

A Call to Action for Jewish Organizations

מִפְּנֵי שִׁיבָה תִּקּוּם וְהִדַּרְתָּ פָּנָי זָקֵן

"You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old..."

(Leviticus 19:32)

Overview

Sacred Spaces is committed to addressing institutional abuses across the lifespan. Knowing that elder abuse is a significant public health issue, Sacred Spaces examined ways to support Jewish organizations in bolstering their prevention and response to elder abuse as well as aiding older Jewish adults age with dignity and agency.

In any endeavor, it is always imperative to hear from those most impacted about their experiences, needs, and ideas. Therefore, Sacred Spaces held a series of listening sessions¹ to learn from Jewish adults aged 65 and older and professionals working in Jewish organizations about their understanding of elder abuse, what prevention and intervention efforts exist in their community, and what resources are needed.

"It was the first time in years that someone asked me about my experience in the Jewish community and valued hearing what I had to say."

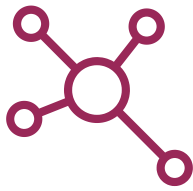
-Older Jewish adult in describing the listening session experience.

This document summarizes the call to action that emerged from the listening sessions. That call is for every individual in the Jewish community to be safeguarded from abuse and maltreatment, and for the Jewish community to examine its communal and institutional practices to promote the safety and self-determination of our elders.

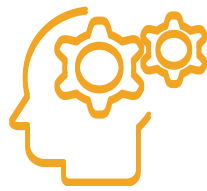
1. Listening sessions are like focus groups. A small number of people from an affinity group are brought together to share their thoughts about a set of pre-developed questions. Sacred Spaces' listening sessions were held over Zoom and lasted 90 minutes. Every listening session had two facilitators asking questions and taking notes.

Themes

Listening session participants, especially professionals who work with older adults, were reassured to learn that many of the issues they faced were occurring in communities across the country. Three overarching themes emerged from the listening sessions: the need for connection, knowledge, and support.



Connection



Knowledge



Support

Connection

Older adults said connection to others and to their communities is of the utmost importance. Many talked about experiencing loneliness and isolation even before COVID. Those who knew someone who had experienced abuse or neglect reported that those victim-survivors felt shame and did not know where to turn for help. Professionals also talked about their own feelings of isolation, especially when finding that they were often the only person in their community working to address elder abuse and therefore had no formal organizational structure to assist them.

"There is an impression that it [elder abuse] doesn't happen here and resistance to talk about it."

-Professional, Jewish Organization

Knowledge

People in the Jewish community hesitate to talk openly about elder abuse, which leads to a lack of community understanding and recognition of this issue. While community members seem aware of externally perpetuated financial scams, insufficient consideration is given to intimate partner violence and other forms of abuse from family members or trusted caregivers. Older adults were unsure what approach would bring the most attention to the issue but generally liked keeping a positive focus on aging with dignity and autonomy. They also wanted more opportunities to be part of the conversations and solutions.

“A lot of people expect abuse to be obvious or apparent. Often it’s not easy to spot, even as a professional.”

-Professional, Jewish Organization

Professionals agreed that the Jewish community lacks awareness of elder abuse and that the topic needs more attention. Professionals are also eager to learn about best practices in elder abuse prevention and response, aiming to augment their knowledge and skills. Many are learning on their own because there is no formal structure to support mentorship or professional development in this area.

Support

Too few dedicated efforts exist to help older Jewish adults age with dignity and autonomy. Older adults said they would like Jewish organizations to find ways to check in with them more regularly and design programming that engages them at every stage of life. Even when they face some decline in functioning due to the normal aging process, they asserted that they are still capable of being independent and having self-determination. In addition, they felt that the Jewish community needs more strategies for addressing ageism as an underlying contributor to elder abuse.

Professionals tend to rely on local law enforcement for response and lack access to a network of community providers who work together to mitigate elder abuse or its impact. Older adults and professionals alike want options of where to go for advice and support if elder abuse is suspected or experienced. Professionals indicated they would like greater buy-in from the community and access to resources for the Jewish older adults with whom they work.

“Even after the abuse, the trouble doesn’t end when it looks okay. The trouble can stay with you, and you need support.”

-Older Jewish Adult

Guiding Concepts for Jewish Communal Response

The listening sessions inspired three core concepts to guide a Jewish communal response to the prevention and intervention of elder abuse. They are:

Shayahut (Belonging)

Kishoriyut (Connection)

Acharayut (Collective Responsibility)

Shayahut (Belonging)

Defined as “the feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences,”² *shayahut* means creating a participatory, welcoming, and inclusive community and organizations.

Kishoriyut (Connection)

Defined as a relationship to other individuals, organizations, or activities as well as the creation and maintenance of interpersonal or social connection, *kishoriyut* means facilitating and maintaining connections so that people build trust and feel seen and valued.

Acharayut (Collective Responsibility)

Defined as the duty of the Jewish community, including individuals and organizations, to create a safe and healthy environment and be part of the effort to prevent and respond to elder abuse and support sacred aging, *acharayut* means increasing knowledge about elder abuse, implementing policies and protocols to prevent and respond, and leveraging resources to assist older adults in having safety, autonomy, and self-determination.

2. Allen KA, et al, Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research. Aust J Psychol. 73(1):87-102 (2021).

Conclusion

The wisdom shared by older Jewish adults and professionals working at Jewish organizations is the foundation for a universal call to action. Jewish organizations can begin to engage in conversations with stakeholders, including older adults, about our priorities in fostering sacred aging. With a better understanding of elder abuse and its impact, Jewish organizations can ready themselves to provide older adults with support and services to maintain safety, dignity, and autonomy while also knowing how to respond to concerns for an older adult's wellbeing. Sacred Spaces is expanding its educational opportunities, resource development, and case consultation offerings to guide Jewish organizations when concerns about elder abuse arise. We are especially grateful to the individuals who participated in these listening sessions; by sharing their experiences and observations, they are helping to make the Jewish community safer for all of its participants, regardless of age.

For additional resources or more information about Seivah, contact us at info@JewishSacredSpaces.org.

"Elder abuse is all our issue."

-Older Jewish Adult