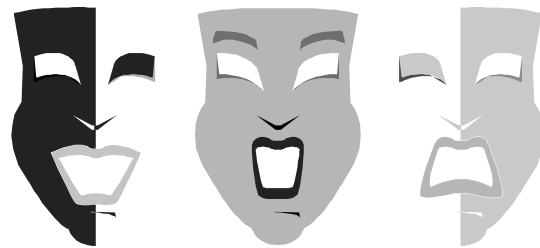


Domestic Violence Across the Lifespan of African Americans:



Elders

Elder Abuse/Elder Maltreatment Among African Americans

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Why Study Elder Maltreatment?

Aging issues are being viewed with increasing interest because by the year 2000, nearly one-half of the population in the United States will be over 50 years of age (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984). Additionally, on October 1, 1998, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala officially declared 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons. Shalala noted, "In the year 2000, older people will outnumber children for the first time in our history" (Associated Press, 1998).

Moreover, the Administration on Aging (AoA) and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) (1998) report the following:

[The] older population itself is getting older. In 1997, the 65-74 age group (18.5 million) was 8 times larger than in 1990, but the 75-84 group (11.7 million) was 16 times larger, and the 85+ group (3.9 million) was 31 times larger.

Simply put, the older population is growing, today's aged are living longer, and those who are middle-aged will live longer once they become elderly (AoA & AARP, 1998).

At the same time, medical advances, protective aging legislation, economic concerns, and mobility all have changed the appearance of helping networks, as has the advent of the smaller nuclear family. Smaller families have meant that fewer people must share responsibility for more dependent older persons. This has created a strain on the natural support system. The strain, in combination with large numbers of elders, may be factors that have predisposed some to become abusive with older men and women.

Elder maltreatment has been an unfortunate manifestation of aging in American society. According to a recent survey from the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) (1998), at least one-half million older persons in domestic settings were abused and/or neglected, or experienced self neglect during 1996. Moreover, for every single reported incident of elder abuse, neglect, or self-neglect, approximately five go unreported.

States' definitions of elder abuse differ. For the purposes of this discussion, elder abuse is defined as caregiver behavior directed toward an aged person that can either be an act of commission (abuse) or omission (neglect) and can be either physical or mental acts, which are demonstrable, causally linked, and determined to be sufficient to warrant intervention. The

National Elder Abuse Incidence Study (1998) identifies seven types of elder abuse: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, neglect, abandonment, financial or material exploitation, and self-neglect.

Elder Maltreatment and African Americans

Traditional literature about elder maltreatment has centered on the majority culture's definition and experiences with abuse and neglect and surmises that the same conditions exist among minority populations. The very definitions used in elder maltreatment are very problematic within minority communities—especially within the African American community.

Based on reported cases of maltreatment, researchers have described an abused elder as 75 or older, lower-middle class, widowed, White female with confusion or severe physical impairment who resides with an adult relative (Kosberg, 1988). The perpetrator, according to the recent National Elder Abuse Incidence Study, is a middle-aged adult male relative who resides in the same home as the impaired elder.

Little attention has been given in the literature to the role of cultural diversity and cultural interpretation in the definition of, assessment of, or intervention in elderly maltreatment. For example, African American elder abuse settings look markedly different from that suggested in literature. Researchers long ago confirmed the existence of the African American multi-generational family. Harper and Alexander (1990) and Hill (1971) stated that Black older people frequently live in multi-generational families, but they are more likely to have their children come live with them in their homes than live in the homes of their children. Those moving in with the elders include:

- (1) daughters who are single, divorced, widowed, or separated and their children;
- (2) the aged person's children and their spouses;
- (3) grandchildren or other relatives, such as nephews, nieces, cousins, and younger siblings; and
- (4) other familial configurations (Harper & Alexander, 1990). Examples of "other familial configurations" included kin and non-kin families.

But, an even deeper concern exists about available literature. Few studies have involved the elderly themselves in addressing the classification nuances of elder maltreatment, preferring instead to leave the task to professionals (Valentine & Cash, 1986). Even fewer studies have sufficiently involved older African Americans. Elder abuse studies that included African Americans as a part of the samples have not involved sufficient numbers of African American elders and have not explored the qualitative details of African American life or this population's elderly. Indeed, there is a growing problem.

Despite the paucity of studies on the subject, qualitative research about elder maltreatment in African American communities has been conducted. Study data were obtained from extensive interviews conducted over the past 4 years with African American victims and perpetrators. From this study emerged 10 interrelated and complex themes regarding elder maltreatment in African American communities (Griffin, 1999).

Theme 1: Physically abusing elders is particularly unacceptable among African Americans.

Unique to African Americans is the historical existence of the strong matriarch, who has been given much credit for preserving the African American family on very little money or while very often maintaining employment outside the home. The struggles of the “mother who keeps things going” have caused intense feelings of loyalty and protectiveness toward her from Black children. It is not uncommon for youngsters and even adult children to experience feelings of extreme anger in response to taunts or accusations about their mothers. But, “I’d never hurt momma” and “you just don’t hit your momma,” were heard again and again during data collection. Elders and suspected perpetrators alike denied physically abusive behavior, which was particularly unacceptable to all parties.

Recognizing that physical abuse is socially undesirable, it was difficult to discern whether there really was no physical maltreatment or if both victims and perpetrators were simply unwilling to acknowledge it. It was also difficult to assess if the caregiver was physically abusive, but denies it due to awareness of community sanctions—ostracism, ridicule, or shame—against such behavior. Similar fears of community reprisals and pity could cause African American elders to deny incidents of physical maltreatment. If this finding is confirmed in later studies, what then are the implications for definitions or categories of elder maltreatment in African American communities?

Theme 2: There is a relationship between social conditioning and abusive behavior among African Americans.

Historically, African Americans have been acted upon violently through racism, either personally or institutionally. Such violent social influences may predispose some African Americans to behave violently. When examining the etiology of African American family abuse, the societal experiences of some African Americans who abuse may be likened to those victims of abuse, who, in turn, become abusers themselves (Steinmetz, 1978, 1988). It has been suggested that when victims become abusers, they have undergone a social learning experience that occurs as a result of victimization.

Neglect and financial abuse were the most prevalent types of elder maltreatment in African American communities (Griffin, 1994). Black children have historically experienced poverty. Many grew up seeing adult family members rely on elders for home and food. According to the ideas of social learning theory, these youngsters have a higher chance of being dependent on their elders for survival when they become adults.

Theme 3: Poverty is pervasive in African American elder maltreatment situations.

Poverty fosters frustration and anger about one’s circumstances, increasing the potential for violence and abuse. Poverty is a recurring factor in research about African Americans, as this population remains disproportionately poor and excluded from the middle class (AARP, 1987). The question is one of whether there is more exploitation of resources or if exploitation is more prevalent than physical abuse because of the economic status of African Americans.

Theme 4: African American perpetrators of elder abuse may be adults involved in dependent, mutually beneficial relationships with elders. These relationships may involve emotional maltreatment of the adult children in the form of “encouraged” infantilism.

The existence of the Black multi-generational family has been well documented. As compared to their White counterparts, African American older people are more likely to have their children come live with them in their homes (Harper & Alexander, 1990). White elderly victims more often may live with their children in the children’s homes (Myers & Shelton, 1987).

Some researchers support the hypothesis that the stress of caring for elders is directly related to elder maltreatment, but others propose the reverse hypothesis. That is, the risk factor is not the dependence of the victim; but instead, it is the dependence of the perpetrator.

There is a type of symbiotic or mutually beneficial relationship that can be found in African American communities. The elders seem to have an understanding, an unwritten contract, with an adult child/grandchild to provide financial support and housing in return for the younger person’s continued presence in the home. This is especially evident in situations where the older person has never lived alone and may fear doing so. To an observer, it appears that one child, usually a “weak” or “flawed” one, has been “kept at home” while his/her siblings were encouraged to become independent and succeed. Hence, the alcoholic or “sickly” adult child who resides with the parent is “protected out of necessity.” This represents “protection from being alone” for the parent and protection from homelessness and destitution for the adult child. Consider the adult protective service worker who investigates the financial exploitation charged against a son by neighbors. The mother denies that any abuse occurs. She adamantly reminds anyone who will listen that she knows the child “borrows” money from her, but she does not mind. She thinks the “few dollars” are a small price to pay for the child’s continued presence in her home.

Less frequently acknowledged is the power relationship, with the older person in control. If one builds on the adage, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem,” retaining an adult child at home does not encourage emotional independence and maturity. Instead, it covertly maintains dependence and encourages social and economic infantilism by not requiring self-sufficiency in certain adult children.

Theme 5: Non-traditional “family” constellations are common among African Americans.

African American families frequently exhibit “other family configurations” or families composed of kin and non-kin members. Tradition and societal influences may predispose African Americans to arrange their familial interactions differently than do Whites. Kin and non-kin families exist, and elderly relatives, or in many cases non-relatives, have reared thousands of children. Kin and non-kin families have historically been a major source of cohesiveness among Black families. The same practice exists today. In the early 1970s, half the African American families headed by women 65 and older included children who resided with them but were not born of the older women (Hill & Shackelford, 1975).

Theme 6: Elderly maltreatment victims are geographically isolated from services, medical care, family members, etc.

An important ingredient in remedying the problem of elder maltreatment is increasing the services available to help primary caregivers. Getting services into and accepted by minority communities have posed problems. Some researchers (Krischef & Yoelin, 1981) suggest that many African Americans are uneasy and unsure about support offered from the traditional public or private agencies and choose to use family resources. However, Carlton-LaNey (1991) suggests that elderly African Americans underuse available services because:

- (1) they are not aware of the variety of services;
- (2) they are not involved in the planning or implementation of services;
- (3) they are powerless in the political arena out of which decisions and programs come; and
- (4) they have feelings of alienation that dissuade participation.

There is some question of whether African Americans only feel comfortable utilizing informal support networks. The greater truth may be that African Americans rely more on family because of the historic absence of formal community services.

The enormity of the task of providing services should not cause program planners to avoid making attempts to address the needs. Avoidance is an all too common tactic used by professionals who simply do not know where to begin.

Theme 7: African Americans are particularly resistant to institutional help.

The level of resistance to help should not be an implicit signal that maltreatment is occurring. Clients mistrust institutions and fear inappropriate handling by social service agencies intended to provide assistance. Where perceived institutional abuse is a factor, the cure may appear worse than the disease to a client.

Theme 8: Minimalization/neutralization behavior is identifiable in both African American victims and perpetrators of elder maltreatment.

Tomita (1990) notes the tendency for victims and perpetrators to minimize or rationalize away what is happening to them. Denial and/or resistance may be psychological defense mechanisms that both victims and perpetrators use to protect their emotional selves. Consider the situation of an elder female and a spousal abuser. She may think, "I chose him, so what does that say about me?" A second and more disheartening scenario has an elderly parent and adult child perpetrator. The older parent says, "I gave birth to him, raised him, and taught him his values, so what does that say about me?" Still another perspective is that of battered women in an unsafe environment. The victim may believe that to feel or behave any differently may increase the potential for harm.

Theme 9: Psychological demoralization is problematic for African American families.

The following are examples of potentially demoralizing situations obtained in interviews with African American families (Griffin, 1999):

- At 41, Irene only worked 1979-1980, because she “couldn’t get a job.”
- An elder’s grandson, James, is 45 years old but he has “not worked regularly” at any time during his life because he “didn’t finish high school” and “has no skills” and because he was “sick.”
- A client’s granddaughter “is needed in the home to care for grandma;” but further investigation reveals she didn’t finish high school and “never really looked for a job.”
- A man’s “carousing behavior” produced five children from women he never married. He is isolated from his children. His support is his elderly mother, who allows him to stay with her when he is ill.

Each of the cited caregivers illustrates what many in society might call a failed or demoralized existence. Violence may be a way of reacting to the lack of options or goals available to meet definitions of success, which are controlled by the majority race. One perpetrator of financial exploitation acknowledged feeling badly about being economically dependent. He characterized himself as a failure as a son and as a citizen. Yet, he does not look for permanent work, and he drinks too much—a scenario that was repeated again and again during the interviews. Failure to meet the majority race’s success criteria increases the potential for socially unacceptable expression.

African Americans are not inherently violent, and rates of violence among Black people in other countries are lower than that of both African Americans and White Americans. The explanation for higher rates of violence among African Americans may be due to the population’s social predicament in American society.

Theme 10: Definitions of elder maltreatment are not sensitive to the unique circumstances of African Americans.

Recognizing that elder maltreatment occurs in all cultural and minority groups, there is little direct evidence and no reason to assume that the existing majority’s definition of elderly maltreatment, such as it is, can be validly applied to different ethnic populations (Williams & Griffin, 1996). Applying the characteristics of a condition that exists in one population without reflection to another may inaccurately frame the other population’s reality.

Conclusion

There is increasing urgency to learn more about elder maltreatment in general, and in African American communities, in particular. This urgency is in anticipation of a dramatic increase in the number of African American elders as the nation enters the 21st century. The studies of elder abuse that exist lack sufficient numbers of African American elders to highlight the nuances of difference between the majority race and African Americans.

Extensive interviews with African American victims and perpetrators of elder maltreatment have revealed 10 somewhat controversial themes regarding violence among this population. These ideas can be viewed as a starting point in exploring the impacts of elder maltreatment in African American communities.

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Elders Deserve Honor and Respect—Not Abuse

Presenter:

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Introduction

In 1996, the Pennsylvania Department of Aging decided to expand its elder abuse prevention campaign to do targeted outreach to three specific audiences: African Americans, Hispanics, and the rural poor. The result was an award-winning campaign: Elder Pennsylvanians Deserve Honor and Respect—Not Abuse.

Project Development

The development of this mass media campaign drew on five basic sources of information: literature search, focus groups, telephone surveys, in-person interviews and meetings with an advisory group consisting of professionals in the fields of elder care, protective services, and law enforcement. The Department of Aging contracted with the Philadelphia-based Beach Advertising Agency to carry out this project. Beach recruited University Research Corporation as a sub-contractor and The Onyx Group as part of the team. The primary challenge was to develop one or more media messages that would reach each of the identified target audiences without being condescending or stereotypical. Products resulting from the campaign include public service announcements for radio and television, brochures on elder abuse prevention, a large poster, and an implementation manual. All campaign materials, with the exception of the manual, were produced in English and Spanish.

The first step in the process of developing the media campaign was an extensive literature and program review. This review showed that relatively little had been done around the country to specifically address elder abuse prevention in the three specific populations that Pennsylvania had identified. The review yielded some effective program models and helped in identifying potential roadblocks. This information was used to gain a better understanding of the extent of elder abuse and to identify the special issues involved in targeting particular groups with elder abuse prevention messages.

The literature and program review was supplemented by qualitative research that included focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and telephone surveys. For the African American population, focus groups were convened with the elderly, staff of various programs that work with elderly African Americans, and non-elderly adults from the African American community. Focus group discussions were used to frame the overall approach and to review preliminary campaign materials with each of the target populations. The focus groups also provided information on optimal dissemination channels and potential barriers.

Because focus groups, by definition, reach a small number of people who may not be truly representative of the larger population, telephone interviews were also used to gain a sense of the community and its needs. These interviews were designed to reach the broad population, not specific target groups. The primary reason for doing the telephone interviews was to determine how closely the ideas that came out of the focus group sessions with targeted populations mirrored the feelings and perceptions of the larger community. If the media messages had been designed for placement only within the targeted communities, the broader assessment might not have been necessary. However, this was not the case. In each pilot community, the target audience receives information from mass media that also reaches the broader community. Thus, it was important that the messages not be offensive or unintelligible to mainstream audiences and that they not portray African Americans, Hispanics, and residents of rural communities as being more in need of abuse prevention and intervention services than the general population.

A key concern in designing the media approach was whether one campaign could be used, with variations, to target three distinctly different population segments or whether it was necessary to develop three completely different approaches. The focus group discussions showed that all three groups shared a tradition of venerating the elderly, closeness to the land, and a feeling of marginality in relationship to mainstream society. These three themes were interwoven into one campaign.

Research Findings

Based on the literature and program search and the qualitative research, the following key points were developed as the basis for the media campaign messages:

The Nature of Elder Abuse

- Neglect, abandonment, abusive language, and misappropriation of financial resources are seen as more pervasive forms of elder abuse than physical violence.
- Abusive actions by adult children and adult grandchildren, whether deliberate or unintended, are far more common among Pennsylvania's elderly than abuses inflicted by unrelated persons, such as hired caregivers, outside contractors, and telephone solicitors.
- The image of the frail, gentle, supportive elderly person is not universal and elder abuse is sometimes a continuation of intergenerational family relationships that have *always* been troubled.

- The term “elder abuse” does not have universal acceptance among various Pennsylvanians, with some seeing the term itself as very negative and others believing that using the term forces the public to face the realities of abuse.

Views on Government

- Bureaucracy and government “interference” is viewed by many in the African American, Hispanic, and rural communities as an inappropriate response to intra-family disputes.
- Elder Pennsylvanians are frequently unwilling to disclose abusive conditions due to concerns about loss of privacy, public embarrassment, and/or possible retaliation from family members and caregivers.
- Professional intermediaries, the general public, and the elderly themselves lack detailed information about the types of State, local, and private resources available in Pennsylvania and how to access appropriate services for the varying types of elder abuse.
- The role of police in the handling of elder abuse allegations in various Pennsylvania communities is viewed differently based on the circumstances and geographic location, with violent confrontations being most likely to involve a police presence.
- Many people who work with the elderly have specific responsibilities related to elder abuse—e.g., financial scams, theft of monthly Social Security checks, physical abuse, monitoring of long-term care centers—and, as a result, have difficulty embracing the full spectrum of abuse problems that confront older persons.

Overall Environment

- In rural Pennsylvania, there has been an out-migration of adult children, leaving many elderly persons isolated and without access to nearby family supports.
- Among African American Pennsylvanians, economic factors combined with traditions of the extended family have led to multi-generational families, including three and sometimes four generations that coexist under difficult and challenging residential and financial circumstances.
- The isolation of many elderly Pennsylvanians who live alone without regular contact with family, friends, or institutional supports, heightens the potential for self-neglect.
- Language barriers and unfamiliarity with modern, North American ways may make it difficult for Pennsylvania’s immigrant elderly, such as Hispanics, to seek help when confronted with abusive situations.

- Many elderly persons cannot read due to poor eyesight and lack of literacy in English or in their native language.

Media and Outreach

- Stereotyped target populations—e.g., Appalachian Whites, Urban Blacks, Migrant Latinos—tend to be embarrassed by media campaigns that reinforce negative stereotypes relating to violence, criminal behavior, or poor intra-family relations.
- Elder abuse is a complex issue with many layers that are difficult to communicate in the short sentences and catchy sound bites that are the basis of media messages.
- Financial scandals and allegations of physical abuse or severe neglect are far more interesting for news and public service announcements on mass media than are the other far more common, but less dramatic, forms of elder abuse.
- The elderly use radio—especially talk radio and gospel music programs—as their connection to the outside world.
- Elderly persons welcome mail and, as a result, are an excellent audience for direct mail messages.
- Programs that focus on the elderly and on children are extremely popular with the general public and tend to receive preference in public service placements and feature news coverage.
- The increasing number of persons who are aged combined with the number of adult children who have responsibility for their elderly parents provides a significant audience for elder abuse messages.

Media Campaign

All the design and text elements of the media campaign were based on several central concepts that emerged from the research: clear definitions, clear goals and audiences, and a sense of where to draw the line.

1. Define Elder Abuse

Providing a clear-cut definition of elder abuse was an important linchpin for media and outreach efforts. It became apparent almost immediately that few people in the targeted communities actually knew what elder abuse was. Many defined it solely as physical abuse or as abuse of older people in nursing homes or at the hands of unrelated caregivers. Broader issues of neglect and theft of funds by family members were not understood as abuse.

2. Have a Clear Call to Action

The campaign had to be broader than just a message to the elderly to not allow themselves to be abused or to call for help. Instead, the messages had to be directed at the broader community and urge people of all ages to take action. The project identified two objectives. The first was to increase the number of calls reporting abusive situations to the area agencies on aging from African American, Hispanic and rural elderly in the designated counties. The second objective was to get people to cease abusive behavior toward elders, either because they recognize that it is wrong or because they are afraid of being reported.

3. Do No Harm

The elderly persons in the focus groups expressed fear that such a campaign would make their lives worse by embarrassing them and bringing “outsiders” into their lives. A central consideration of the process of developing the media campaign was that the images and message of the campaign should not expose targeted communities to further stigma or make them feel under siege from the authorities. Elders already felt marginalized because of race and age. The campaign wanted to improve their lives, not put them under additional stress.

Several draft approaches were developed and shared with groups of elderly and gatekeepers, i.e., elder care professionals and community leaders and representatives. During this review period, major differences emerged regarding the messages that people in the targeted communities and gatekeepers liked. The photo album theme—with soft colors and a positive approach, rather than harsh, bright colors and a negative emphasis on the evils of abuse—was well received by African Americans, Hispanics, and rural persons who viewed it. However, many professionals felt that the campaign was not hard-hitting enough. In the end, however, the wishes of the community triumphed, and the Elder Pennsylvanians Deserve Honor and Respect—Not Abuse campaign was launched.

The overall theme of the Honor and Respect campaign reinforces the traditional family values and respect for elders within the State’s African American, Hispanic, and rural communities. It takes that approach based on the belief that much of the elder abuse in African American, Hispanic, and rural communities is not intentional. Therefore, efforts to increase awareness of what constitutes abuse can have a positive, preventive effect. The campaign also stresses the importance of community action, with a call to action directed at neighbors and friends, urging them to report instances of elder abuse to the area agencies on aging.

The need to position the local area agency on aging as a friend rather than an enforcer was an important rationale for the soft approach. This was seen as particularly valuable for people who historically have had poor relations with law enforcement due to racism or other issues. Additionally, because many in the target communities were unfamiliar with the services offered by their area agencies on aging, the media campaign had served to introduce the agencies as friendly and supportive while communicating specific information about what constitutes elder abuse and where people could turn for help.

Media and Community Outreach

While the basic campaign materials were identical, the methods of reaching the three target communities differed. Radio and ethnic newspapers were used to deliver the message to the African American community. Posters and brochures were also used extensively, with placements in senior centers, hairdressers, barbershops, supermarkets, local stores, and restaurants—all places where people in the community gather. Because many African American media outlets are small and understaffed, radio stations often welcomed public service announcements and cooperated readily in the scheduling of public service shows on topics such as elder abuse prevention to meet programming needs.

Similarly, editors of African American community newspapers were willing to run well-written news releases on the program and letters to the editor. Fortunately, many of the popular African American radio personalities and newspaper columnists were open to the project. Getting their support can be instrumental in whether a campaign is successful, as these individuals often act as gatekeepers who can control how a message is conveyed.

For the African American community, the church was a prime outreach channel. In Pennsylvania, most African Americans are Baptists, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), or Pentecostal. Elderly Blacks tend to be more devout in their religious practices than Pennsylvanians of other ages, although many elderly are too infirm or lack the means to attend religious services on a regular basis. But the church is not only important to churchgoers. In many African American communities in Pennsylvania, local churches serve as the centers of their community and are influential even with those who do not attend or hold formal membership.

The high percentage of elderly churchgoers makes issues related to older persons of considerable interest to many of Pennsylvania's religious denominations. The potential for this tie-in was one of the reasons for the understated tone of the Honor and Respect media campaign. There was a sense that churches would be more likely to become involved in the outreach efforts if the poster and brochures did not contain visuals that would make the materials unsuitable for display in local houses of worship.

The elder abuse prevention campaign found that the best way to get the involvement of the community's religious institutions was to approach the pastor or priest and the lay leadership. In many churches, the president of the board of trustees or the deacons' board is quite influential. Many Black churches also have someone deemed the "Mother of the Church." This position is honorary in nature and is bestowed on a woman who has a long history of involvement with church matters and is respected by members of the congregation.

Because Black churches tend to have a history of involvement in social service and community activities, it is often easy to gain access for a program like elder abuse prevention, even though it is not a strictly religious activity. Involvement can include having the pastor

mention the program during the church announcements, placing information and the toll-free telephone number in the church notices and on bulletin boards, and mentioning the importance of caring for the elderly on church-sponsored radio broadcasts. In some instances, pastors may even be willing to talk about the importance of honoring the elderly in a Sunday sermon.

The social clubs provided another important avenue for outreach. Within African American communities, fraternities and sororities remain the focus of community activities long after college. Other influential groups among African American Pennsylvanians include the Prince Hall Masons, the Elks, and Veterans Posts for men; and the Eastern Star, Urban League Guild, and various auxiliaries and clubs for women. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People also has a strong statewide network and active chapters in many Pennsylvania cities.

Conclusion

The targeted elder abuse prevention media campaign was disseminated to the pilot sites in the summer of 1996 and, subsequently, throughout the State. Embarking on this effort to increase diversity showed true recognition by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that no communities are immune to elder abuse and that designing targeted messages and approaches is a key component in protecting the State's elderly residents from abuse.

Rhodessa Jones: Woman for the 21st Century
A Cultural Odyssey Performance Lecture/Workshop Series

Presenter:

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Introduction

Theater, among other art forms, is emerging as a strategy to deal with issues afflicting society. Rhodessa Jones uses theatrical performance to address domestic violence and other issues that impact African American populations. In the course of her presentation, Jones performed excerpts from the award-winning productions *Big Butt Girls*, *Hard Headed Women*; *Street Corner Symphony*; and *The Blue Stories: Black Erotica on Letting Go*. She introduced the audience to such characters as Mama Pearl, who is based on a 70-year-old African American woman she met at a prison. As Jones transforms into the character she deems a sage crone, she takes on a matriarchal persona. Mama Pearl teaches the younger inmates about survival in the violent prison environment and explores issues impacting the lives of African American women, including drug use and prostitution. She also addresses the issue of violent relationships through the performance piece *When Did Your Hands Become a Weapon?* and notes the importance of creating a safe, supportive environment for elders, as well as women experiencing abusive relationships. Jones further notes the importance of interventions that are sensitive to cultural issues and that utilize an inter-generational approach to healing.

In addition, Jones read excerpts from various scripts of past productions by The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women, a performance workshop designed to increase self-awareness and self-esteem in an incarcerated women's population through the creation of theater pieces based on their personal stories.

The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women

History

The San Francisco County Jail initially hired Jones in 1989 to work as an aerobics instructor. Entering the jails, Jones realized that something more was needed, and she began using storytelling to communicate with the inmates. The Medea Project was first conceived in 1991 while Jones was developing a performance piece entitled *Big Butt Girls*, *Hard Headed Women* based on the lives of the incarcerated women she encountered at the facility. As the piece was being developed, Jones, social worker Sean Reynolds, and jail officials found that female inmates experienced feelings of guilt, depression, and self-loathing because of their perceived failure in the community. Indeed, such issues directly contribute to recidivism among female offenders. In response to such concerns, Jones founded The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women to explore whether an arts-based approach could help reduce the number of women returning to prison.

Production Format

In The Medea Project, Jones and her team of artists, which includes professional actresses, ex-offenders, and inmates, stage autobiographical material gleaned from inmates. The resulting work has not only changed the participants' lives, but also generated new artistic forms of expression. The experience confirmed Jones' belief that creating dramatic work can simultaneously transform members of a community and stretch the limits of theatrical possibilities. The Project has staged five full-length productions at major San Francisco theaters. By engaging incarcerated women in the process of developing and staging theater about their lives, The Medea Project has empowered many to explore their creativity, confront their personal problems, change their attitudes about themselves, and take control of their lives. These productions have garnered reviews in the local and national press that significantly heightened the participants' self-esteem and sense of membership in society.

From the outset, Jones has maintained that increasing inmate self-awareness is the necessary prerequisite to breaking the cycle of recidivism. Texts of The Medea Project performances are drawn from the real-life experiences of the participants. Together, the actresses and inmates use stories, songs, myths, prayers, and dreams to shape the script. The theatrical production develops inside a workshop that entails popular music, physical exercise, basic vocalization, script development, creative writing, dramatic presentational techniques, and choreography taught within a theater improvisational structure. The ensemble uses the prisoners' language to explore a wide range of issues and attitudes that perpetuate incarceration, including fear of others, domestic violence, sexual assault, incest, drugs, prostitution, poverty, and single parenthood. The public performance enhances and enlightens the inmates' personal experiences with theater. Their self-esteem and active personal responsibility is realized and celebrated in the presence of an audience comprising family, friends, public officials, and seasonal theatergoers.

Transforming Lives of Incarcerated Women

Education is vital in defining rehabilitation. The Medea Project uses theater to encourage the female inmate to examine her participation in her own incarceration. Workshops utilize the medium of theater, movement, literature, and visual art to increase self and social awareness. The Medea Project examines life-threatening issues with the incarcerated women as a means of building alliances among them. The forced personal alliances are the beginnings of building bridges back into communities. African Americans comprise the largest group of female offenders in California. This population needs to be educated and uplifted to foster a lasting impact for change in their lives.

The Medea Project's aim is to start these women on the path to recovery by developing and producing a main stage theater performance from their stories. The critical challenge that remains when the production is finished is to find ways to help the female offender return to her community. She needs to leave the prison feeling more positive about who she is, where she has been, and why. She needs skills and support to sustain her healthy reintegration into the community. To this end, The Medea Project has working relationships with a network of local social service agencies, advocacy groups, and halfway houses to help facilitate the post-prison transition for the Medea women.

Setting the Standard

The Medea Project has become a model program for the use of arts and theater as the basis of transformative initiatives for prison populations. Similar programs in several States have begun since The Medea Project's inception. Social service groups and prison administrators regularly contact Jones for her input and feedback on programs. A distinguishing feature of The Medea Project, as compared to other arts intervention programs, is the emphasis on the creation and presentation of a finished performance artwork. Jones hails this as a cornerstone of The Medea Project's process. She stresses that the artistic and production standards of The Medea Project performances place a greater responsibility on the participants, resulting in a positive effect. The inmates are tasked with developing the production, presenting the material, and making a commitment to their fellow inmates/performers and the audience. This discipline, from a production standpoint, has a positive impact on inmates' transformation and reintegration into the community.

Breaking the cycle of probation, incarceration, and drug relapse through the use of the arts is the primary mission of The Medea Project. In fact, studies suggest that prevention techniques emphasizing lifestyle changes and community encouragement to participate in recreational activities can help divert women from entering the criminal justice system. The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women is at the forefront of the battle to rehabilitate female inmates through the arts.

New Directions

In the fall of 1997, The Medea Project undertook a production with Glide Memorial Church and the San Francisco Commission on the Status of Women that constituted an expansion of its vision. Using its workshop formats and Jones' self exploration techniques, this production worked with survivors of domestic violence and Glide Church's Breaking the Cycle Program to develop a theater performance, *Requiem for a Dead Love*. Battered women are prisoners of their social and domestic realities. They find themselves caught in a world of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse in which drugs, sexism, racism and crime often play a part. The Medea Project provided a format and a context for these women to explore their stories, celebrate their choice to improve their situations, and demand that the community participate in the process of change.

In January 1999, The Medea Project explored race and culture in a performance entitled *Slouching Towards Armageddon: A Captive's Conversation/Observation on Race* at the Lorraine Hansberry Theater in San Francisco. As we face the millennium, Jones has defined theater for the 21st century.

Domestic Violence Across the Lifespan of African Americans: Elders Conclusion

The presenters for this plenary session identified key issues around the manifestation of elder maltreatment, defined various types of abuse, and explored intervention strategies to address this phenomenon among African Americans. Dr. Linner Ward Griffin, an Institute Steering Committee member, stressed the importance of studying elder maltreatment and presented findings from surveys and qualitative research on the prevalence of elder maltreatment in African American communities. She also identified the similarities and differences between elder maltreatment and other types of abuse and noted interrelated themes emerging from interviews with African American victims and perpetrators of elder maltreatment.

Ms. Charyn Sutton presented information about the development of an award-winning elder abuse prevention media campaign targeting African Americans, Hispanics, and the rural poor. She noted that research for the *Elders Deserve Honor and Respect—Not Abuse* campaign helped identify issues related to how elder abuse is defined in minority and marginalized communities, what role the government should play in mediating abusive situations, and stigmas and stereotypes related to age and ethnicity. Ms. Sutton indicated that these issues were addressed through radio and television public service announcements, brochures, and other materials produced for this campaign.

Finally, Ms. Rhodessa Jones gave a theatrical performance that addressed violence, drug abuse, and other issues that impact African Americans. Ms. Jones introduced an incarcerated matriarchal character who taught younger women how to survive in the violent prison setting and shared the history of the Medea Project, a program she conceived that employs an arts-based approach to reduce the recidivism rate of incarcerated women. In addition, Ms. Jones explored how theater and other art forms are emerging as strategies to address issues afflicting society.

As the African American elder population in the United States continues to grow, it will become imperative that issues around elder maltreatment are examined. Service providers must engage a number of intervention strategies to ensure that abuse is addressed in families, communities, geriatric settings, and penal institutions, recognizing that each environment may require a different approach. Researchers must continue to study elder abuse to identify risk factors and ensure that cultural diversity is considered in the definitions of, assessment of, and intervention(s) in elder maltreatment. Finally, we must all work to erode the tolerance for and shame associated with elder maltreatment, remembering always that elders, indeed, deserve honor and respect—not abuse.