

Elder abuse cries for remedy

FOR 50,000 NEW YORK senior citizens, the phrase "golden years" is nothing more than a cruel irony. Instead of golden, their later years have turned out to be black and blue.

That is the number of people 60 and over who last year were beaten, sexually assaulted, humiliated, robbed or killed in New York City — perhaps next door, perhaps across the street from our own homes. Many of them, after a lifetime of caring for their families, now live in fear of their own children.

"It is a hidden problem," says the Rev. Coleman Costello, 56, in typical charitable fashion. For the last four years he has made it his life's work to



help victimized seniors.

With that goal in mind, the priest founded Walk the Walk in Long Island City, the only program in the city dealing with elder abuse. He also plans to begin building the country's first emergency shelter for abused seniors in Glendale next May.

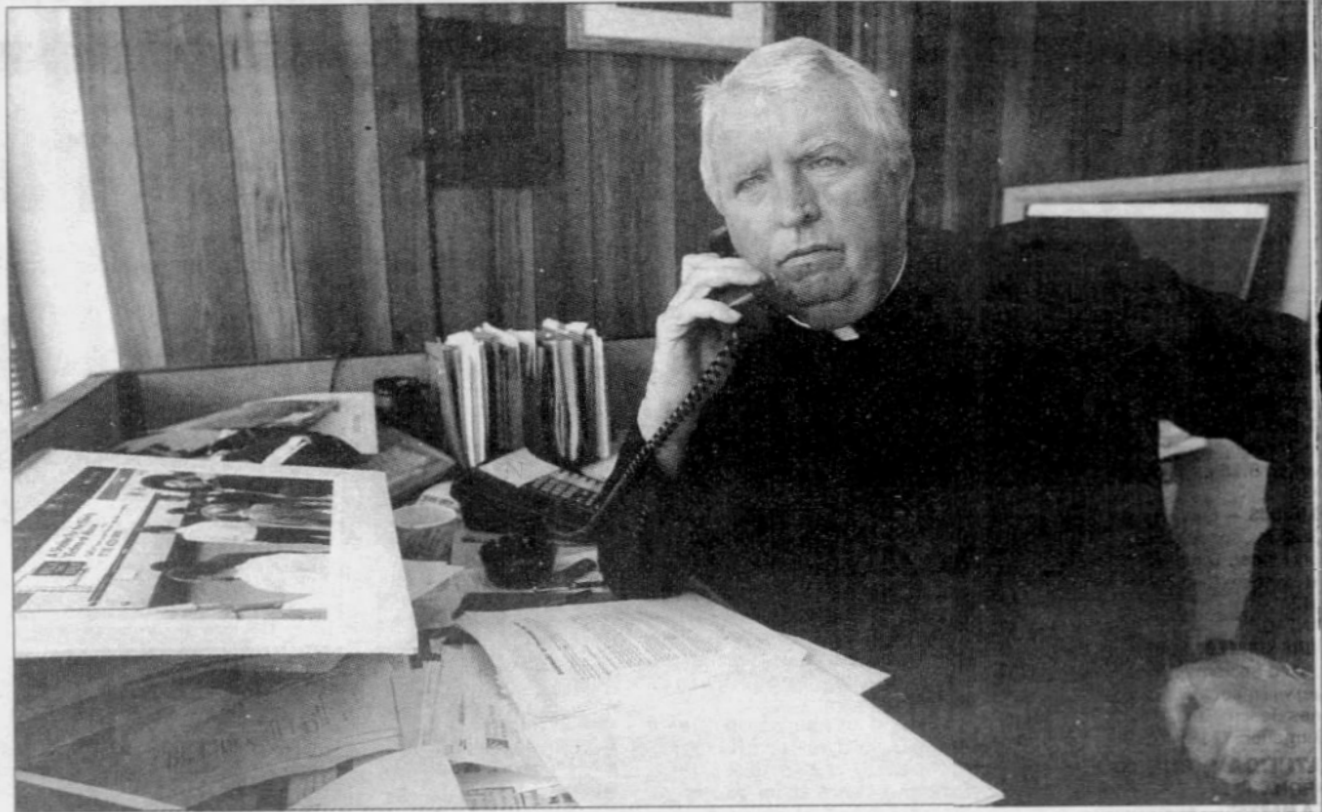
"We cannot allow violence," he says in Walk the Walk's modest Jackson Ave. storefront, "to take the place of kindness."

Elder abuse is one of New York's most shameful, dirty little secrets — and it is getting to be not so little anymore. The victimization of senior citizens has reached epidemic proportions.

According to Dr. Toshio Tatara, executive director of the nonprofit National Center on Elder Abuse, a Washington, D.C., research institution, 5% of the city's 1.3 million residents 60 or older were abused in some way by the people supposed to care for them.

Between 1986 and 1996, Tatara says, elder abuse increased 150% nationwide. With the country's population becoming older, abuse cases will inevitably rise.

The crying need for the services provided by Walk the Walk notwithstanding, petty election year politicking is



WILLIE ANDERSON DAILY NEWS

SENIORS' ADVOCATE: The Rev. Coleman Costello is on a mission to help abused senior citizens.

endangering Walk the Walk's survival.

Plans for a much-needed alcohol and drug outpatient clinic, a free legal services center for the victims and a counseling and education center for the abusers are all on the back burner at this point. Fortunately, a \$1.8 million grant from the New York Dormitory Authority and the New York State Department of Social Services to buy the property and build the shelter — approved in April — has not been affected.

Partisan budget battles at state and city levels are to blame for Costello's money problems. Gov. Pataki vetoed \$400,000 allocated to Walk the Walk by local Democratic legislators, and the mayor is withholding \$209,000 earmarked by local City Council members to fund Walk the Walk.

"This means all I have is \$43,000 from the State Legislature," Costello says, "which is not enough even for the salaries of the seven people who work at the office."

There seems to be some hope, though. On Friday, the city's Department for the Aging phoned Costello and asked him for last year's budget. It also wanted detailed plans on how Walk the Walk would spend the \$209,000.

"When a politician tells me there is no money," Costello says, his blue eyes flashing, "I remind him that the Gulf War cost \$1 billion a day — and money was found."

He is a man of faith, so he trusts Mayor Giuliani will finally do the right thing. "I complied with the request, and wrote a letter to the mayor asking

him to release the funds," he says.

A chain-smoking hulk of a man who talks in a streetwise, rapid-fire stream of words, Costello looks more cop than priest. Yet, for 30 years he has helped people of all ages with alcohol and drug problems.

Before founding Walk the Walk in 1995, he had proven his mettle as director for 25 years of the Queens Outreach Project, a program for teenage alcoholics and drug addicts.

WITH HIS MIXTURE of street smarts, administrative experience and commitment, Costello has what is needed to be an effective champion for the abused elderly. His programs must be funded if New York is to do something about this shameful, dirty secret.