

The Centre for Armenian Information and Advice case study for HEAR Intersectionality research - summary

The Centre for Armenian Information and Advice (CAIA) has been providing for the welfare and information needs of Armenian people in London, primarily those who are older or disabled or carers.

There are approximately 20,000 Armenian people in London, but this population is scattered across the capital, which makes providing support for vulnerable people more difficult, bearing in mind that CAIA is the only such organisation providing support for Armenians in London.

Problems that CAIA has identified include:

- Lack of information related to health and social care in Armenian
- Poor provision of interpreting services related to access to health and social care
- Lack of awareness amongst the Armenian of their statutory rights and available services
- Poor opportunities to have any influence on services or service providers
- Social isolation and 'invisibility' as a population within all sectors
- Poverty due to lack of access to state pension, and often consequent vulnerability to abuse from those they need to depend on
- Institutionalised racism and lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity on part of service providers

CAIA addresses these issues through a range of services including opportunities to meet others and reduce social isolation and loneliness, provision of hot meals and transport, advocacy to improve access to health and social care services and provision of advice and information about services, rights and benefits.

CAIA has helped to:

- Obtain respite breaks for carers
- Increase income through appropriate benefits advice and support with applications
- Deal with complaints about inadequate home care services
- Liaise with housing providers to address inadequate or inappropriate housing

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The Centre for Armenian Information and Advice (CAIA) was founded in 1986 with support from the London Boroughs Grants Unit to provide services for the welfare, information and educational needs of over 20,000 Armenians scattered across London. CAIA aims to improve the quality of life, living standards, and offer opportunities and access for better education and welfare for Armenians to assist their integration and contribution in society.

CAIA has over 25 years' experience delivering services to older/disabled Armenian refugees (aged 55 +) and those connected with them.

There is precious little specific research into the social, health, and care needs of this small minority ethnic group and in particular older/disabled Armenians. What there has been is primarily due to the work of the CAIA. This has led to a failure of identifying key issues such as language barriers, including no health or service information in Armenian, lack of awareness about statutory rights, and lack of influence on health/social service decision makers /providers.

CAIA is the only such specialist support in London:

- Providing a safe and supportive environment for older people to meet, socialise, celebrate their culture, get a hot nutritious meal twice a week, and get advice and help with any problems they are experiencing
- CAIA provides not only a social and cultural lifeline to many of them via their lunch club and advisory services but also act as a conduit for them to access council, health and other statutory services which otherwise they would not be able to do. Transport is a major problem for them especially for the frail. Many live on their own and CAIA's door-to-door transport provision is the only way they can leave their homes and travel

Armenians are a scattered population, who have often lost contact with family and friends who have settled in different countries. London Armenians are part of a 3 million diaspora created by the first genocide of the 20th century, carried out by the Ottoman government during 1915-18. The continued denial of the historical sufferings of the Armenian people which has left them vulnerable to various upheavals in various countries over the past 100 years continues to impact Armenian identity and perspectives wherever they live. *(Most recently for example the destruction of what was the 100,000 strong Syrian Armenian community due to the civil war)*

CAIA meets the needs of an extremely isolated group whose language is never catered for by

Statutory services. Unlike other refugee populations, Armenians are largely invisible and ignored by the media, decision makers, statutory services, voluntary organisations and even the general public. This is because Armenians have arrived from troubled parts of the Middle East and former USSR and are often classified as Arabs, Iranians, Russians or 'White Other'.

Armenians continue to feel very vulnerable to various political / social upheavals, media campaigns or legislative changes aimed at those from abroad in British society.

Frail, disabled older Armenians face extreme hardship and difficulties in accessing statutory services, as elderly people, as frail/disabled people, as elderly Carers, as refugees with low levels of English, and as residents of deprived areas of West London. Many subsist on low incomes because they do not qualify for a pension, as they either arrived as refugees late in their lives or have not worked long enough to be eligible for a state pension. Today many are dependent on the "goodwill" of their relatives which also makes them vulnerable to abuse, neglect and exploitation, while those without family survive on meager state benefits or reliance on the CAIA.

This situation often compounds their health and mental well-being, and puts increased pressure on our meager resources to help them find solutions, either by helping them access whatever statutory rights they are entitled to, such as sheltered accommodation, or through our extensive networks and contacts within the Armenian community for live-in carers, as many struggle to live independently (i.e. no longer able to shop/cook, travel on their own, or deal with complex official communications, etc.).

Decision makers/policy makers fail to recognise/identify key issues such as language barriers, including the absence of health or other service information in Armenian, which has resulted in this group's lack of awareness about their statutory rights, and consequently their inability to influence providers. CAIA's advisory service was created, is based in and run by the community. This is crucial, as people from BMER communities do not trust Statutory/mainstream agencies, have little experience with them, and often feel that they will not receive help due to lifelong experiences with institutionalized racism and a lack of general understanding of cultural differences, and language problems.

For older Armenians some of the issues they face are:

- Social isolation (small numbers dispersed across London)
- Various hardships/ deprivation, especially those living in private rented accommodation
- Poor quality of life
- Inactive lifestyle
- Struggle to live independently unless supported by carers, especially those with dementia
- Multiple barriers in accessing health services & information about entitlements/statutory rights because Armenian is spoken only by Armenians and

that they are ‘invisible’ because they have arrived in UK from various countries

It is widely established that a regular, active and social lifestyle enhances the physical and mental health of older people/carers. We provide a regular activity for older disabled people who would otherwise be housebound and isolated, and use non-health focused activities as a successful way of disseminating information and creating the basis for social networks.

What challenges do we face as an organisation when supporting this group of people?

The challenge our organisation faces when supporting this group is the amount of resources needed to address their multiple needs because there is no such similar specialist service provider who works to:

1. Address /reduce the social/cultural isolation in older Armenians. 200 utilise the day centre and activities from across West London annually. 40 of the most frail and disabled are provided free door-to-door transport
2. Improve the safety and security of older Armenians. 120 older people are visited by CAIA's Health & Advocacy Workers, where we are able to identify any deterioration in their health/quality of life, including those of any live-in carer
3. Improve health of older Armenians. 200 annually benefit from various health promotional talks/workshops, including about Fuel economy, money management, etc.
4. Enable older Armenians to make more informed life choices. 200 annually receive a range of education and information about benefits entitlements, which helps reduce poverty and hardship

Good practice examples:

- The CAIA provides good quality advice and support on housing, welfare benefits and immigration issues. Helping with completing housing and benefit applications, providing interpretation for clients to access statutory services, referrals for social housing. Over 60 years of age are about 40% of these service users
- Provide social/lunch Club for Older People on Mondays and Fridays, offering a variety of informative & recreational activities, health related talks, annual Xmas party, outings to seaside, free mini-bus transport service to frail and disabled to help attend. 150 users benefit from this service. It is widely established that a regular, active and social lifestyle enhances the physical and mental health of older people and Carers. The value of using non-health focused activities as a way of disseminating information and creating the basis for social networks via this Armenian social/lunch club for older people has been extremely successful for the CAIA
- Provide flexible short-term breaks and advice for 25 Carers (many of them older people/relatives) looking after 25 frail older people in London Borough of Ealing. Carers obtain a much-needed break from their duties. They can use this time to attend other tasks, shop, or simply take some time

for themselves--secure in the knowledge that their older people are safe, happy, well-looked after by people they know and trust

- Health Advocacy & Outreach Project/worker makes hospital/home visits to help older people/carers improve access to NHS and care services and reduce social isolation. 120 beneficiaries annually
- Organise Inter-generation activities to share skills for mutual benefit such as older people teaching young people how to cook traditional Armenian dishes and young people teaching older people how to use the internet
- DWP holds surgeries at CAIA in partnership once a month to improve communication and help with benefit entitlements

CAIA has also extensive experience of working in partnership in West London to promote and advocate for the health and social care needs of older /disabled Armenians (and older Carers) to access NHS/social services. Over the past 25 years CAIA has attended various consultation meetings organised by the statutory or voluntary sector in London boroughs of Ealing, Hounslow, Brent, and Hammersmith & Fulham. Our presence and networking efforts to influence the strategic plans and commissioning priorities have not always been useful due to lack of resources. CAIA has also been active members in the past of *Hounslow Older People's Voluntary Sector Provider Forum*, *Ealing Black, Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BMER) Health and Social Care Forum*, *Ealing Voluntary Services Older People Forum*, and the older refugees programme operated by *Age Concern England* and the *Refugee Council*. None of the above now exists as a result of continued reforms and statutory changes as well as the changing landscape of local CVS's.

The following are real life examples from the experience of older Armenians:

- Agency carer visits home. 20 minutes visit not only not long enough but older person unable to communicate/question quality of service
- Some use Taxi card scheme but not always on time or unable to make appointments due to language problems
- Blue Badge parking: Has become very difficult now. Many older/disabled people who had blue badge are being refused, and language and cultural problems make challenging difficult
- Adaptations: one person did home improvements with his own money and was not aware of the availability of grants. Another person had been supplied with a commode instead of the requested downstairs toilet
- Older couple live-in sheltered building. Wife visually impaired, almost blind. Haven't applied for home adaptation support – don't know how too
- For many years older Armenians have asked why the council does not provide the Armenian community with an Older People's home/residential home. Many older Armenians suffer in hospital, in residential homes/nursing homes and even sheltered homes where the staff do not speak Armenian. It would be good if specific provision was allocated in an area or a number of places in a home
- We know of an older/disabled person who has been waiting 5 years for the installation of a shower. The reason for the delay is unknown. Lives in sheltered accommodation. Need advocacy support to put pressure on local authority or councilors to provide service

- Far too often the quality of statutory service depends on the individual. 'Some staff are really good and nice; some are not'
- There is a lot of pressure on CAIA to provide free interpretation/information to local council/hospitals, etc.
- Individuals rely on their own networks rather than other voluntary or statutory agencies which means they are excluded and second class citizens. Older carers are in desperate need for help and support, particularly those who look after those with dementia.
- Very few older people/carers know about Direct Payments scheme.
- There are too many forms/questions to complete to obtain basic services. Those whose first language is not English, or lack confidence or do not have carers, give up/miss out.
- A 90 year-old who was unhappy with the agency carer who never provides receipt for shopping she makes. It took a long time to change private agency carer. 'Why does it have to be so complicated?'
- One of the biggest contradictions is that it is not possible for people to comment on services if they don't know about them. Our older people need information and explanation to ensure a coherent picture. Some refugees are afraid to speak out – they may still have a refugee mentality so suffer in silence instead

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