

Area Agency on Aging *Connections*

Take action to help stop abuse or neglect of seniors

By Daniel Casciato
For *Pittsburgh Senior News*

Last year, 1,374 reports of need were taken in Allegheny County due to some form of abuse or neglect to seniors – that’s one out of 160 seniors.

Although that statistic was down slightly from the previous year’s 1,477 reports of need, it’s still too many, according to Don Grant, supervisor of Protective Services for the Allegheny County Area Agency on Aging (ACAAA). “There’s still a lot of abuse out there,” he said.

To formally address concerns of abuse and neglect of seniors, the state legislature passed the Older Adults Protective Service Act in July 1988. Since its inception, there have been more than 100,000 reports of abuse and neglect across the state.

Allegheny County contracts with three agencies for protective services: Eastern Area Adult Services, Inc., Ursuline Services, Inc. and Lutheran Service Society. They offer resources and support to detect, prevent, reduce or eliminate abuse, neglect (including self-neglect), financial exploitation and abandonment of seniors.

There are several categories of abuse: abandonment, self-neglect, physical abuse, financial exploitation, sexual abuse, caregiver abuse and verbal abuse with mental anguish. The most common form of abuse reported last year was caregiver abuse, at 34 percent. Self-neglect was next, at 23 percent; physical abuse, 18 percent; financial exploitation,



seven percent; emotional abuse, five percent; sexual abuse, three percent; and abandonment at one percent.

So how can you get help? According to Don, the process begins with a report of need. This usually comes by way of a phone call from a person who suspects that a senior is in need. “It starts with a phone call to the Protective Services Unit at (412) 350-6905,” explained Don. “It could be a member of the general public, a home health agency that sees abuse in the home, a nursing home or personal care home that is reporting cases of neglect.”

Don said the top reporters come from the home health agencies because it’s mandated under the law that they report cases of abuse. “Most seniors can live independently and take care of themselves without any problems. We usually see a need for protective services when a senior becomes incapacitated as a result of advanced dementia or other

types of incapacity issues.”

After the phone call is made, a caseworker then investigates the situation to determine if any abuse or neglect is occurring. After a report is completed, the senior is offered help; it may include a care plan for in-home services or financial management services.

Don said that their mandate is on the senior’s right to self-determination. Anyone who has mental capacity has the legal right to refuse services. “When we go into a home, we only substantiate about 20 percent of the cases, meaning that the person is at imminent risk because they are incapacitated,” explained Don.

If a senior is determined to be incapacitated, the caregivers can make a recommendation for a guardianship after being evaluated by a clinical psychologist.

The simplest way for seniors to protect themselves is to have contact with someone outside of

their home. “That’s going to be important. Whether it’s family members or church members to come and check on them, getting involved in social functions, attending a senior center, or even calling the SeniorLine to request services in the home, seniors need to keep connected to society.”

For more information, call SeniorLine at (412) 350-5460. *PSN*

Financial exploitation of seniors is becoming a common form of abuse. Theft, fraud, forgery, extortion and the wrongful use of a power of attorney are some forms of financial abuse. What can you do to protect yourself? ACAA recommends these steps:

- Educate yourself and understand what kind of financial power you give to your caregivers.
- Be cautious of joint banking accounts and power of attorney agreements. Power of attorney is a legal document that puts your financial affairs into someone else’s hands. Consult with an attorney if you need advice regarding power of attorney.
- Review your own financial documents; don’t let someone else do it for you.
- Get a copy of your credit report and review it every year. (Under federal law, you are entitled to a free copy every 12 months.)
- Do not give out your personal or financial information (Social Security number, date of birth, address, etc.), especially over the telephone.
- Keep your credit cards in a safe place.