

# Practice Perspectives

The National  
Association of  
Social Workers

750 First Street NE

Suite 800

Washington, DC 20002-4241

SocialWorkers.org



Chris Herman, MSW, LICSW

Senior Practice Associate

cherman.nasw@socialworkers.org

## Elder Justice & Racial Justice

This publication is one of a four-part series on elder justice. Please visit [www.socialworkers.org/Practice/Aging/Aging-Tools](http://www.socialworkers.org/Practice/Aging/Aging-Tools) to read two accompanying Practice Perspectives: *Elder Abuse & COVID-19* and *Federal Funding for and Administration of Elder Justice Programs*. A forthcoming report, *Social Work Roles in Elder Abuse Prevention and Response*, will be posted to the same web page.

Elder justice intersects closely with racial justice. Systemic racism permeates all aspects of U.S. society and influences later-life experiences, including elder abuse (New York City Elder Abuse Center [NYCEAC] at Weill Cornell Medicine, 2020). Consequently, racism contributes to the devaluing of human beings that enables elder abuse and other forms of mistreatment.

The following occurrences and concerns offer a small window into the overlap of elder justice and racial justice:

- lack of culturally and linguistically competent service provision
- underrepresentation of people of color in many disciplines (including the social work profession), roles, and settings that serve older adults
- perceptions within specific cultural communities regarding how abuse is defined and how and when help (for any

concern within a family or community) is sought or welcomed

- connection between lack of financial resources (income inequality, often rooted in government policies that historically favored white people) and perceptions of elder neglect
- disproportionate impact of homelessness on older adults of color (especially those who are Black), which increases the likelihood of experiencing crime (Mars, 2020)
- lack of broadband access in numerous parts of the country, especially in the rural and frontier areas where many people of color live
- discrimination and violence against Asian American and Pacific Islander older adults because of stereotypes about COVID-19
- disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on older adults of color (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021) and on nursing homes that serve primarily people of color (Gebeloff et al., 2020)
- disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on young and middle-aged people of color who work in health care and other high-risk environments, often with low pay, few benefits, and difficult working conditions (such as lack of personal protective equipment, unmanageable caseloads, and long hours)
- assaults and killings of older people of color (especially Black people) by police

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- assaults and killings of older people (of various races and ethnicities) during racial justice protests
- demonization of immigrants, including older adults
- lack of trust within communities of color toward many systems—such as law enforcement, social service organizations, and health care systems (including mental health and substance use)—because of past and current disparate treatment
- mistrust within communities of color regarding collaboration between law enforcement and service providers, such as Adult Protective Services (APS)
- the movement to shift resources from police departments to the social services sector
- requests from older adults of any race or ethnicity for service providers (such as a home health aide, APS worker, or law enforcement officer) of a specific race or ethnicity.

This short list illustrates the necessity of an intersectional approach to elder justice work. Initiatives and resources to foster such an approach are increasingly available; some brief descriptions follow.

- The National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA)<sup>1</sup> has published fact sheets about mistreatment of African American and Latino older adults, key research findings about abuse in Mexican American and Puerto Rican communities, and a guide to communicating with people with low English proficiency ([https://ncea.acl.gov/Resources/Publications.aspx#cultural\\_issues](https://ncea.acl.gov/Resources/Publications.aspx#cultural_issues)).
- The National Indigenous Elder Justice Initiative (NIEJI),<sup>2</sup> NCEA, and the University of Southern California (USC) Keck School of Medicine have copublished multiple fact sheets on elder justice in Indian Country ([www.nieji.org/publications](http://www.nieji.org/publications)). NCEA also has a Web page dedicated to Tribal resources (<https://ncea.acl.gov/Resources/Tribal.aspx>).
- NIEJI offers a tool kit for Tribal multidisciplinary teams focused on elder abuse, sometimes known as Elder protection teams ([www.nieji.org/tribal-elder-protection-team](http://www.nieji.org/tribal-elder-protection-team)); online interactive educational modules ([www.nieji.org/training](http://www.nieji.org/training)); and a map of Tribal hotlines ([www.nieji.org/hotlines](http://www.nieji.org/hotlines)).

- The Bureau of Indian Affairs has developed a handbook for APS personnel working with Indigenous Elders ([www.nieji.org/assets/1289-5165/2013-adult-protective-services-handbook.pdf](http://www.nieji.org/assets/1289-5165/2013-adult-protective-services-handbook.pdf)).
- NCEA has developed many of its publications in multiple languages, including Armenian, Chinese, Farsi, Japanese, Korean, Samoan, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese (<https://ncea.acl.gov/Resources/Publications.aspx>). This process has involved not only professional translation, but also content review and revision for cultural relevance.
- The National Hispanic Council on Aging has published an article on helping Latinos address Medicare fraud ([www.nhcoa.org/tag/cultural-competency/](http://www.nhcoa.org/tag/cultural-competency/)).
- The Southeast Asian Resource Action Center (SEARAC) and the Diverse Elders Coalition (to which SEARAC belongs) wrote a 2021 article entitled *Help for Southeast Asian American Caregivers Facing PTSD, Trauma, Racism and Language Barriers* for the American Society on Aging (Sam et al., 2021).
- In 2015, the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (NCALL)—an initiative of End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin—and the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) Office on Violence Against Women conducted listening sessions with Red Wind Consulting and other Tribal leaders, leading to the creation of the tool kit *Reclaiming What is Sacred: Addressing Harm to Indigenous Elders and Developing a Tribal Response to Abuse in Later Life* (Brandl, Davis, & Ybanez, 2016; Litton & Ybanez, 2015; NCALL, n.d.-b). In 2020, NCALL and the National Resource Center for Reaching Victims released the tool kit *Increasing Access to Healing Services and Just Outcomes for Older African American Crime Survivors* (Davis & Block, 2020). That same year, NCALL collaborated with NCEA, the USC Family Caregiver Support Center (part of the School of Gerontology), and the National Center on Law and Elder Rights to present the Webinar *Intersectional and Multi-Disciplinary Look at Elder Mistreatment and the African American Community: Sharing New Resources*.

<sup>1</sup> NCEA is a resource center funded by the Administration for Community Living (ACL) and located at the Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California.

<sup>2</sup> The National Elder Justice Initiative is an ACL-funded resource center located at the Center for Rural Health within the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences.

Initiatives and resources to foster an intersectional approach to elder justice work are increasingly available.

and *Strategies for Impact* (Benton et al., 2020). Most recently, NCALL, in partnership with Asha (another initiative of End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin), sought and received a grant from the DOJ Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) for its *Enhancing Services to Older African American Victims of Abuse and Financial Exploitation* project (NCALL, n.d.-a; OVC, 2020). The project strives to increase access for Milwaukee-based African Americans who have experienced abuse in later life to culturally responsive, age-relevant, and trauma-informed direct services and advocacy within the justice system, social services agencies, and community organizations. The project is also developing resources to enhance access to culturally specific providers throughout the field. These projects were all conducted under the leadership of NASW Colorado Chapter member Bonnie Brandl, who founded NCALL in 1991 and served as executive director until early 2021.

- NYCEAC at Weill Cornell Medicine has launched a racial equity initiative (<https://nyceac.org/racialequity/>). Activities to date include a statement against racism on Juneteenth 2020 (NYCEAC, 2020b), biweekly internal discussions addressing the intersection of elder justice and racial justice (R. Breckman, personal communication, January 14, 2021), and monthly posts highlighting individuals who are advancing racial equity in the elder justice field (<https://nyceac.org/highlighted-voices-for-racial-equity/>). One such post featured NASW New York City (NYC) Chapter member Gilbert James, who works in JASA's Legal Social Work Elder Abuse Program (NYCEAC, 2020a). The profile described how racial justice shapes James's work and his personal journey to explore equity and truth. This racial equity initiative developed under the leadership of NASW NYC Chapter member Risa Breckman, who cofounded NYCEAC at Weill Cornell Medicine in 2009 and served as executive director until early 2021.
- The California (CA) Master Plan for Aging (MPA) "outlines five bold goals and 23 strategies to build a California for All Ages by 2030" (CA Department of Aging [DOA], n.d.-b, para. 4). Its *Inclusion and Equity, Not Isolation* goal addresses (among other forms of systemic bias) ageism, elder abuse, ethnocentrism, racism, and xenophobia, as

well as the need for culturally competent approaches to elder abuse prevention and response (CA DOA, n.d.-a). Development of the MPA was informed by a 13-month stakeholder engagement process (CA DOA, n.d.-c). Input submitted by the California Elder Justice Center (CEJC) during this period addressed, among other topics, the intersection of elder justice and racial justice (CEJC, 2019).

The preceding list is by no means comprehensive. Furthermore, many other organizations have redoubled their racial justice efforts—albeit without an elder justice focus—over the past year and a half. (Visit NASW's racial equity microsite at [www.socialworkers.org/Racial-Equity](http://www.socialworkers.org/Racial-Equity) to learn more about NASW resources and advocacy, for example.) These efforts contribute to the foundation upon which intersectional elder justice work can be done.

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- The author thanks NASW members Georgia Anetzberger (Ohio Chapter), Bonnie Brandl (Colorado Chapter), and Risa Breckman (New York City Chapter), whose collaboration and expertise enriched this publication.*





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**Practice Perspectives** Fall 2021



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