

# Stakeholders gather to tackle senior abuse and neglect in communities

By Northeast News Staff

DAWSON CREEK – Stakeholders from around the region gathered in Dawson Creek on June 28 for a discussion on how to address elder abuse and neglect in their communities.

The conversation was facilitated by officials from the BC Association of Community Response Networks (BCACRN), an organization engaged in a project to help build the capacity of local agencies and groups to provide a coordinated response to cases of abuse or neglect.

“Our ultimate goal is to have more Community Response Networks (CRNs) in B.C.,” said executive director Sherry Baker, adding that capacity in the North, including First Nations communities, have been diminished over the past several years.

Baker said it is estimated 10 per cent of older adults are victims of abuse, neglect or self-neglect based on documented cases, though the undocumented cases could be much higher.

“It’s a tough topic to talk about, to swallow your pride and say it has happened to you,” added Heather Archer, a regional mentor for the organization. “A lot of people keep it covered up and try to work their way through it by themselves, or just learn to live with it because they are afraid of the consequences of taking any kind of action.”

They said those forms of abuse are not just physical, but financial, emotional and psychological as well. They can be perpetrated by a caregiver, family member or even a complete stranger. Baker added self-neglect can include situations where a person is unable or unwilling to care for themselves, engage in lifestyles or behaviours that put them at greater risk, such as the behaviour of hoarding.

“How people are being abused keeps changing, too,” said Archer. “We didn’t have email and internet-related abuse, and we didn’t have the telephone scams a number of years ago. As other things change in our society, some of these abusers get more creative.”

She said while there is legislation that allows for intervention in cases of abuse or neglect, the key is really prevention and early-intervention. She added there is a great opportunity with all the work around anti-bullying campaigns in schools to carry those notions of care and respect of other people into adulthood.

“We’re really fostering the idea that community looks out for community,” she said. “We need to get back to that old-fashioned neighbour supporting neighbour. To not being intrusive, but eyes and ears open and offering help and assistance when you see somebody is in need of that and respecting their decision as to when they take you up on that.”

The Northern Health Authority has the responsibility under the Adult Guardian Act to receive and respond to reports of abuse, neglect or self-neglect of vulnerable adults.

Jillian Rille, a community geriatric social worker with the health authority in Fort St. John, said she provides many services to seniors, including responding to cases of physical, emotional, financial and even sexual abuse. She said financial abuse can be especially difficult to intervene in because it can involve making a judgment

call about a person’s intent.

“Sometimes it hard to determine if that person made a clear choice or not, or if they were coerced into making that choice,” she said.

She said each situation can be quite different, and the client has to accept the help in order for her to intervene.

Muriel Stanley, support and education coordinator in the Peace Region for the Alzheimer Society of B.C., said seniors living with dementias will have greater vulnerabilities in some areas. For example, she said it’s hard for people with dementias to understand complexities and even remember actions they’ve taken in the past, making it easier for an abuser to manipulate them. She added symptoms like suspicion and paranoia are common in Alzheimer’s patients and it can be difficult to separate fact from fiction in cases of abuse, but that is why support workers will always investigate complaints they receive.

Judi McGowan was responsible for coordinating

the workshop and said her interest is in seeing seniors get the support they need.

“They’re our elders, the ones who built our country and I think it’s really important we take extra-good care of them.”

She added she was impressed by the turnout and the ideas that were presented by stakeholders and is hopeful a local CRN will form so stakeholders can continue to share information.



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