Fact Sheet: Elder Abuse

United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona

Elder abuse is a serious problem. In Arizona, between 4,600 and 6,900 seniors will experience some type of abuse each year. Reports of abuse have increased 150% over the last decade. Older adults may become vulnerable due to isolation, physical or mental disabilities and dependence on others for assistance. This vulnerability makes them easy targets for physical, emotional and sexual abuse, neglect, financial exploitation and fraud. Abuse always occurs when there are no witnesses.

Older seniors and those very dependent on others are the most frequent victims. Most victims of abuse are Caucasian (75%) and female (63%). Some victims live alone (35%) and some with family (27%).

Elderly victims are often reluctant to report abuse because they feel ashamed, embarrassed, humiliated, afraid, and may even defend the abuser. That is because perpetrators of abuse are generally family members (28%), caregivers (17%), or friends and neighbors (7%). Victims frequently rely on the abuser for some type of caregiving services at home and are afraid if the abuse is reported they will be placed in a nursing home. Some victims are actually able to convince themselves that they deserve the abuse or exploitation. Authorities estimate that the number of abuse cases that are reported represents only 25% of the cases that actually occur.

The most prevalent type of abuse referred to Pima County law enforcement is financial exploitation and fraud. John Evans, Unit Chief Counsel AZ Attorney General's Office, states that the most common characteristics of victims of fraud and exploitation are that they are gregarious (need interaction), compulsive (cannot pass up a good deal), have a sense of machismo (believe they cannot be fooled), vulnerable (have experienced a recent trauma) and naïve (they want to believe everything they have been told is true).

Perpetrators exploit seniors by presenting themselves as persons of authority, creating a sense of trust with the senior, appealing to the senior's sense of emotion, insisting that this opportunity will not happen again and persuading the senior to act immediately. Some telemarketing scams have been directly targeted to seniors, resulting in an annual loss of nearly $5 million dollars. Financial fraud is always committed by people who look as if they are honest.

Self-neglect occurs when the senior is unable to care for his or her own needs and refuses needed care or medical help. Self-neglect may also include excessive drug abuse. About 36% of the cases of reported abuse are due to self-neglect. Fear of loss of control or loss of independence can cause self-abuse, such as refusing to eat or to take medicine.

There is a compelling need to make all seniors aware of how to protect themselves from violence, abuse and exploitation. Family, friends, volunteers and caregivers must learn to recognize the signs of elder abuse or exploitation, the questions to ask the victim to verify that abuse has occurred, and where to go for help from law enforcement and Arizona Adult Protective Services.