

Elder abuse comes in many forms

It happens in our communities. Elderly persons suffer at the hands of their loved ones or their caregivers. Sometimes they are neglected by family or they may neglect themselves. As the number of seniors in our region continues to climb, the more the issues will surface.

You may know someone like *Edith* (names have been changed to keep identity confidential):

Edith is 75 years old and lives with her son and his wife. She is in poor health and is barely mobile. She is at home most of the time except for doctor's visits and an occasional visit to see her sister. She has visited the emergency room on several occasions lately saying she falls when she stands up from her chair. The bruises on her face appear more like an open face slap, but she says that she hit her head on the coffee table. She also has bruises on her upper arm that look suspiciously like someone grabbed her arm. She thinks it might have happened when her son picked her up to put her in the chair. The doctor suggests that she might want to see her regular doctor to discover why she is falling so frequently. She says that she will tell the doctor next time she has an appointment.

From this account, there is no way of knowing if abuse is occurring. Unless *Edith* makes a report to the Department of Social Services or notifies the police it is unlikely that it will ever be investigated. What can you do?

Consider another scenario that happens in our area:

John is 80 years old and has lived in the area all off his life. He still lives in his simple home on a mountain farm of about 50 acres. He used to work in a mill, and farmed tobacco and raised two sons with his wife who is now deceased. John has some dementia, and does not take care of himself as well as he should. He tells his sons they will get the farm when he dies, but he wants to live in the house until then. The sons would like to sell the land now to a developer for serious financial gain. John is stubborn and will not agree. The sons take steps to have their father deemed incompetent to carry on his daily affairs.

This might be a case of financial abuse, or the sons might be sincerely looking out for the well-being of their father. It is the type of situation that may take time to unfold. How *John* is treated in the process and what becomes of the land and his home will determine if this is considered abuse. What is your response to the situation?

Consider *Mary*:

Mary is 68 years old and has not worked in over ten years due to health problems. She has no family in the area and lives on a small fixed income in her home of thirty years. Her neighbors find her to be peculiar, and they know that

she does not take care of her home base don the outside. They only see her leave about once a week when she goes to the grocery store. They doubt that she eats very well based on the small amount of groceries she carries in. The few neighbors who try to befriend her notice that the inside of the home is in a shambles and that Mary does not let anyone beyond the front door. The neighbors do not know what to do.

From this brief description it may be considered a case of self neglect. *Mary* may not see it that way. *Mary* might feel comfortable with her lifestyle and the choices she makes. Then again, she may need help. What will you do?

All three scenarios might be considered forms of elder abuse and there is something you can do. If you have concerns about an elderly person or suspect some form of abuse, even if you are not sure, you should speak up.

You can call Adult Protective Services in Haywood County (452-6620) and make a report, and your identity will remain confidential.

Be ready to give the elder's name, address and description of your concerns to the person handling the call. Be aware, that despite your concerns, an older person has the right to decline assistance from any source if they are mentally competent.

We have each been given the responsibility under North Carolina law to keep elders safe from harm. Your concern for another could save an elder from undue suffering.

For further information, call the Elder SAFE Hotline:
866-496-5406

###

(This article first appeared in ENCORE Magazine, February 2008, Mountaineer Publishing. It has been edited for all seven counties of the 30th Judicial District.)

For more information, contact:

Michael Rich
rich@30thalliance.org
(828) 452-2122