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'Advocacy and education' key in prevention of elder abuse

Story

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By John Kennett jkennett@mdn.net
Posted: Tuesday, February 11, 2014 2:45 pm



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Pat Gamer, left, and Pam Celley, both of Sanford, laugh while putting away the Bingo balls Wednesday at the Trailside Senior Center in Midland. Places like the Trailside Senior Center are great for seniors looking to connect with others, which will make them less likely to fall victim to abuse.

2005, and then grew to 1.9 percent in 2012.

FACTORS

The National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) states that as many as 2 million senior citizens are being abused. With approximately 90 percent of those abusers being family members, the NCEA defines elder abuse as: "The intentional actions that cause harm or create a serious risk of harm (whether or not harm is intended) to a vulnerable elder by a caregiver or other person who stands in a trust relationship to the elder. This includes failure by a caregiver to satisfy the elder's basic needs or to protect the elder from harm. Domestic elder abuse generally refers to any of the following types of mistreatment that are committed by someone with whom the elder has a special relationship (for example, a spouse, sibling, child, friend or caregiver)."

"The most common form of elder abuse is psychological abuse, and financial abuse (5 percent per year prevalence rate) is second," stated Lichtenberg. "In many cases the older adult is suffering from significant dementia (e.g. Alzheimer's disease) or is extremely frail and needs a lot of physical care. The abusers often live with the older adult, and many times have some financial dependence on the older adult."

Joe Blewett, director at Pinecrest Farms, is also noticing more abuse on a nation-wide level.

Elder abuse: Not a topic that's easy to detect or deal with. But, an aging population means the topic is something that will become more and more of a serious concern across America.

"As more older adults become very old (beyond 85) we see the numbers of cases increase, and some of the debate about whether the actual incidence of elder abuse is increasing is because we know that elder abuse is under-reported," said Dr. Peter Lichtenberg, director of the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University.

The 2010 U.S. Census reported 40.3 million, or 13 percent of the total population, is age 65 and older. By 2050, that age bracket is expected to comprise 20 percent of the total U.S. population. In 2010, there were 5.8 million people aged 85 or older. By 2050, it is projected that there will be 19 million people aged 85 or older.

"The fastest growing segment of our population is those over 85," said Midland County Senior Services (MCSS) Director Alan Brown.

The American Community Survey, published by the U.S. Census Bureau, stated that the 85+ population in Midland County was 1.4 percent, in 2000, dipped to 1 percent in

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"When you say, 'abuse,' it will most likely be in the form of neglect, which is abuse," he said. "As the baby boomer population gets up there, people are staying in their homes longer and living longer. And they don't necessarily know resources that are out there. I think we're going to see it grow, unfortunately. But, then there are places like Pinecrest and (The Arc of Midland) that are great resources in the community to look out for that."

Alzheimer's can be another significant factor in elder abuse.

"Alzheimer's is a burden on the person suffering, but also the caregiver," said Brown. "It is a very stressful situation, whether it is the spouse that has the disease, or whether it is a parent that has the disease. It is a real life-changer and relationship changer."

In 2003, the National Research Council conducted a study on elder mistreatment and found that only 1 in 14 cases of elder abuse is reported to the authorities.

"They don't want to cause trouble even if they are being taken advantage of; they are not quick to report those things," said Brown. "It is difficult because the older seniors can be dependent on those younger relatives for their health and well being. We've had some situations where we've delivered meals on wheels to people and see there is something going on, but the senior is very tight-lipped about it."

For additional advice on "Warning Signs of Elder Abuse" and "Prevention of Elder Abuse," see the accompanying article.

IMPACT OF ABUSE

The direct medical costs associated with violent injuries to older adults are estimated to add over \$5.3 billion to the nation's annual health expenditures, and the annual financial loss by victims of elder financial exploitation were estimated to be \$2.9 billion in 2009, a 12 percent increase from 2008, stated the NCEA.

Lichtenberg recently completed a study, "Is Psychological Vulnerability Related to the Experience of Fraud in Older Adults?" published in Clinical Gerontologist. The study, of 4,440 participants, reported financial fraud victimization of older adults and found that the combination of high depression and low social-status fulfillment was associated with a 226 percent increase in fraud prevalence.

"Financial exploitation of the elderly is on the rise according to the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, and the numbers are expected to continue to grow as Baby Boomers age," stated a press release regarding the study. "This exploitation, which includes telemarketing scams, fake home repairs, fake check scams, identity theft and more, costs approximately \$3 billion each year."

PREVENTION

"Early detection of potential problems by health practitioners, case managers, etc. and better assessment tools can help families receive intervention before abuse becomes full blown or worsens," said Lichtenberg. "Advocacy and education and repeated messaging about the need to stop elder abuse is also important."

A family discussion about issues can help.

"We are trying to get families to get out on the table some of these issues, a lot of the concerns," said Brown. "Some of them aren't. Some are unfinished business from mom and dad and child. We have our counseling program and some of it has spun off on to family mediation. Estate planning, including wills and trusts, can lessen the load on family members."

Senior Services has available a "Your Conversation Starter Kit" published by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement to aid people in the discussion regarding wishes for end-of-life care.

Depending on the situation, advice from an attorney who specializes in estate planning and elder law can help alleviate the tension and possible family feuds.

Locally, MCSS has formed an interagency group that meets and brainstorms about different concerns regarding the elderly.

One program that is getting wider attention is "Aging in Place," which the Centers for Disease Control defines as: "The ability to live in one's own home and community safely, independently, and comfortably, regardless of age, income, or ability level."

Brown stated, "This is what we are totally committed to: that people need to age with dignity. No matter what stage of frailty they are at, we want people to still determine what is important in their lives."

Anyone suspecting a case of elder abuse may call:

- Midland County Senior Services at (989) 633-3700
- Midland County Department of Human Services at (989) 835-7040
- Michigan Adult Protection Services at (855) 444-3911
- 9-1-1

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WARNING SIGNS OF ELDER ABUSE

- Bruises, pressure marks, broken bones, abrasions, and burns may be an indication of physical abuse, neglect or mistreatment.
- Unexplained withdrawal from normal activities, a sudden change in alertness, and unusual depression may be indicators of emotional abuse.
- Bruises around the breasts or genital area can occur from sexual abuse.
- Sudden changes in financial situations may be the result of exploitation.
- Bedsores, unattended medical needs, poor hygiene and unusual weight loss are indicators of possible neglect.
- Behavior such as belittling, threats and other uses of power and control by spouses are indicators of verbal or emotional abuse.
- Strained or tense relationships, frequent arguments between the caregiver and elderly person are also signs.
- It's important to remain alert. The suffering is often in silence. If you notice changes in personality, behavior or physical condition, you should start to question what is going on.

PREVENTING ELDER ABUSE

- Learn when and how to report abuse.
- Get help for commonly seen "tricky situations" involving possible abuse of elders and adults with disabilities.
- Learn about the agencies and organizations that respond to reports of abuse.
- Learn what some communities and multidisciplinary teams are doing to prevent abuse from occurring.
- Explore how the many fields and organizations that serve elders and adults with disabilities may play a role in abuse intervention and prevention.

From the National Center on Elder Abuse. For more information on elder abuse, visit their website at: ncea.aoa.gov

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