

Protecting Older Adults

Mandatory elder abuse reporting law in effect

by reha maze



Adults are living longer than ever before. And as the older population increases, so too does the prevalence of an issue no one likes to talk about.

“People naturally become more isolated as they outlive their contemporaries and family members,” says Lori Metz, adult protection supervisor with the Larimer County Department of Human Services. “And many live thousands of miles away from their families.”

While it’s common for people today to live more private lives, isolation is the top reason intervention is needed for mistreatment or neglect of older, at-risk adults. It’s also why so many instances of elder abuse go unreported.

Effective July 1, 2014, Colorado became the 48th state to require mandatory reporting of elder abuse and exploitation. Various professionals who work with older adults are now required to file a report with law enforcement within 24 hours of suspecting abuse, neglect or financial exploitation of individuals 70 and older. Failure to do so is a class-three misdemeanor and penalties include up to six months in jail and/or a \$750 fine.

The Colorado Commission on Aging predicts that by 2021, the number of older adults in Colorado will have increased 54 percent since 2011.

“We’ve always reported,” says Yvonne Myers, health systems director at Columbine Health Systems. “The main difference is that the police will now be called first in more instances, which adds a whole new level to the conversation. We’re excited about it because the consequences may get more people to take the issue seriously—it needed to happen.”

Elder abuse typically occurs at home, within families or by people in a position of trust. The most common forms are financial exploitation and caregiver/self-neglect.

“We most often see people taking a family member’s money—that will be the number one call we make,” Myers says. “Some people make the assumption that just because their mother is 90, she must not be able to manage her own checkbook...but just because someone is older doesn’t mean they can’t make their own decisions.”

Most neglect situations are due to isolation, not malicious intent. People who are busy and unable to provide the older adults in their lives with appropriate care may not be recognizing how severe their health-care needs are or what sources of support are available. “It can be completely overwhelming,” Metz says. “So we’ll go in and plug that person into the resources they need to stay in their home as long as it’s safe. If it’s no longer safe, we provide resources for outside placement—many people have no idea how much help they have access to.”

All Colorado residents are urged to immediately report suspected mistreatment or neglect of an at-risk adult. A big indicator to watch out for is significant changes in personal and financial habits.

“I think this law will elevate awareness and cause people to ask a few more questions when they get the feeling that something isn’t quite right,” Myers says. “You can tell when someone doesn’t feel like they can advocate for themselves. Those who are empowered and cared for will thrive—even at 90.”

Red flags

Signs to pay attention to include:

- Changes in behavior, appearance or cleanliness
- Medical issues not being addressed
- Unsanitary living conditions
- Deviations in financial habits
- Pieces of property going missing
- Aggressive family members

When in doubt, call!

The Adult Protective Services intake line at the Larimer County Department of Human Services is available 24/7 at (970) 498-7770. In an emergency call 911.

Mistreatment categories from the Colorado Department of Human Services

Exploitation means taking an at-risk adult’s money or other assets against their will or without their knowledge. It also means deceiving, harassing, intimidating, or using undue influence to get the adult to do something against their will.

Caretaker Neglect occurs when an at-risk adult’s caretaker fails to make sure the adult has adequate food, clothing, shelter, psychological care, physical care, medical care or supervision.

Self-Neglect occurs when an at-risk adult cannot or does not care for himself or herself.

Physical Abuse is hitting, slapping, pushing, kicking, burning, confining or restraining an at-risk adult. Sexual Abuse is sexual activity or touching without the at-risk adult’s consent or understanding.

For more info go to the Department of Human Services at colorado.gov.

Factors that increase an older person’s risk

- Isolation
- Loneliness
- Recent loss
- Physical or mental disabilities
- Unfamiliarity with financial matters
- Family members who are unemployed and/or have substance abuse problems

From the National Center on Elder Abuse, ncea.aoa.gov.

Resources and further reading

- Larimer County Office on Aging larimer.org/seniors (970) 498-7750
- AARP Foundation ElderWatch aarpelderwatch.org
- Colorado Consumer Line coloradoattorneygeneral.gov (800) 222-4444
- Colorado Coalition for Elder Rights & Abuse Prevention ccerap.org