

## Taking it to the Hill

Psychologists share their expertise on trauma, violence and abuse with federal policy-makers.

BY DIANE L. ELMORE, PHD, MPH, AND  
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In recent years, an estimated six million cases of child abuse, five million cases of intimate partner violence, and between one million and two million cases of elder abuse were reported. Scholars suggest that these data represent only the tip of the iceberg, as many acts of violence go unreported.

APA's Public Interest Government Relations Office (PI-GRO) has been working with federal policy-makers for years to create, strengthen and fund federal laws that prevent and protect people from violence and abuse across the lifespan. On Feb. 28, psychologists from around the country came to Washington, D.C., to participate in APA federal advocacy training, Capitol Hill visits and a congressional briefing to educate Congress about the effects of violence and abuse.

### Hill visits

These advocacy events were held in conjunction with the 2008 Summit on Violence and Abuse in Relationships (see page 30), which was championed by APA President Alan E. Kazdin, PhD, spearheaded by Divs. 35 (Society for the Psychology of Women) and 56 (Trauma), and supported by 19 additional APA divisions.

The advocacy day began with a training session for 50 summit participants, who received an overview of the federal legislative process and learned effective strategies for



APA members on Capitol Hill: Dr. Dolores Subia BigFoot, Dr. Liza M. Suarez, Dr. Lisa M. Brown, Dr. Carolyn M. West and Dr. John A. Fairbank.

informing and influencing federal policy. Participants also received a detailed briefing on either the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) or the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). VAWA supports vital programs including a national hotline, shelters and grants to combat violence against women. CAPTA supports state grants to strengthen child protection agencies and community-based prevention grants to assist child victims of abuse or neglect.

After their training, summit attendees visited with their members of Congress or congressional staff to discuss the role that psychology plays in prevention and treatment of violence, and urged support for funding of key federal programs—specifically, CAPTA and VAWA. Despite their critical importance, both CAPTA and VAWA have been underfunded in recent years. In fact, the president's fiscal Year '09 budget proposes a \$120 million

cut to VAWA programs and a \$1 million cut to CAPTA programs.

### Congressional briefing

In addition to the advocacy training and Hill visits, PI-GRO organized an afternoon congressional briefing titled "Trauma, Violence and Abuse: Prevention, Treatment and Recovery Across the Lifespan," held in collaboration with Reps. Danny K. Davis (D-Ill.) and Todd R. Platts (R-Pa.). Presenters included APA members Dolores Subia BigFoot, PhD, Lisa M. Brown, PhD, John A. Fairbank, PhD, Liza M. Suarez, PhD, and Carolyn M. West, PhD, who shared their knowledge with an audience of congressional staff and representatives of national organizations.

Fairbank opened the briefing with a systematic overview of the issues at stake. As the co-director of the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress at

Duke University and past president of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, Fairbank defined the scope and impact of trauma and violence for the general population and drew the audience's attention to at-risk populations including children, incarcerated people, service members and veterans.

West, the Bartley Dobb Professor for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Washington, continued the discussion with an outline of the roots and consequences of intimate partner violence, particularly in the lives of women of color. She also pointed to the importance of drawing together multiple sources of help and support for victims, including family, education and law enforcement. West urged Congress to support full funding for VAWA programs to address the needs of women who experience violence.

In her comprehensive presentation on child traumatic stress, Suarez, assistant professor in the Pediatric Stress and Anxiety Disorders Clinic at the University of Illinois, emphasized that early exposure to abuse and neglect imposes great costs to children, families and society. Suarez urged Congress to fully fund the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and CAPTA—two of the most important federal resources to address the needs of children exposed to traumatic stress.

Brown, a geropsychologist and trauma expert from the University of South Florida, spoke about the difficulty of detecting, reporting and preventing elder abuse. In her presentation, Brown stressed that abused elders need more proactive advocates and described the merits of the Elder Justice Act (H.R. 1783/S. 1070), which would authorize

federal efforts to understand, prevent and effectively combat elder abuse, neglect and exploitation.

The presentations concluded with a discussion of trauma exposure in the American Indian and Alaska Native populations by BigFoot, director of the Indian Country Child Trauma Center at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center. BigFoot drew attention to the high rate of suicide, incarceration and juvenile delinquency among American Indians. She emphasized the need for streamlining the complex set of mental health service providers to American Indian communities and recommended continued support for programs to train minority mental health professionals, including the Minority Fellowship Program.

The federal advocacy training and Hill visits along with the congressional briefing helped to draw much-needed attention to violence and abuse issues. The expertise and commitment of the APA members who participated throughout the day helped advance the violence and abuse federal policy agenda. With the continued guidance of the APA membership, PI-GRO looks forward to ongoing efforts to encourage the prevention and treatment of trauma across the lifespan. ■

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To learn more about APA's efforts on trauma, violence and abuse, visit [www.apa.org/ppo/pi](http://www.apa.org/ppo/pi) or e-mail [delmore@apa.org](mailto:delmore@apa.org).

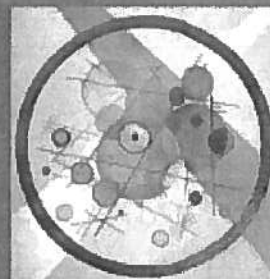
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