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Gray Matters: We must do better

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June is Elder Abuse Prevention Month and an opportunity to think about elder abuse as a social justice issue.

When we consider elder abuse as strictly an individual problem or family affair, we fail to see how societal structures and systems create a world ripe for abuse. Getting old is seen as the sole qualification for being a victim, just as victims of sexual violence are assumed to have done something to “deserve” it. We must do better.

When our communities place older people at higher risk of abuse, we are not living up to our ideals and the American principle that “all people are created equal.” We are, in essence, saying that elders don’t have the same right as everyone else to be engaged as full participants in society. We must do better.

We need policies that connect people to communities at all stages of life. Our current policies increase social isolation and put older people at greater risk of neglect and abuse. Abuse and neglect means all people are not truly equal. We must do better.

Without equality, we blame individuals for problems that are really systemic in nature.

- She needed too much care.
- He is difficult to deal with.
- She was too greedy.
- He was on drugs.
- He’s just lazy and won’t get a job.
- Caregiving is a burden.

There are causes of abuse and neglect that go beyond individual behaviors and characteristics. Whenever we blame the individuals involved, we give our social systems and structures a free pass. We make the issue a personal problem, to address privately, if at all. This creates social injustice. We must do better.

Society is like a building: It needs strong supports and secure beams. We need solid “social” beams so that we can all participate fully in our communities as we age, free from abuse.

Like a house, social structures need interconnected, securely joined and frequently maintained support beams set up to prevent and immediately address elder abuse. Strong systems and an integrated team of professionals can prevent elder abuse. Services like health care, public transportation, volunteer services, community centers and law enforcement are important support beams in our social structure.

Family members cannot be entirely responsible for preventing elder abuse. One beam alone cannot support a strong building; likewise, individuals can’t single-handedly prevent abuse. We need a broader social structure to support families and others who care about and for older adults. We must do better.

Government, private businesses, community leaders and social organizations must take elder abuse prevention seriously. An individual beam is important, but a strong building needs a lot of strong beams. If one beam is weak or missing, the structure won’t stand.

With the proper support, older people will have more opportunities to stay connected. But if the beams are missing or weak, older people will likely experience social isolation. Abuse may go unnoticed and the older adult won’t be connected to needed support and services. We must do better.

For example, safe and reliable public transportation reduces social isolation and helps prevent elder abuse. When public transportation is easily accessible, older people can get to places like grocery stores, community centers and doctors’ offices. When older people can access these resources, we’re able to socialize with people, run errands and get the services we need. This is what justice looks like.

Services offered by senior centers, Area 1 Agency on Aging, Redwood Caregiver Resource Center, Redwood Coast Village, government programs and others connect older people and help us participate in community life. We must build an even stronger social structure around older people to reduce social isolation and overcome elder abuse and neglect.

We must do better. Let's recommit to our national promise of justice for all.

For more information, go to www.frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/elderabuse.

Maggie Kraft is the executive director of the Area 1 Agency on Aging.

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