutes abuse. However, unless we have APS records, or there's a guardianship, criminal

prosecution or other court proceeding where there is paperwork to confirm the abuse, we really can't report it.

Scott: That's probably true. It's a lot like senior housing or assisted living that journalists call nursing homes even though they're not. A workshop for local journalists that teaches them about the topic area is often effective or a glossary of terms you can get sponsored and shared with the media.

13. One concern we have is when news stories misrepresent the dynamics of domestic violence and sexual abuse in elder populations because of deeply held myths and misconceptions, not only among the general public and media but also lack of training among elder services. (Do the presenters have any comments or advice on how to deal with this?)

Dan: Develop trust with media members you are working with....to the point where you can explore this kind of question. Whether pitching a member of the media, asking different staff to be involved as you talk to the media, or developing specific pieces of information, make sure at least a couple people check it for thoroughness and consistency.

Tracy: You need to reach out to reporters and try to correct misconceptions. Have you ever thought about having a domestic violence media seminar where advocates for the elderly, prosecutors and social workers can talk about these things with reporters and reporters can ask you questions?

Scott: If it has been misinterpreted, let the writer/reporter know either by contacting them directly or by sending a letter to the editor or the station or the blogger.

14. What about sending primers to the editors and news desks with basic background and list of resources, potential resources?

Dan: That's a good idea, but I would make sure you do a couple of other things at the same time. Reach out to these people at the same time – call and/or email them. Ask them to meet with you. You might have great information, but go the extra step by letting them know who you are.

Tracy: Great idea!

Scott: Good idea