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State Officials Say Vulnerable Adult Abuse is Under-Reported; Encourage Oregonians to Report Suspected Abuse

There were over 35,000 calls to DHS in 2013 reporting suspected adult abuse; however state officials fear that there is a lot more vulnerable adult abuse in Oregon that is not reported to law enforcement or protective services officials.

“We know that national research suggests that under-reporting of abuse is a serious issue,” said Marie Cervantes, Director, DHS’ Office of Adult Abuse Prevention and Investigations (OAAPI). “Oregon is most likely right in line with national data that shows adult abuse is vastly under-reported,” she said.

“We can only respond to abuse that we know of and need the public to assist us to be able to protect our most vulnerable citizens,” Cervantes said.

In preparation for World Elder Abuse Awareness Day June 15, OAAPI would like the public to be more aware of the serious problem of vulnerable adult abuse and how to report it.

According to a Cornell University study, only one in twenty three cases of adult abuse actually gets reported to authorities.

The Cornell University study also showed that financial exploitation is reported on average one in forty-four times and neglect one in fifty-seven times.

“It is critical that Oregonians call their local protective services office, law enforcement or the state’s central number to report abuse: **1-855-503-SAFE** if they suspect any type of abuse of a vulnerable adult,” said Cervantes, whose program is responsible for some of Oregon’s most vulnerable citizens.

OAAPI is responsible for conducting and coordinating abuse investigations and providing protective services statewide in response to reports of abuse and neglect of vulnerable adults, including:

- Adults over the age of 65
- Adults with physical disabilities
- Adults with developmental disabilities
- Adults with mental illness

“Responding quickly and thoroughly to abuse reports is not only critical, but helps ensure the safety and long term health of vulnerable Oregonians,” she said.

Cervantes said that there are many reasons for people not reporting abuse, including:

Victims:

- are afraid of retaliation,
- think they will be put in an institution,
- don't want to get the perpetrator in trouble
- are ashamed that a family member mistreats them
- think that the police and social agencies cannot really help them
- think that no one will believe them.

Witnesses to abuse:

- do not know who to speak to
- do not know what can be done
- think that no one will believe them, or
- just do not want to get involved.

Victims may not understand what happened:

- don't realize they were victimized;
- are confused about the facts or unaware of the facts
- have memory problems due to medication, illness, fatigue, depression
- might not be able to verbalize what happened

John Thompson, Deputy Director of OAAPI said that national research points out that *more than half of people with mental illness or developmental disabilities will experience repeated physical or sexual abuse in their lifetime*. According to the National Adult Protective Services Association (NAPSA):

- Abused seniors are three more times likely to die from their injuries
- Elder abuse victims are four more times likely to go to a nursing home
- Adult victims of abuse use healthcare services at higher rates

- 90 percent of abusers are family members or trusted others
- Almost one in ten financial abuse victims will turn to Medicaid as a direct result of their own monies being stolen from them.

“When people are free from abuse, their medical, physical and psychological treatment needs are reduced, allowing them to live independent, productive lives in their communities,” Thompson said.

Oregon’s abuse prevention data suggest that under reporting of possible abuse is more likely to occur when the vulnerable person lives alone and has little or no support from friends and family. Contact with people outside the care-giving environment allows the vulnerable person an opportunity to talk about things that may be abusive, neglectful or unprofessional and further provides the support system one may need to make an official report to authorities.

For many vulnerable people who are isolated from outside contact, the decision to report possible abuse becomes more difficult due to fear of getting the person in trouble and risk of losing what little outside contact the person may currently have.

For vulnerable people living in facilities and in licensed settings, there are often many other residents and staff present that the person can talk too. If they believe a particular staff or care giver is being abusive, it helps to discuss it with another staff member and allow that person to report the incident.

DHS’ Office of Adult Abuse Prevention and Investigations provides protective services, counseling, prevention and reporting for adult abuse victims in Oregon.

Find [more information on the new statewide abuse reporting line](#) on the DHS Web site, or call 1-855-503-SAFE.

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