

Financial abuse of the elderly is a growing problem

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By Eileen Beal

The good news is that we are living longer. The bad news is that—as spouses and friends, and even children, die—many elderly people are becoming socially isolated. "[That] brings hazards that can be greater than any disease and one of them is an increased risk for financial abuse," says Carol Dayton.

As Chief of Adult Protective Services (APS) for the Cuyahoga County Department of Senior and Adult Services, Dayton knows whereof she speaks. In a little over a decade she's seen the number of reports of financial exploitation of the elderly jump from 7% to 15% of all reported cases of elder abuse. But those numbers probably aren't telling the real story. "Research indicates that only one in five instances comes to the attention of the authorities," she says.

Women—mothers, aunts, sisters—in their late 70s and early 80s are the primary targets for financial abuse. That's because they tend to have chronic illnesses—arthritis, heart disease, etc.—that make it difficult to get out, have accumulated resources, and tend to place others' wants and needs above their own. Many are experiencing mental decline, too. Their situation leaves them open to the kind of undue influence (wheedling, cajoling, coercion) and threats (of abandonment, of physical harm, of being placed in a nursing home) an abuser uses to get them to give them gifts, loans, and presents and/or access to their checkbook, savings, and legal documents.

Abusers are harder to profile. Usually, however, they are family members or paid caregivers.

While the latter tend to make the news, it's the former who are doing the lion's share of financial abuse. "They [relatives] often feel entitled to their assets—now—because they are going to inherit when the senior is gone," says Dayton.

Many abusers have a history of irresponsible behavior or a substance abuse problem, says Susan Goodwyn, LISW, the Abuse Prevention Coordinator for the Greater Cleveland Elder Abuse/Domestic Violence Roundtable. "Obtaining the substance is the driving force in the life of an addicted exploiter, and they will use any means and any resources to obtain it," she adds.

According to Dayton and Goodwyn, the following are "red flags" that financial abuse may be taking place.

- The senior is living well below her/his means.
- The senior is missing valuables—jewelry, antiques, collections—that can be sold easily on the street.
- There are unexplained—or secret—changes in legal or financial documents (i. e. wills, powers of attorney, the addition of others as signatories to checking and/or savings accounts, etc.).
- The senior seems to be isolated from friends and other relatives by a spouse, relative, or caregiver.
- A relative or caregiver has begun to live far above his/her means.
- Papers lying near the phone, or about the house, suggesting there are financial problems.

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If you suspect financial abuse is taking place, you have several options.

"Talk with the [elderly] person," suggests Goodwyn. "Indicate the 'red flags' you see and gently ask what is going on...[or] talk with an advisor that the senior trusts—their attorney or financial planner or banker."

Challenge the exploiter. "Sometimes this will deter an exploiter who knows that others are wise to his/her game," says Goodwyn.

Call the County Department of Senior and Adult Services (DSAS) or the police department where the senior lives. Calls can be made anonymously, say both Goodwyn and Dayton.

"DSAS and the police work together on these cases," says Goodwyn. "Both agencies will advise the senior what the concern is and each will proceed according to the situation and what remedies are available if it is found that financial abuse is occurring."

Often, however, the problem can't be resolved. "Unless there is a guardian involved," says Goodwyn, "seniors, like any other adults, have the right to make what we might consider foolish decisions with their money and resources."

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For more information on financial abuse of the elderly:

Local agencies/resources:

Cuyahoga County Bar Association (elder law experts) 216-621-5112

Cuyahoga County Dept. of Senior and Adult Services 216-420-6700

First Call for Help (Northeast Ohio) 216-436-2000

Ohio Attorney General's Office 216-787-3030

Ohio Consumer Protection Public Action Line (Ohio) 800-282-0515

ProSeniors/Ohio (legal and long-term care issues) 800-488-6070

Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging 216-621-8010

Organizations with excellent information and resources: (Note: all sites 'visited')

Elder Rights Center www.aoa.gov/eldfam/Elder_Rights/Elder_Rights.asp

National Family Caregivers Association www.familycaregiving101.org

National Center on Elder Abuse www.elderabusecenter.org

Ohio Attorney General's www.ag.state.oh.us/site_map/protecting_the_elderly.htm (legal and long-term care issues)
www.proseniors.org

Cuyahoga County Dept. of Senior and Adult Services www.cuyahoga.oh.us/dsas/adultprotective.htm