

Police recruit Wollongong cabbies to keep watch for hidden elder abuse



Angela Thompson

SEPTEMBER 11 2018 - 7:00PM

NSW Taxi Council's Martin Rogers, Rima Elhage, Acting Insp Charles Hutchins, Mahamad Choubassi, Sen Con Sharon White and Illawarra Taxi Network GM John Meagas-General.

Wollongong police have recruited the city's taxi drivers as their eyes and ears, in a ramped-up bid to stamp out elder abuse.

Sometimes they're fragile ... If we don't look after them, who will?

Mahamad Choubassi

More than 50 cabbies attended an information session Monday night aimed at alerting them to the signs that their elderly fares could be being mistreated.

The city's taxis will also be fitted with stickers bearing the Elder Abuse hotline number, identifying methods for preventing abuse, and pushing a message of respect for the elderly.

Wollongong Police District duty officer, Acting Inspector Charles Hutchins, said this was one of several strategies now being undertaken to tackle the often hidden problem.

"Taxi drivers are in a unique position to identify elder abuse in the community," he said.

"They are a primary transport option for the elderly and have one-on-one conversations with their passengers where some of the risk factors of elder abuse may become evident.

"By partnering with the Illawarra Taxi Network to implement this strategy, Wollongong Police District aims to identify and prevent instances of elder abuse in the community."

Illawarra Taxi Network's Mahamad Choubassi, who attended Monday's meeting, said cab drivers were uniquely placed to look out for the elderly.

"Most of our customers are elderly people," he said.

"When you drive them all of the time, they become like family – they trust you.

“Sometimes they’re fragile, and we’ve got to look after them. If we don’t look after them, who will?”

Mr Choubassi said the taxi network would hold further meetings to spread the lessons of Monday’s meeting to all the city’s cab drivers.

He said untidy clothing and bruising were the signs he would most keep watch for.

“If they’re not dressed well, that may mean they’re not being looked after,” he said. “If they have any bruises – you always, say, ‘what happened to your arm?’”

“They do trust cab drivers. That’s the reason we are getting involved.”

Police encourage anyone who suspects a case of elder abuse to dial 000, Crime Stoppers (1800 333 000), their local police station on the Elder Abuse helpline (1800 628 221), which provides further information, guidance and reporting options.

The police strategy has been in planning for some time, but has been set in motion less than a fortnight after police leveled [shocking allegations against a 28-year-old Thirroul carer](#) accused of assaulting her 81-year-old charge. The case is before the courts.