



Father Costello and Walk the Walk

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. - George Bernard Shaw

“There is no one doing what we are doing and I still can’t get any money . . . It doesn’t make sense!” a frustrated Father Coleman Costello exclaimed. It was November 2000 and Walk the Walk, the non-profit organization that Father Costello founded in 1993 was about three months away from opening the nation’s first shelter for abused elderly. The twenty bed shelter, Mary’s House, would be the latest piece in a comprehensive program of services that Walk the Walk had developed during the last seven years to deal with the large and growing problem of mistreatment, neglect and abuse of elderly citizens in New York City.

While others might take great pride in a ground breaking achievement like Mary’s House, Father Costello’s reaction was simply, “It’s about time.” As he saw it, the problem is huge. “There is a lack of uniformity in the way elderly abuse is reported by different states and different state agencies,” Father Costello commented. “Some experts estimate there are three million elderly who suffer abuse each year.” Part of the problem, he believes is that as a society, the United States does not want to face up to the fact that between one in ten and one in twenty of our elderly citizens is abused each year, and two thirds of the alleged abusers are family members. “No one wants to read about a 101 year old woman raped by her 81 year old son-in-law,” Father Costello explained. Elderly abuse is “America’s dirty little secret.”

The mission of Walk the Walk is the “identification, prevention and treatment of elder abuse.” During its early years, the organization focused on raising public awareness of elderly abuse, securing operating funds and developing innovative programs to help abused seniors. It has taken all of Father Costello’s energy and all of his 401K retirement account to get the organization started and functioning at its current level. In recent months, however, it has become clear that the organization has reached a crossroads. It cannot continue to expand both the number of people it serves and the types of services it provides with its current staff. Father Costello, the other staff members and the volunteers at Walk the Walk are all stretched to their limits.

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In thinking about a strategic direction or, at least, a strategic emphasis for the next three to five years, several consultants have suggested that the Board of Directors of Walk the Walk needs to sharpen its focus and choose one of the following three options:

1. Growth (i.e. Build More Facilities): In Queens alone there are an estimated 20-40,000 cases of elderly abuse each year (see Exhibit 1), and at least double that number in New York City. Even though not all cases will require short-term residential treatment, one 20-bed shelter will not meet the demand. If Walk the Walk focused its efforts and built on its success in developing Mary's House, it might be able to build two or three more shelters for the elderly including one in Manhattan. A shelter in Manhattan, Father Costello believes, would give Walk the Walk "much greater visibility in the corporate community."

2. Institution Building: A second option is to focus the organization's resources on strengthening Walk the Walk's internal capabilities. Financially, Walk the Walk, had almost no reserves and has come close to running out of money several times during the last few years. The organization is also highly dependent on State and City grants and contracts (see Exhibit 2). It needs to find alternative sources of revenue, especially donations from individuals. Walk the Walk also needs better internal systems for monitoring and documenting the results of its programs to ensure that they were effective. Father Costello also believes that the organization must develop a stronger and more active Board of Directors. To do that successfully, more staff time and organizational resources will have to be spent on Board recruitment, training and communication.

3. Advocacy: A third strategic direction would be to focus more organizational effort on raising awareness about the problem of elderly abuse. Walk the Walk has struggled to obtain its current level of City and State funding. There is still very little Federal funding available.¹ By building alliances and increasing public awareness, Walk the Walk might be the catalyst in getting millions of dollars of Federal funding appropriated for programs to prevent or treat elder abuse. The organization already has a significant public profile and Father Costello receives calls from advocates in places like Florida, Kansas and California on a regular basis seeking his advice and guidance.

Presumably, over the next three to five years, Walk the Walk will need to pursue all three of these options to some extent, but if the Board of Directors does not set some priorities and sharpen the organization's focus, it will exhaust the organization's resources and burn out its staff.

The Problem

By most accounts, there are three basic categories of elderly abuse:

Domestic Elder Abuse -- Any of several forms of maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, neglect, abandonment, financial or material exploitation) of an older person by someone who has a special relationship with the elder.

¹ On December 17, 2000, Walk the Walk received its first federal grant, an operations grant through the House Appropriations Committee of \$170,000.

Institutional Elder Abuse -- Any of the above-mentioned forms of abuse that occur in residential facilities for older persons (e.g. nursing homes, foster homes, group homes, etc.).

Self-Neglect or Self-Abuse -- The behavior of an elderly person that threatens his/her own health or safety. Self-neglect generally manifests itself in an older person as a refusal or failure to provide himself/herself with adequate food, water, clothing, shelter, personal hygiene, medication and safety precautions.

Despite the reprehensible character of elder abuse, not all forms are considered to be a crime. Physical and sexual abuse are crimes, but many states do not consider it illegal to abandon an elder or misappropriate his/her savings. In a recent *New York Daily News* article, Eugene Kelley of the Brooklyn District Attorney's Elder Abuse Program stated: "In New York State, it is not a crime to put Granny out on the street. People can be charged with a crime if they abandon a child, but you can't be charged with abandonment of adults unless you put them in danger. Most Granny dumping occurs in the emergency room of a hospital or the lobby of a nursing home."

According to the staff of Walk the Walk, there are a number of reasons why elder abuse occurs. Perhaps the biggest reason is the stress on the caregivers saddled with the burden of caring for an elderly, dependent relative. "Individuals experience a wide range of emotions regarding their role as caregiver," writes Lorraine O'Donoghue of Walk the Walk, "including suffering high levels of stress and depression. Nearly half of all caregivers become depressed. . . . They experience losses of their own, including limitations on their freedom, poor job performance, isolation from family and friends, and the lack of attention to their own health and relaxation." While Father Costello does not excuse elderly abuse, he certainly understands that most people are ill-trained and ill-prepared when they are thrust into the role of caregiver. It is also generally not a role for which they volunteer. To make matters worse, according to Lorraine O'Donoghue, "almost half of these caregivers are also raising children under 18 years old at the same time." According to Father Costello, to prevent or mitigate elderly abuse means not only helping the elderly, but helping the caregivers and abusers.

Another aspect of the problem of elder abuse is alcoholism. With a long history in working with substance abuse among young people, Father Costello quickly recognized its devastating consequences for the elderly. "Alcohol related problems put as many older Americans in the hospital as heart attacks," he reported, "and as many as 70% of hospitalized older adults have alcohol related problems." Like many other aspects of the elder abuse problem, alcoholism is misunderstood or ignored. "Symptoms of alcoholism are frequently misdiagnosed in the elderly, as signs of aging," explains Father Costello, "such as dementia, depression, confusion, forgetfulness, falls or accidents." Rather than help a senior deal with alcoholism and help the senior improve his or her quality of life, many family members "minimize the problems with the attitude of 'Why not let him drink, it's the only pleasure he has left at his age.'"

Many instances of elder abuse go unreported and many seniors suffer in silence. "Studies show that many do so because they fear reprisal from their abuser. Some are afraid to leave

their homes. Others cannot afford to move out. Many physically cannot. Almost all are ashamed.” (*Los Angeles Times*, June 1999). Some experts estimate that only one in fourteen incidents of elder abuse get reported. Herbert Stupp, the New York City Commissioner for the Department of Aging makes the following assertion about domestic violence. “If you take a young woman in a wife-beating situation, even though it is difficult for her to leave her home and go to a shelter or other housing, she can visualize a new life. For seniors, in many cases, they can’t visualize that. They may be being abused in the home, but they don’t have more working potential to buy another home or rent another apartment. It makes them feel even more trapped.”

For those seniors who do try to escape from an abusive situation, there are few, if any, safe, hospitable alternatives. The New York City Department for the Aging did a survey of over 70 domestic violence shelters where elderly were being referred. The Department found that the elderly rarely stayed more than a few days. Among the reasons that these shelters did not work for the elderly were that they were not handicapped accessible, had no staff with gerontological training, and could not address the dietary and medical needs of the elderly. In other words, these shelters were designed for women and children, not the elderly.

In surveying the current situation, Father Costello noted that one in six people in the United States is over the age of 60. “By 2030, one in four people will be over age 60,” he notes. The fastest growing age group in America is those over 85. The problem of elderly abuse will only get worse, he believes, especially if we as a society try to ignore it and pretend it does not exist.

Father Costello

“I’m a pain in the neck,” is how Father Coleman Costello describes himself. At 6’4” and 250 pounds, he has the ability to be a very large pain in the neck. Over time, he has learned to operate in many different venues. He is comfortable talking to gang members and drug abusers on the toughest streets of Brooklyn and Queens. He is equally effective working the halls of the State Legislature in Albany. And of course he is comfortable in Catholic Churches in all kinds of neighborhoods where he continues to perform the sacraments and services. His admirers refer to him as a “sweetheart,” “hero” and “mover and shaker”. Everyone agrees that he is the driving force behind Walk the Walk.

Father Costello was born in Queens in 1943. While he was growing up, he saw many of his friends suffer from alcohol and drug abuse. 1967 is noteworthy for Father Costello both because it was the year he was ordained and because it was the height of the heroin epidemic in this country. Shortly after his ordination, he began working with drug addicted children in Brooklyn. Rather than wait for addicts to come to him, he went to the parks where drugs were being sold. “I did not tell the kids not to do drugs,” Father Coleman explained. “But I let them know they could come to me if they wanted help.” As he saw the problem, most of the people “didn’t want to do drugs or alcohol, but were addicted.”

The young priest was not the type to simply accept the current situation. He wanted to find or create a better answer. In the late 1970s, Father Costello founded the Outreach Project in

Queens. One of the first programs of its kind, it operated out of a storefront and focused its efforts in the streets and in reaching out to young people rather than waiting for them to come for treatment.

After 25 years of immersing himself in fighting substance abuse, Father Costello “burned out.” With his elderly mother in need of his time and support, Father Costello left his high stress work at the Outreach Project and returned to more traditional priestly duties in Park Slope, Brooklyn and later in Bayside, Queens. The death of his mother got him thinking about the plight of the abused elderly. True to form, he immersed himself in this new issue. “It makes me feel good to help people,” he likes to say. Or, more simply as he explained to his bishop, “This is what I do.”

In 1993, he joined the board of the National Coalition of Grandparents. He then decided that there was more that could be done for the victims of elderly abuse. So he founded Walk the Walk to help elderly members in the community who were under severe duress.

A Day in the Life

“I arrived at the office yesterday at around 5:20,” Father Costello explained when asked to describe a typical day. “No one bothers me and I can get a lot of paperwork done.” Joe Dobbins a 74 year old volunteer at Walk the Walk arrived about 6:15 with a cup of coffee and a need to talk. Around 7:30 Joe O’Donohue, the CFO arrived. For the next hour he discussed the current cash flow issues confronting the agency and the problem that “We can’t spend money we don’t have.” They also worked out the project budget for a foundation proposal due the following week.

A good portion of the rest of the morning was then taken up with staff issues. One of the staff members was concerned about an apparent disparity between her salary and that of some of her colleagues doing comparable work. Father Costello also was concerned about the staffing of the Alpha Omega unit which counseled elders with alcohol problems. He was concerned about the way some of the cases were being handled and about the vision or lack of vision coming from the unit’s leadership.

Throughout the morning, his assistant Ann Fitzgibbon handed him a stream of phone messages which he tried his best to return. There were construction issues at Mary’s House. Board members called in with concerns and suggestions. There were politicians and staff members from New York City Agencies that needed his attention.

By 3 PM he left the office. He stopped by the Mary’s House construction site to check on the progress and chat with some labor union officials who were helpful in getting the unions to donate a percentage of the labor on this project. Remembering that the cook that night was not very good, he stopped for some white castle hamburgers on his way back to the rectory. Once at the rectory, which also houses a homeless shelter, he began another round of phone calls pausing from 6-7:00 to have “a peaceful dinner” with the other priests. After dinner he was back on the phone, helping to plan an upcoming fund raising event for Walk the Walk and also talking with a mother from Park Slope about helping to get her son into a drug treatment program.

At 10:30, he finally put down the phone and picked up the remote control. His goal, as always, was to find something amusing on television. “I like to go to bed with a smile.”

The Program

The original goal of Walk the Walk was to build a shelter for the victims of elder abuse and a twenty-four hour hotline. With no good alternatives available for abused elders, Father Costello wanted to create a “model shelter” that would show the need for this kind of service and spur other communities to build similar facilities. He soon encountered major regulatory and funding obstacles. Since there were no other elderly abuse shelters, it was unclear which regulatory agency had jurisdiction and which set of rules needed to be followed. As Father Costello put it, “What we’re really opening here is a quasi-nursing home, quasi-domestic-violence shelter, quasi whatever we come up with.”

Raising the capital for Mary’s House proved equally complex and challenging. To purchase the site, Father Costello obtained a \$350,000 bridge loan. Using his many influential friends, Father Costello orchestrated a full-scale assault on City, State and Federal funding sources. He could not get a line item into the New York State budget, but the Assemblyman from Queens used his special “Member Item Grant” to secure an \$82,000 grant for the shelter. The labor unions, with whom he had very close relations, offered \$71,000 in donated labor. A corporation made an in-kind furniture donation worth \$120,000. Finally, the big breakthrough came when the State of New York made a \$1.8 million grant from its Homeless Housing Assistance Corporation (see Exhibit 3, Capital Budget for Mary’s House).

Construction on Mary’s House began in December 1999 and is scheduled for completion in March 2001. Through all the ups and downs, Father Costello has remained optimistic, if somewhat frustrated by the slow pace. “Its been a difficult time,” he confessed, but “I am committed to this and I know it’s going to work.”

As it turned out, the delays in developing Mary’s House, forced Walk the Walk to focus on other programs. As he got more involved in the issues of elder abuse, Father Costello realized that only a small percentage of elders would need all the protection and services of a specially designed shelter.

For the broader population of elderly abuse victims, Walk the Walk developed four programs, which could be accessed on either a referral or walk-in basis.

STEPS (Services to Empower and Protect Seniors) is Walk the Walk’s primary entry point for elderly clients seeking services. The people staffing this department do an initial assessment. A case manager is then assigned to help the elderly person access entitlements such as income support, Medicaid, home care, Social Security, meals on wheels and pension and survivor benefits. The case manager may also help the senior with transportation, housing and medical problems. It is not unusual for the case manager to accompany the senior on some medical appointments to help and to assess the quality of medical and psychiatric services the senior is receiving. Fundamentally, the STEPS program provides counseling, client advocacy and referrals.

A more specialized program that Walk the Walk has developed is its Crime Victims Assistance Program. Working with the New York Bar Association and students from St. John's, CUNY Law and Pace University, Walk the Walk provides pro-bono legal advice. Many abused elderly have been the victims of financial hardship as a result of relinquishing power of attorney to their caregivers. Many victims do not know where to get started in dealing with criminal and civil legal actions such as restraining orders. The Crime Victims Assistance Program gives these individuals help and advice. It also helps victims access the services of the New York City Police Department with whom Father Costello has developed a very strong working relationship spanning more than thirty years.

Another specialized program is the Alpha Omega Substance Abuse Program. It is New York State's first non-hospital based, outpatient, drug and alcohol program specifically designed for the elderly, this program draws on Father Costello's long involvement in the field of substance abuse and the need for this service. "There are 150,000 cases of untreated drug/alcohol abuse in the elderly population in New York City," Father Costello asserts. There have been some challenges in getting this program funded. Local elected officials were optimistic that they could get him a \$400,000 seed grant. After several twists and turns it came in at \$25,000. "While \$25,000 is nothing to sneeze at," Father Costello commented, it was much less than we expected or needed and "it really hurt the cause." Eventually, Walk the Walk took a different route and obtained a \$255,000 grant from New York State to run the program.

The fourth program that Walk the Walk launched while waiting for Mary's House to get funded and built was a Program for Batterers. As consultants McCafferty and Calick wrote in explaining the need for this program, "Providing treatment to the victim will, in most case situations, not eliminate the risk of further abuse. All victims of domestic violence have an abuser and, that person will, more often than not, be a relative upon whom the victim has become dependent." While Father Costello is very clear that his client is the abused senior, he believes that a comprehensive approach including counseling and support groups for abusers is far more effective than a fragmented, partial approach involving only the victim. He also notes that rising apartment rents in New York City are creating additional problems because young people who want to live independently are forced to move in with their elderly relatives, setting the stage for an abusive relationship.

The Need for Greater Focus

Having 'burned out' once before, Father Costello sees many of the same danger signs at Walk the Walk. The headline of an article in their latest newsletter reads, "More Cases Are Being Referred to Walk the Walk." The story goes on to describe the fact that it is not only the number of referrals, but the "seriousness and severity of some of these cases" that is increasing. On the one hand, the whole organization can feel good about Walk the Walk's growing reputation and success. On the other hand, the organization's internal capacity is already being stretched, and their signature program, Mary's House, is about to come on line.

One way for the Board of Directors of Walk the Walk to think about which of the three options (Growth, Institution Building, or Advocacy) to emphasize in the next three to five years, is to think about benchmarks. If Walk the Walk chooses the Growth option, the primary benchmark will be the development of three additional shelters. Were there other benchmarks, Father Costello wondered, that the board should utilize under this option?

Defining clear, easily measurable benchmarks if Walk the Walk chose the second option, Institution Building, would be more difficult. One easily measurable benchmark, Father Costello noted, was building an adequate financial reserve. How big a reserve should Walk the Walk build in the next three to five years, and what size reserve did the organization need to function effectively and efficiently? Another important benchmark related to this option that the Board might consider would be to improve the quality and effectiveness of the existing programs. How can that be objectively measured?

The third broad option, Advocacy, is probably the hardest to benchmark. For example, obtaining Federal funding for elderly abuse would almost certainly be the result of many factors, only some of which Walk the Walk could control. On the other hand, educating the public to this problem should not be made a lower priority, simply because it is hard to measure.

With a Board Meeting and a possible retreat coming up, Father Costello thought it would be a good idea to present these three options to the Board. It was time to set benchmarks and priorities.

Final Thoughts

“I am the charismatic leader of this organization,” Father Costello explained. “I know I am not supposed to be doing paperwork. But who will do it?” Closely linked to this issue of how to allocate his time was the issue of money. “How do we get the attention of the Federal Government? How do we get the attention of the large private organizations? Where will we get the money to expand?”

He also wondered how he would get the public to “accept the fact that elderly abuse exists in all communities, that it is widespread and that very often it is hidden.” But above all, Father Costello worried about the elderly. “You’ve got to see the cases we’re dealing with here,” he remarked. “This is tragic stuff.”

Study Questions for Walk the Walk

1. Which of the three options should Walk the Walk emphasize during the next three to five years?
2. Based on the financial information in the exhibits, how is Walk the Walk doing financially? What is your biggest area of concern?
3. How should Father Costello spend his time? What can the Board do to keep him from getting burned out?
4. What benchmarks should Walk the Walk use to evaluate its effectiveness?

Exhibit 1

Queens has a higher rate of Elderly Abuse

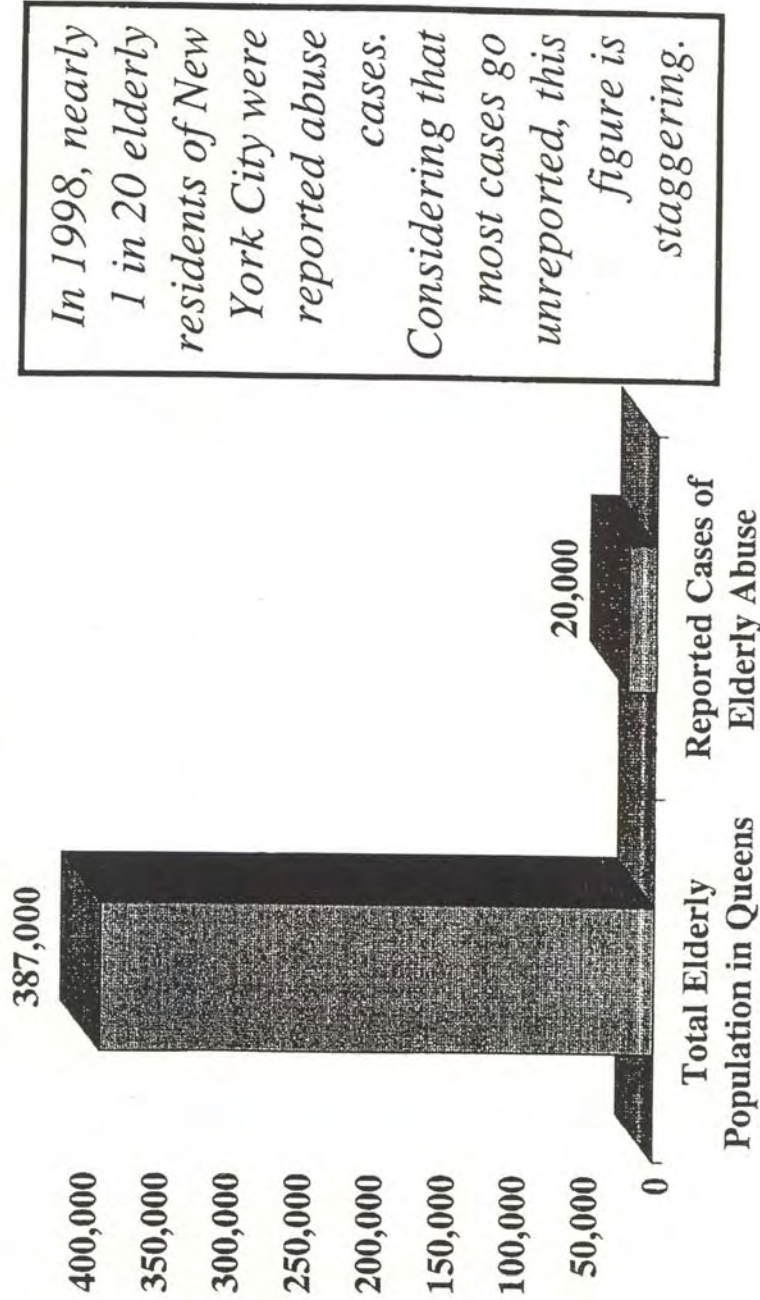


Exhibit 2
Walk the Walk Operating Budget (\$000)

	Draft Audit FY 1999	Projected Actuals FY 2000	Budget FY 2001
Revenues			
<i>Contributions</i>			
Individuals	119	10	80
Events	70	120	120
Foundations & Corp.	<u>0</u>	<u>30</u>	<u>80</u>
Sub-Total	189	160	280
Other Revenue			
City of New York	294	0	0
Dept. for the Aging (City of NY)	0	423	437
State Office for the Aging	0	75	119
State Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse	0	190	257
State Contract: Counseling Victims of Crime	0	132	143
State Homeless Housing Assistance Corporation	0	0	435
Medicare	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>30</u>
Sub-Total	294	820	1421
Total Revenues	483	980	1701
Expenses			
STEPS	161	200	200
Alpha Omega Substance Abuse	149	200	510
Mary's House Shelter	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>519</u>
Sub-Total (Program Services)	310	400	1229
Supporting Services			
Administration	63	292	323
Fund Raising	<u>97</u>	<u>97</u>	<u>107</u>
Sub-Total	160	389	430
Total Expense	470	789	1659
Surplus (Deficit)	13	191	42

Note: Fiscal Year is July 1
through June 30.

Exhibit 3
Walk the Walk Capital Budget – Mary’s House Shelter
(\$ Thousands)
SOURCES

Homeless Assistance Grant	1,800
Burrough of Queens (State Assembly Grant)	82
In Kind Grant (Labor Unions)	71
In Kind Gift (Furniture)	<u>120</u>
Sub-Total	2,073
Bridge Loan	<u>350</u>
Total Sources of Funding	2,423

USES

Construction	1276
Land Acquisition	337
Closing Fees	5
Construction and Title Insurance	23
Architect Fees	83
Development Fee, Borings Fee, J51 Fee	48
Survey and Environmental	6
Special Electrical and Window Enhancements	71
Start Up Costs	12
Capital and Replacement Reserve	<u>84</u>
Sub-Total	1945
Furniture and Equipment	130
Contingency (15%)	311
Interest on the Bridge Loan	<u>32</u>
Total Uses of Funding	2418



Exhibit 1