

Opening the door:

New York City adult protective services workers learn to gain the trust of elder abuse victims

Change AGENTS Initiative

The John A. Hartford Foundation's Change AGENTS Initiative was a three-year effort dedicated to improving the health of older Americans, their families, and their communities through practice change. The initiative harnessed the collective strengths, resources, and expertise of the foundation's interprofessional community of scholars, clinicians, and health system leaders. The Change AGENTS Initiative was managed by The Gerontological Society of America.

The 34 projects funded through the Action Awards grants program showcased the improvements that interprofessional teams can bring to light by implementing evidence-based programs into targeted care settings in local environments.

These one-year grants for up to \$10,000 were available to interprofessional teams led by Change AGENTS for the purpose of achieving meaningful change to practice or policy that will improve the health and wellbeing of older adults and/or their families.



About one in ten Americans over the age of 60 is at risk of elder abuse. With unprecedented growth in the number of Americans in that age group, the number of victims of elder abuse is expected to continue growing as well.

Abuse can take many forms, including physical, sexual, psychological, and financial. Neglect is also a form of abuse. Not all forms of abuse leave visible marks, and victims of abuse may be unwilling or unable to report the problem—thus, abuse can be difficult to identify.

“Research shows that if you establish a strong connection, a strong therapeutic alliance, that your client is more likely to feel comfortable, to disclose and to continue doing the work,” said Caroline Gelman, PhD, LCSW, an associate professor at Hunter College’s Silberman School of Social Work in New York City. Through a 2015 Hartford Change AGENTS Action Award, Gelman, Geoff Rogers, and colleagues from Silberman and from Hunter’s Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging devised a program to train adult protective services workers to form the types of alliances needed for elders to disclose abuse.

“Giving them these specific skills, every time they make contact with someone, they’re increasing the likelihood that the person will disclose,” she said.

Administered by The Gerontological Society of America, the Hartford Change AGENTS Initiative accelerated sustained practice change to improve the health of older Americans, their families, and communities. The initiative harnessed the collective strengths, resources, and expertise of the John A. Hartford Foundation’s interprofessional community of scholars, clinicians, and health system leaders so they could learn from and support one another while they adopted, evaluated, and sustained changes in practice and service delivery. The Change AGENTS Action Awards grants program

was designed to support Change AGENTS in implementing promising ideas in practice change.

The Situation

Elder abuse is not easy to detect. Injuries that physical abuse might inflict can be attributed to clumsiness or disability. Other forms of abuse may leave no physical signs. Elders who are capable of reporting abuse may resist doing so.

“There are many reasons older adults would be afraid to disclose. Unfortunately, in the vast majority of cases, the person who is abusing them is somebody known to them and close to them, somebody that they depend on,” said Gelman. “It’s often a caregiver, who may have threatened them.”

Older adults might worry that the perpetrator, who could be a relative, would be charged with a crime. They could also be concerned about being taken from their home.

In other cases, victims of abuse do not have the mental faculties to advocate for themselves and report the problem.

For these reasons, the onus is on social services to identify abuse and an appropriate course of action. However, the training that adult protective services (APS) workers receive is not necessarily aligned with the skills they need once they enter the home of a suspected victim. Gelman’s prior research and focus groups with APS workers in New York City had revealed that workers often felt they were not getting the supervision or the skills training they needed to do their job. They were trained in legal rights and protocols but not in relationship building.

The Solution

Building on their prior research findings and APS workers’ expressed needs, Gelman, Rogers, and colleagues devised a 1-day, 8-hour interactive training for New York City APS workers. *Opening the Door to Engagement: A Training for Practicing Attuned Adult Protective Services Work* teaches APS workers not only how to get inside the door of an alleged victim’s home but also how to get victims to open up to them.

“The engagement piece is so important,” said Donna Cooper, director of the APS Office of Policy, Procedures, and Training. “There are services that we have to provide, but if you have clients that are not even open enough to tell you their needs, how are we able to address those needs?”

In the training, workers practice communication skills and strategies to help them engage and connect with alleged victims and alleged abusers. There is always the possibility, Gelman said, that social services can work with alleged abusers and help change their behavior. “That’s more likely in keeping with what the older adults themselves prefer: to stay in their own home, to stay under the care of this person they’re dependent on, and for that person not to be abusive.”

After participants watch trainers model client engagement, they read and analyze a transcript of an APS worker visit, critique a video of an actual visit, and role-play simulated home visits.

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“They learn that every single thing you do from your first contact to getting inside to whether you sit down when they ask you to sit down, that all of that is going to move the needle toward allowing the person to feel safe in telling you if, in fact, something’s going on.”

The program aims to teach APS workers what to do before they get to the door, once they are at the door, and after they are in the door, as well as how to exit.

How the Change AGENTS Action Award improved outcome

The Hartford Change AGENTS Action Award afforded Gelman and Rogers the time to create the training, allowed them to hire a trainer to administer the program, and made it possible for them to provide meals for trainees. Gelman believes the investment and attention that the project put into APS workers will reap their own rewards.

“We found anecdotally in our pilot project that was funded through the Change AGENTS Initiative that there’s inherent value in making the workers feel supported and feel that people are investing in their professional development.”

Upon completion of the pilot program, Gelman and Rogers presented their research at the 27th annual meeting of the National Adult Protective Services Association. After seeing their presentation, a representative from Texas APS invited Gelman and Rogers to come to Texas and train the entire staff throughout the state.