

The Growing Issue of Elder Abuse

If we asked people on the street if they knew an elderly person who had been exploited financially or abused physically, or had come to some kind of harm from another person, most would say yes.

Ask those same people if they knew that abusing a senior citizen was a crime and could bring jail time to the perpetrator and the number would drop off dramatically.

Across the country, the number of elderly is growing and the same is true in western North Carolina. In 1997, 12% of the population in North Carolina was older adults (22.5% of Clay County is over 65), the projection for 2020 is 18%. With that increase comes the growing potential for abuse, exploitation, or neglect of the elderly in our community.

In a recent survey of professionals who work with the elderly in the seven western counties (includes social services, clergy, law enforcement, etc.), 72% suspect that abuse is going on in their communities; 91% believe that elder abuse goes underreported.

In 2007, the 30th Judicial District Alliance for Domestic Violence-Sexual Assault began a program to promote awareness of elder abuse issues in the seven western counties called Elder SAFE.

Sybil Mann, the executive director of the Alliance has this to say about the situation:

“Our western North Carolina communities are aging. Baby boomers are growing older and retiring and new retirees are moving into our area. More young people are relocating away from the mountains for employment, so we are seeing a shift in our population demographics. Persons over the age of 65 are our fastest growing group.

Sadly, elder abuse and financial exploitation are on the rise as well –but we are helping only a small fraction of these crime victims. The Alliance of domestic violence programs saw the need to partner with elder services providers to increase community awareness of elder abuse, neglect and exploitation and how we can respond effectively.”

Elder SAFE defines abuse as:

Any action that causes harm or creates a serious risk of harm to an elder by a caregiver or other person in a position of trust, or failure by a caregiver to meet the elder’s basic needs or to protect the elder from harm

Elder abuse can include verbal, emotional, financial or sexual as well as physical abuse or neglect.

According to figures from the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA), neglect is the most common form of elder mistreatment, followed by physical abuse, then by financial exploitation.

Elder abuse remains largely hidden because seniors resist help or are physically isolated and cannot obtain help. A primary reason for resisting help is because neglect or abuse often happens at the hands of family members.

According to the NCEA, adult children are the most frequent abusers of the elderly in domestic settings, and spouses are the second most frequent abusers.

Because family members are often the perpetrators of abuse, this only heightens the fear and shame of seniors and complicates the process of asking for and receiving help.

Some signs of abuse:

- Bruises, welts or marks lacking good explanation
- Frequent or inconsistently explained falls, injuries
- Housing in disrepair or unsafe living conditions
- Unexplained withdrawals from bank accounts
- Radical change in elder's behavior
- Hesitance to talk openly, especially around abuser

If you have concerns that abuse may be happening to someone you know, even if you are not sure, please speak up. Each of us has a responsibility under North Carolina law to keep elders who are vulnerable safe from harm.

In Clay County, reports of elder abuse can be made to Adult Protective Services: (828) 389-6301.

When making the call, be ready to give the elder's name, address, and a description about your concerns. Your identity can be kept confidential and your call could save an elder from undue suffering.

For more information or additional support, contact Elder SAFE:
1-866-496-5406 toll-free

SIDEBAR 1

Some Elder Abuse Statistics

According to the best available estimates, between 1 and 2 million Americans age 65 or older have been injured, exploited, or

otherwise mistreated by someone on whom they depended for care or protection.

Data on elder abuse in domestic settings suggest that 1 in 14 incidents, excluding incidents of self-neglect, come to the attention of authorities.

Current estimates put the overall reporting of financial exploitation at only 1 in 25 cases, suggesting that there may be at least 5 million financial abuse victims each year.

SIDEBAR 2

Elder Abuse Resources

www.30thalliance.org

(Local organization dealing with domestic violence and elder abuse issues)

www.ncea.aoa.gov

(National Center on Elder Abuse)

1-866-496-5406 (toll-free)

Elder SAFE Hotline (7 Western Counties)

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

National Domestic Abuse Hotline

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For more information, contact:

Michael Rich

rich@30thalliance.org

(828) 452-2122