



Select Committee Inquiry into Elder Abuse—  
Carers WA Submission

November 2017

**AN AUSTRALIA THAT VALUES AND SUPPORTS ALL CARERS**

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## ABOUT CARERS WA

Carers WA is the peak body representing the needs and interests of carers in Western Australia and is part of a national network of Carers Associations. Carers provide unpaid care and support to family members and friends who have disability, mental illness, a chronic condition, terminal illness, an alcohol or other drug issue or who are frail aged. The person they care for may be a parent, partner, sibling, child, relative, friend or neighbour. Illness and disability are non-discriminatory and the caring role can be borne by any individual at any given time, regardless of socioeconomic status, age or location. Caring is a significant form of unpaid work in the community and is integral to the maintenance of our aged, disability, health, mental health, and palliative care systems. A report undertaken by Deloitte, Access Economics, 'The economic value of unpaid care in Australia in 2015', determined the replacement value of the care undertaken by carers in Australia to cost \$60.3 billion per annum.

Some important facts about carers include:

- There are 2.7 million unpaid carers in Australia. More than 856,000 carers are primary carers.
- There are more than 320,000 family and friends in a caring role in Western Australia or approximately 1 in 8 in the community.

## ENQUIRIES

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Carers WA welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Legislative Council committee on Elder Abuse. Carers WA will address items (h), (i) and (j) of the committee terms of reference. Carers WA wishes to confine its comments to the impact of elder abuse on carers and ensuring adequate information is available to educate carers on the various forms of elder abuse.

## Terms of reference

The Legislative Council ordered that a select committee be established to inquire into elder abuse with particular reference to:

- (a) determine an appropriate definition of elder abuse;
- (b) identify its prevalence;
- (c) identify the forms of elder abuse, including but not limited to neglect;
- (d) identify the risk factors;
- (e) assess and review the legislative and policy frameworks;
- (f) assess and review service delivery and agency responses;
- (g) the capacity of the Western Australia Police to identify and respond to allegations of elder abuse;
- (h) identify initiatives to empower older persons to better protect themselves from risks of elder abuse as they age;
- (i) consider new proposals or initiatives which may enhance existing strategies for safeguarding older persons who may be vulnerable to abuse; and
- (j) consider any other relevant matter.

## Executive Summary

We have focussed on family and friend carers of older people as per our charter as a peak body for carers. We have not focussed on paid care workers or volunteers. This distinction is important because loose references to carers who perpetrate elder abuse, particularly in the media, often fail to distinguish between different groups of people who provide care, leading to skewed representations of family and friend carers.

It should also be noted that not all relationships between an older person and a family member or friend constitute a care relationship. Under the Carers Recognition Act 2004 and a carer is defined as someone who provides unpaid care and support to family members and friends who have disability, mental illness, a chronic health condition, or who are frail aged. This may also include terminal illness and alcohol or other drug issues. This role is unpaid and ongoing and accordingly, not all relatives and friends perpetrating abuse can be considered carers. Please note that being in receipt of a Carer Payment or Carer Allowance from Centrelink is not considered being 'paid' to provide care.

In addition, carers can themselves experience abuse from the person they care for.

Carers WA recommends strengthening support and assistance for carers to reduce their levels of stress as well as the provision of more affordable and timely training and advice on what constitutes abuse and how to prevent or deal with it.

## Introduction

The Alliance for the Prevention of Elder Abuse: Western Australia (APEAWA) defines elder abuse as any act which causes harm to an older person and occurs within an informal relationship of trust, such as family or friends. This can include:

- financial or material abuse
- emotional or psychological abuse
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Social Abuse
- Neglect

Research shows an increasing incidence of elder abuse in Western Australia with an estimate of approximately 12,500 victims of some form of elder abuse in WA in 2011, estimated to almost double by 2031.<sup>1</sup>

## Carers and elder abuse

The extent to which carers are perpetrators of abuse is not clear from the research. Similarly statistics on carers who are abused by the person they care for are difficult to find.

In the 2016 submission to the Australian Law Reform Commission, Carers Australia concluded that “the causes of elder abuse are wide-ranging and are highly contextual to individual circumstances. Moving away from the perception of carers as potential or actual perpetrators of abuse, and identifying the abuser as a distinct category, is more productive in addressing and preventing elder abuse.”<sup>2</sup>

A Carers Queensland survey of 571 carers found that 26% did not feel safe in their caring role and reported being abused.<sup>3</sup> Carers Australia conclude that carers who are abused continue to care for their abuser for a number of reasons: there may be no alternative care;

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<sup>1</sup> “Examination of the extent of elder abuse in Western Australia: A qualitative and quantitative investigation of existing agency policy, service responses and recorded data” M, Clare, B, Black Blundell, J, Clare, APEAWA website, <http://apeawa.advocare.org.au/publications/>, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> “Carers Australia Submission to the Australian Law Reform Commission; Elder abuse and Commonwealth Laws”, Carers Australia website, <http://www.carersaustralia.com.au/storage/carers-australia-elder-abuse-inquiry-submission-august-2016.pdf>, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> “Quality of Life Survey”, Carers Queensland, 2015, <http://carersqld.asn.au/11309-2>, accessed 15 November 2017.

they may be concerned for the wellbeing of the person they care for; and they may experience stress around seeking services to intervene.<sup>4</sup>

## **Initiatives to empower older persons to better protect themselves from risks of elder abuse as they age**

In order to empower older people, including carers and the people they care for, to better protect themselves from the risks of elder abuse the following initiatives are suggested.

### **Capacity Building**

Further funding in emotional support, peer support, planning assistance and counselling would build carer capacity. This support would assist carers to identify issues and stressors specific to their circumstances and reduce the stress of their caring responsibilities. Increased funding for these supports would reduce one risk factor which may lead to abuse within the caring relationship.

### **Financial Literacy**

A carer who is assisting an older person with income and assets may have low levels of financial literacy and struggle with the complexities of laws and systems guiding these activities. Carers in this position require specialist advice and training on financial duty of care and legal responsibilities. This advice should be timely and affordable.

### **Resources and general education**

Programs should be developed to educate carers on elder abuse. Carers ACT have developed resources including posters and brochures to raise awareness and safeguard carers and care recipients from the risk of elder abuse. These resources can be found at <http://www.carersact.org.au/resources>.

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<sup>4</sup> "Carers Australia Submission to the Australian Law Reform Commission; Elder abuse and Commonwealth Laws", Carers Australia website, <http://www.carersaustralia.com.au/storage/carers-australia-elder-abuse-inquiry-submission-august-2016.pdf>, p. 7.