

**Title:** Elder support and relationship service

**Aim:** This proposal seeks funding to support the community sector to prevent, reduce and respond to elder abuse.

**Rationale:**

Demographic, health and social issues across Australia have resulted in population ageing and increasingly complex family structures. Despite the ACT having a relatively younger age profile than many other capital cities, Canberra is expected to similarly continue population ageing with those aged 65 years and over estimated to increase from 11 per cent of the population in 2012 to 22.5 per cent in 2062.

At the international level, the estimated prevalence rates of elder abuse in high- or middle-income countries ranged from 2% to 14%, with financial and emotional abuse the most common (WHO, 2015). Including neglect could add as much as 20% to the level of abuse among women in older age groups (Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health, 2014). The most common perpetrator of elder abuse is a family member, most often an adult son or daughter.

At the core of many cases of elder abuse is family dysfunction and complex social issues. Ageing can contribute to poor family relationships and increase the risk of elder abuse in a number of ways. While in Australia the existing formal health and welfare systems provide a range of services for older Australians, older people with care requirements are still predominantly looked after by their families. Longer life expectancies and/or extended ageing-related illness may mean that the care phase lasts for a prolonged period, causing mental, physical and financial burden on older people, care-givers and extended family (Mitnick, 2010). Ageing can lead to increased vulnerability and isolation of the older person, rendering elders more vulnerable to exploitation for psychological, emotional and physical reasons, and it also means that abusive behaviour is less likely to be discovered due to the absence of social and other networks around the older person (AIFS, 2016).

The ACT has the highest rate of divorce of any capital city, with increasing rates of re-partnering, blended families and stepfamilies. These trends in family formation also provide the context in which family disputes can arise as parents and stepparents age, particularly when decisions need to be made about assets, inheritance and end of life care.

The development of relationship based services to respond to elder abuse is embryonic when compared to overseas jurisdictions, such as Ireland and Canada, where holistic, alternative dispute resolution and restorative services are emerging as an effective response to elder abuse. These services contrast with legal processes that can be expensive, burdensome on tribunals and courts, and circumvent the service's ability and the family's willingness to come to their own agreement. They provide an alternative to older people who may wish to preserve their relationship with their adult child on whom they may also rely for ongoing care, and who are unlikely to seek legal remedies due to guilt, shame and fear. These services can improve the safety of 'at-risk' elders and their families through safety planning for older people and building the capacity of family members to monitor risk.

**Proposal:**

The funding would support a relationship service that would aim to reduce the risk and prevalence of family violence occurring at older ages, including elder abuse through the earliest possible support. Funding would provide for a holistic, innovative and flexible face to face service (including outreach for clients with mobility issues and to nursing homes) that would flexibly respond to the presenting needs of individuals and families through a 'no wrong door' approach. It would provide advocacy, case coordination, information, support and referral to specialist support services and legal advice, counselling, facilitated family meetings (mediation), and/or education.

The service would ensure the voice of the older person was heard, and support families to make decisions around medical, health, financial or living arrangements that protect the interests, rights and safety of all family members. The service would be aimed at prevention and early intervention to mitigate the risks of violence associated with increased, ageing-related vulnerability, but could respond to crisis where necessary.

People can attend the service on their own, with their partner or extended family. Family members would be supported by qualified mediators, psychologists and social workers who have received specialist training in ageing related issues and law. The service would operate with an affordable and flexible charging policy so cost is not a barrier to engagement and participation.

**Evidence:**

The service would build upon the evidence collected during a twelve month trial of an elder relationship service conducted in six sites across Australia by Relationships Australia between 1 January and 31 December 2016<sup>1</sup>. The trial included the establishment of an unfunded site at Relationships Australia Canberra and Region (RACR) in Deakin, ACT.

During the trial period services were provided to 79 families that included 140 clients. The ages of clients ranged from 34 to 92 years, with 65% of clients identifying as female and 35% male. Almost half (48%) of the clients were older people, and 30% were the adult daughters and 18% were the adult sons of the older people. Ten per cent of clients were experiencing a physical disability and 5% a psychiatric disability. Although the service was aimed at prevention and early intervention, one-quarter of clients were currently experiencing violence, most commonly financial abuse and/or emotional abuse.

Pre-service and post-service assessments confirmed the Program had a positive impact on family functioning, and the communication skills, behaviour and safety of family members. Almost all clients (84%) were satisfied with the services they received. A substantial majority of clients agreed that as a result of attending the service they are better able to deal with the issues that they sought help with. More than 60% of clients reported they are better able to avoid legal pathways in solving their problems, and just under 80% of clients felt their wishes were heard and understood.

The establishment of an ongoing service in the ACT would build upon evaluation findings that would maximise outcomes for clients, including greater emphasis on holistic and therapeutic approaches, supporting clients between sessions and facilitating family meetings with both a counsellor and

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<sup>1</sup> The full evaluation report is available on request.

mediator working in partnership. The service would also explore strategies for innovative ways of increasing engagement with resistant family members, including personal phone calls to disengaged family members rather than correspondence, face-to-face outreach at local offices for elders and distant family members, and involving influential family members to broker contact with disengaged family members.

Key to the success of the service would be stakeholder relationships. While some stakeholder engagement was undertaken during the pilot period, in the establishment period substantial effort would be expended on increasing awareness of the service for potential referring and receiving organisations.

**Funding:**

The service would leverage on the existing infrastructure of RACR and utilise the existing service outlet. This site has been well-known and regarded for providing family and relationship services over the past 54 years. The site would also benefit from the existing skills, supervision and policies of RACR.

The target population would be people with an ageing related family issue (family violence, inheritance disputes, end of life disputes and planning, grief and loss, family reunification and estrangement) and their families.

The service would be staffed by 0.6 FTE for a Counsellor, 0.6 FTE for a mediator and 0.5FTE for a Team Leader. The team leader would be responsible for building external stakeholder relationships and for promoting the service to target populations and services that this population are engaged with such as GP's, hospital social workers, aged care services, carers organisations, veterans associations, Alzheimers Australia, mental health services, not for profits organisations and violence and abuse services.

This would require funding of \$248,000 per annum with a budget set out below.

Wages including oncosts 1.2 FTE service delivery 0.5 Team Leader	\$172,770	
Supervision, professional development & training	\$3,000	
Equipment (computers, phones.)	\$7,500	
Corporate/management fee covering ICT, building	\$64,730	This covers rent, phone & internet charges, HR, payroll, research
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$248,000</b>	

**Case study (Relationships Australia Elder Relationship Service, December 2016)**

*A mother lent a son a large portion of her retirement savings for his business venture. There was an understanding by both parties that the money would be paid back.*

*The mother had factored in that the son mostly owned his own home but the son had re-mortgaged his home and had not let on that he was in a precarious financial position.*

*10 years have passed and the son has not repaid the mother and she has been unable to retire. The son felt that the money, and his obligation to re-pay the loan, should simply be forgotten about. The son had not expressed gratitude for the loan, nor shown any remorse at being unable to repay it.*

*The mother's presenting issues included emotional distress over what she perceived to be her son's betrayal of her good will. The negative affect on the parents' financial situation and conflict over whether legal action should be taken was also causing problems in the parent's relationship. Her legal claim was clear and undeniable, but her husband (the son's father) did not wish to pursue the son for the money. They both bore each other's sorrow for their diminished lifestyle in their hard-earned retirement. They also shared a sense of regret that they have been unable to give equally to all of their children, and anger that their son had taken advantage of them.*

*Outcomes from a facilitated family meeting:*

- *an acknowledgment from the son that he understands the issues and is grateful and wanting to do his best to rectify the situation;*
- *partial repayment of the loan at a rate that the son and his family can afford; and*
- *referral of the mother for counselling support.*