



COMMUNITY

Over 5,000 Halton seniors at risk of abuse

By Hiba Kesebi
SPECIAL TO THE CHAMPION

Carol Macdonald was psychologically abused by her husband. She was put down, humiliated and underestimated.

She contemplated suicide many times, but never knew that her husband's mind games were, indeed, a form of abuse until a woman from a women's shelter took her by the arms and broke the news to her.

"She told me that I'm facing the reality of what abuse is," said Macdonald.

"I should leave, and support is available. I didn't know that I was being abused. It's easier to live in denial."

Macdonald admits that it took her a long time to make her exit, yet she's thankful for finally making it.

"The person I am now is not the person I was 15 years ago," she said. "I was pathetic, sad, overwhelmed, confused."

Today, Macdonald's smile never leaves her face.

She's got humour and energy, ambitions and goals, independence and peace of mind.

That change was radiant during the recent launch of Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention and Services (SAVIS) of Halton's new Seniors Supporting Seniors Peer Mentoring Project.

The initiative aims to reach out to 200 senior women in Halton by providing them with knowledge about how to recognize abuse and where to get support in the community.

Macdonald is the co-ordinator of the Seniors Supporting Seniors Peer Mentoring Project.

The Ontario Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse states that those who assist abused older adults believe that the rate of abuse is close to 10 per cent.

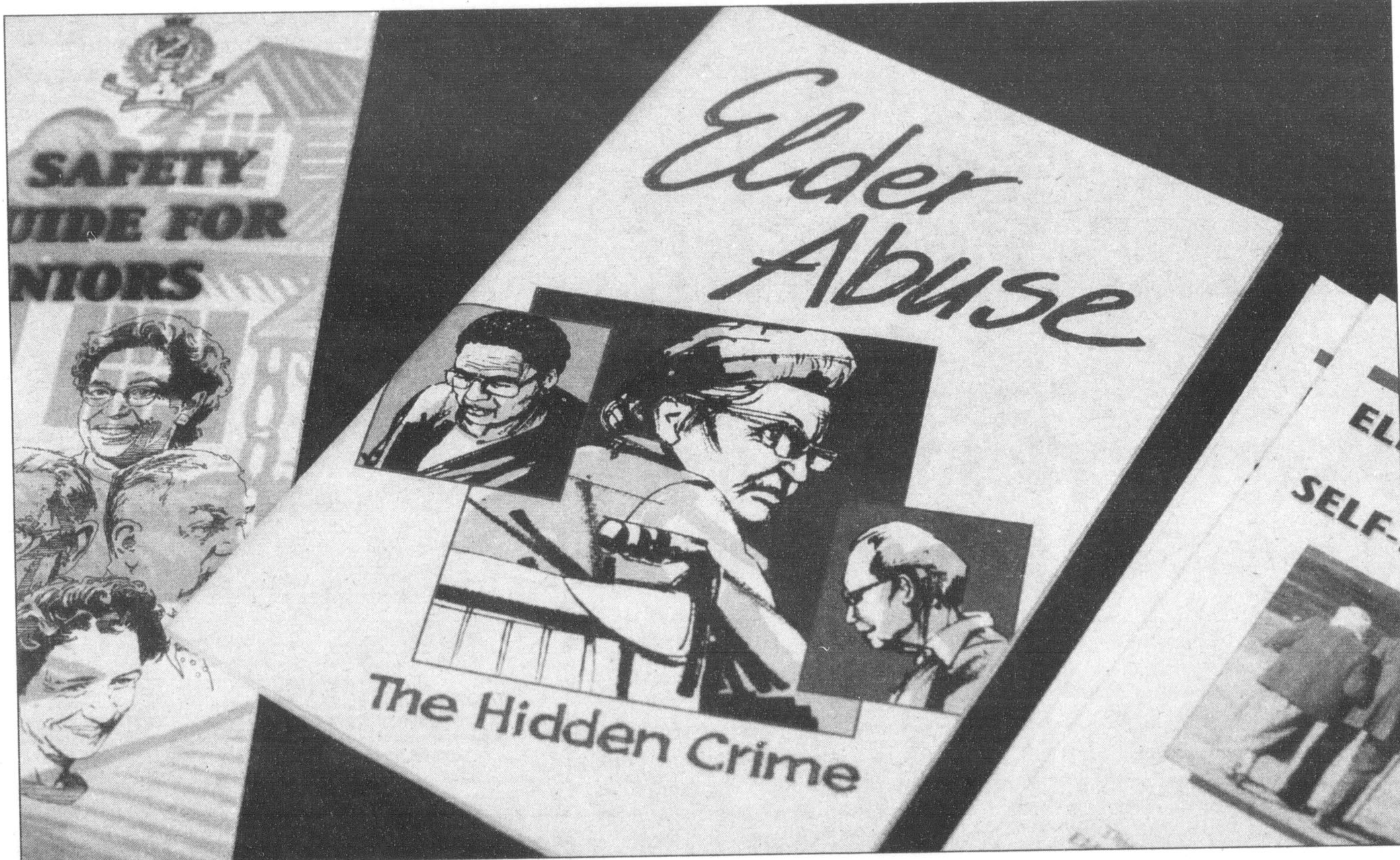
Therefore, with about 55,000 seniors living in Halton as of 2006, it's possible that as many as 5,500 seniors are, or are at risk of, being abused.

"Emotional abuse is an extremely insidious form of abuse that is harder to recognize and deal with because it is not recognized in the court system, it isn't a criminal offence but it makes a woman feel like she is nothing," said Macdonald.

According to Macdonald, most assaults on seniors are committed by the people they know and love best.

In Macdonald's case, the abuse was coming from her husband. For others it can come from children, and even grandchildren.

The World Health Organization defines



abuse of older adults as the "single or repeated acts, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within a relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person."

"An abusive person will try to make you feel confused — they'll deny, they'll lie, because they want to have power in a relationship. It's all about power. It's all about inequality," said Macdonald.

She added that the longer one stays in such a relationship, the feeling of entrapment becomes greater.

Four senior women are now ready to conduct presentations to other seniors and provide them with the information and support they need in order to break free from what Macdonald calls "invisible abuse."

Lorraine Bird's goal is to get the facts of abuse out in the public through her volun-

teer work with the Seniors Supporting Seniors Peer Mentoring Project.

"Abuse is not spoken about," Maedonald said. "I want to get the message that there is help out in the community and get people to start talking about it."

Bird hopes the presentations will let abused seniors know they're not alone.

Susan Caslick, a retired nurse and now one of the four volunteers with the mentoring project, said, "People see it (abuse) happen, but are not aware it is wrong."

The reason, according to Caslick, is lack of action. That's why she hopes to speak

out loud for the women who have experienced this abuse.

"It's a form of healing," she smiled.



Carol Macdonald, co-ordinator of the Seniors Supporting Seniors Peer Mentoring Project, is working to spread the message that help is available for senior women being abused.

"Seniors will realize that they're not alone."

Carlene McKenzie trained the mentors on conducting presentations with seniors.

"I got them to look at what it means to be a woman, what sexual violence is and how it is viewed by older women," recalled McKenzie.

"It's important to look at how sexual assault affects the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical well being."

The project's training facilitator also emphasized the need for volunteers to be confident because in the end, they need to instill this confidence and hope to other seniors.

After attending three afternoon training sessions, the four senior women have graduated from the program, received their certificates and are looking forward to their first presentation.

It will take place August 12 at the Lakeshore Place Retirement Residence in Burlington at 10 a.m.

Macdonald is still recruiting volunteers.

Another training session is scheduled for August 18 to 20 from 1 to 4 p.m.

If you're a senior who would like to help other seniors, contact Macdonald at (905) 825-3622 or seniors@savisofhalton.org.

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