

Understanding Elder Abuse

Elder abuse is a crime that has civil and criminal penalties. Elder abuse laws are designed to protect against abuse of vulnerable adults. The number of people aged 60 years and older significantly increases as the Baby Boom generation ages so it is likely that the prevalence of elder abuse will continue to grow.

Types of Abuse

Elder abuse is intentionally causing harm or serious risk of harm to a vulnerable adult. There are five main types of abuse: physical, emotional/psychological, neglect/self neglect, sexual abuse, and financial exploitation.

- **Physical abuse** is defined as causing (or threatening to cause) physical pain or injury. This definition includes any non-accidental physical injury caused by another person.
- **Emotional abuse** means to cause emotional or mental pain, anguish or distress on a vulnerable adult by verbal acts or non-verbal conduct. Some examples of verbal acts of abuse include intimidation, taunting, use of power and control, or belittling. Some examples of non-verbal conduct that constitute emotional or
- **Psychological abuse** includes lack of communication with the adult, isolating the adult from other family members and friends, leaving the adult alone, or causing fear and loneliness.
- **Neglect** is harm to an adult caused by failure to provide for basic needs, such as food, water, shelter, or clothing. This category includes self-neglect, which is the inability of the adult to carry out daily living activities or manage personal finances. The individual himself cannot take care of them self or request assistance.
- **Sexual abuse** is unwanted sexual contact of any kind.
- **Financial exploitation** is the illegal taking, misuse or hiding the vulnerable adult's property, assets or money.

Warning Signs of Abuse

Some of the warning signs of abuse are easily noticeable; however, many signs are easy to miss. Some common signs of abuse include:

- Bedsores, pressure sores, unattended medical needs, failure to pain
- Physical conditions such as, bruises, burns, broken bones, or pressure marks
- Withdrawal from normal activities
- Changes in concentration and depression
- Threats and other intimidation and control behaviors by the caregiver
- Bruising of the breasts or genital area
- Unusual activity in bank accounts, missing personal items, changes to wills, power of attorney or other legal documents or an overall change in their financial situation
- Self neglect.

Self-neglect is also important when thinking about elder abuse. Sometimes, seniors don't take good care of themselves due to declining health, social isolation, memory impairment and/or alcohol or drug dependency. Some common signs of self-neglect are when people



don't take medications correctly, attempt suicide, have poor personal hygiene or have unclean or unsafe living conditions.

Who May Be a Victim?

The most common victims of elder abuse are women. Older individuals who are socially isolated or who have a mental impairment are likely to be vulnerable to abuse. Persons 80 years of age & older suffer abuse and neglect two to three times more than the rest of the population. While elder abuse does occur in both domestic and institutional settings, it is more common in home settings. Family members, particularly adult children and spouses, are most likely to be the abuser because they are either financially dependant on, or the primary caregiver of, the vulnerable adults.

Reporting Abuse

If you are the victim of elder abuse, you can tell your doctor or nurse about it. They can help you. You can also call the police, a trusted neighbor or family member or someone from your faith community. It is important that you tell someone.

Abuse is vastly underreported so the actual number of victims is not known. Many older adults are abused, neglected or exploited every year, yet the majority of victims don't get help. A study by the National Center on Elder Abuse found that only 16% of the abusive situations are referred for help, which means that 84% of these crimes are never reported. Reports of abusive situations increase every year as more and more people become educated on the warning signs of abuse. We all have a responsibility to protect vulnerable adults from unsafe or abusive situations. Michigan law requires persons in certain professions to report elder abuse.

If you become aware of abuse in your community, contact your local police department and make a report -remember that elder abuse is a crime! Anytime you suspect abuse, call Adult Protective Services' 24-hour Hotline at 1-877-963-6006. They are required to begin an investigation within 24 hours. You may report confidentially and anonymously. When reporting, you will have to give the name of the victim and as many details as you have about the suspected abuse.

Abuse can occur in a person's home, including retirement communities, or in a health care facility such as a nursing home, hospital, adult foster care facility or home for the aged. Most health care facilities are required to post the name, title, location and phone number of an individual in the facility responsible for taking complaints and conducting investigations. If you become aware of abuse in a health care facility, immediately make a report to the law enforcement agency in the jurisdiction where the abuse occurred. You should also contact the Attorney General's Office at (800) 24-ABUSE (242-2873) and report on-line or by mail to:

Michigan Department of Community Health, Bureau of Health Systems, Complaint Investigation Unit, P.O. Box 30664, Lansing, MI 48909. You can also report it on the Internet at: www.michigan.aov/bhs, click on "Health Systems & Licensing" and "Featured Services" whenever abuse occurs or is suspected.



Additional resources include:

Vulnerable Adult and Exploitation Helpline (800) 996-6226

Elder Law Center (313) 937-8291

Citizens for Better Care (800) 833-9548.

By: Jodie Giles

Wayne County Neighborhood Legal Services, Redford Elder Law Center