

Tackling elder abuse a renewed focus for CHATS

Elder abuse has long been identified by CHATS (Community & Home Assistance to Seniors) as a hidden crime, but as more people have found themselves homebound during the global pandemic, it is a crime that is being tackled with renewed focus by the organization.

COVID has had a ?significant impact? on frustration, anxiety and other mental health challenges experienced by seniors, says CHATS CEO Christina Bisanz. But as much as it has had an impact on seniors, it has also had an impact on their caregivers as well.

?We know that a lot of elder abuse is quite invisible and not something that necessarily gets reported or that people would be aware of the warning signs that someone is potentially being taken advantage of or abused,? she says. ?I think the pandemic and the fact that people have been very restricted in their movement and seniors in particular have been isolating at home for so long that those tensions have built up even more and contributed to the potential for more abuse to be taking place ? and less opportunity for that abuse to be recognized by others in the community.?

Part of a response to this is a series of workshops CHATS has made available everywhere virtually, not just in the York Region and South Simcoe areas they serve.

?We felt the series is very important and timely right now to be raising awareness, to be educating people on everything from what is financial abuse? What is mental health, addiction and abuse? What does it look like? How does ageism play into this? That is a big piece of the concerns we have; they have lived their lives, why should we care? Why should we bother?

?We felt the pandemic has certainly exacerbated the problem and therefore elevated the need to have this kind of education and awareness taking place. The pandemic has also raised awareness that social isolation really is a problem and outside the pandemic we still need to address social isolation in older adults and the impact that that has had both on their mental and physical health.?

Programs spearheaded by CHATS go a long way in addressing some of this isolation.

Prior to COVID, CHATS offered in-person wellness programs and adult day programs that not only provided social opportunities for seniors but a bit of a respite for their caregivers.

Clients, says Ms. Bisanz, are ?clamoring? to get back to programs such as these.

?We saw when we were able to start opening up some of our programs before Christmas and the joy that people had of finally being able to get back together, see their friends, still wearing masks, still practicing social distancing, but when we had to shut that down through the Omicron wave we heard from clients how much they missed it.

?I think there has been a silver lining in this too that we have been able to introduce more virtual programming and to support older adults who learn how to use tablets and computers to be able to continue to connect with their friends and families in ways that, perhaps before the pandemic, they never really imagined that they would feel comfortable communicating or participating in online bingo games or doing physical fitness via a tablet. That is one of the things so many community organizations turn to support older adults to be able to use computers or tablets, to be connected through the provision of the Internet, to be providing technology training and technical support; the community sector really rallied around that and I think it will continue to be a service offering that people will want to take advantage of and will be more comfortable in doing.?

CHATS recently held a ?strategic planning refresh? with their Board to look at where we are in the midst of uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, the development of new local healthcare models with the Ontario Health Teams, providing more integrated healthcare, and the fact there is a Provincial election coming up.

?The Board was having to create a strategic plan and identify the priorities amongst all that uncertainty,? says Ms. Bisanz. ?I think the number of things we do now, we do know how the seniors' population is continuing to increase in York Region, that we continue to have a need to look at ways to support older adults and their caregivers to be able to have the choice of living in their own homes with dignity and in their own communities as long as possible. There's a number of challenges we have to be able to meet to make that happen.

?One big challenge we have is with respect to having enough health human resources, particularly personal support workers, as well as other frontline workers given that there is a lot of competition. As need increases, our ability to be able to compete with wages and other sectors, the gap is? that is a huge challenge we need to address and we're doing so with renewed emphasis given what's happening. We're also continuing to advocate for more investment in the homecare and community support sector and services so that we can be able to meet those needs and respond to the challenges of being able to support people to live at home.

?The work that not just CHATS but so many other community organizations like ours are doing and whether it is for older adults, for people with developmental challenges or anybody that is relying on community support to help them live safely and with dignity is even more important and we really need to encourage our government leaders to take note and to start to invest more in the sector. We're very effective in helping people out of hospital and long-term care, but the investment that we need to be able to respond to the growing demand is not keeping pace. That is putting people at risk. If there is one message is, we absolutely need our political leaders to start to recognize the importance of investing in our sector.?

For more about CHATS, including Elder Abuse programs, visit chats.on.ca.

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