

ARC of Beaver safeguards seniors who are victims of abuse

By Daniel Casciato
For Beaver County Senior News

Elder abuse often goes unrecognized or unreported. It takes on the form of physical abuse, mental abuse, neglect or exploitation. Social isolation and mental impairment are two factors that may make a senior more vulnerable to abuse. The reason that it's often not reported is because seniors fear that they will be removed from their homes.

However, ARC of Beaver, which investigates complaints of abuse, neglect and exploitation for Beaver County seniors, strives to keep seniors within their own homes. "Following our investigations, we have successfully kept seniors in their homes and have also kept them as safe as possible," says Judy Hamilton, ARC's older adult protective services supervisor.

According to Judy, the Older Adult Protective Services Act – a civil act that was signed into law in November 1988 – protects seniors who are at risk for abuse, neglect or exploitation. The law established a voluntary statewide system of reporting and investigating suspected abuse, neglect, exploitation and abandonment of seniors ages 60 and older.

Under the act, abuse is defined as continued actions or omission by a caregiver that results in serious physical, emotional or financial injury to the senior. Such acts or omissions include physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, financial exploitation or neglect. Suspected incidences of self-neglect are also covered by the act.

The act provides immunity from civil and criminal liability for those reporting suspected abuse or neglect. Each county's area agency on aging has a responsibility under the law to investigate and provide protective services whenever necessary. The Beaver County



Office on Aging subcontracts this program to ARC of Beaver, which is a corporation under Achieva. The act is aimed towards those seniors who are unable to advocate for themselves, according to Judy.

Any Beaver County resident age 60 or older who resides in their own home, apartment or licensed facility such as a nursing home, and is a victim of abuse, neglect, exploitation or abandonment is eligible for protective services.

A referral is accepted when there is reason to suspect that the senior is incapacitated in some manner, without a responsible caregiver and with imminent risk of danger to the senior and or their property.

"If we get referrals or reports from somebody who is out of the county, we would refer them to one of the other agencies in Pennsylvania," says Judy.

During the last fiscal year (July 2005 to June 2006), 512 reports were filed with protective services. When ARC receives a referral, they investigate the allegation.

"A caseworker is assigned a case to investigate if there is a sign of abuse or neglect," says Judy. "They would then complete a total assessment of their physical and mental and environmental situations."

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If it's determined that there is a case of abuse or neglect, ARC will connect the senior with services available in the county to alleviate the abuse or neglect. If the assessment does not reveal an abusive situation, it could lead to a finding of other needs for the senior. The older adult may not know how to obtain these needed services.

"If that's the scenario, we will inform the senior of all the services that are available in the county that they qualify for and help facilitate them getting connected to those services," says Judy.

One such situation is seniors who cannot care for themselves being left alone during the day while the caregivers have gone to work. A situation like this usually arises because the caregiver is not aware that there are care services available to come in and reduce the time the senior is alone, or even help with a senior's personal care or meals.

"We'll help make the caregivers or seniors aware of services like this and connect them to those services," says Judy.

If the investigation turns up criminal acts like a suspicious death, ARC refers the cases to local law enforcement. "If they pursue a criminal case, then we proceed to

help protect the senior and keep them safe."

If a senior or caregiver calls about problems they perceive may be going on in a nursing home or personal care home, ARC will conduct an investigation with compliance from the facility. "We will interview residents and other staff to see if there's been a problem with a staff member being abusive or neglectful," says Judy.

If it's determined that the staff person has caused problems, the facility will have to make the decision of whether or not that employee would be reprimanded, fired or remain there. Regardless of the outcome, ARC ensures that the senior will always be protected and safe.

Judy encourages seniors and caregivers to contact ARC if they suspect abuse or exploitation. "We are accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, including holidays and weekends," she says. "After hours, we have an answering service. But we can ascertain whether we need to send help immediately, such as paramedics or law enforcement."

To report any type of abuse or for more information about protective services, call (724) 775-1786 or toll free 1 (800) 272-0567. **BCSN**

Ostomy Support Group

The Ostomy Support Group meets on the first Sunday of each month. Meetings take place from 2 to 4 p.m. at the education center in the Medical Center, Dutch Ridge Road, Beaver. The group offers support to ostomates with questions about products, pouching or skin problems, and pre-surgical counseling, if needed. Ostomates and significant others are invited to attend. Light refreshments are served following the meetings. Any questions can be answered by calling Charles Auld, vice president and visitor coordinator at (724) 775-0574. Meeting dates are: March 4, April 1, May 6 and June 3. No meetings are held in July and August. **BCSN**