

Consumer Focus

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Look for Signs of Elder Abuse

Older adults can be at risk for elder abuse, which is also called “abuse later in life.” Elder abuse may take place through mistreatment, exploitation or neglect, and can occur at the victim’s home, a family member’s home, or care facility. Whether you are an older lowan or know of one, it’s really important to be aware of the problem and say something if it happens to you or someone else.

Iowa’s older adult population is one of the fastest-growing in the United States. 16% of lowans are over age 65 and several Iowa counties have a 65+ population exceeding 20%, according to 2016 figures from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The Attorney General’s Consumer Protection Division routinely handles consumer complaints from older lowans who are victimized by con artists.

But elder abuse goes well beyond getting scammed by a smooth-talking stranger. In fact, the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) reports that more than 90% of abusers are family members or “trusted others” - not strangers at all.

Types of Elder Abuse

- Physical abuse: Inflicting physical pain or injury upon an older adult
- Sexual abuse: Any sexual offense committed against an older adult
- Emotional abuse: Verbal assaults, threats of abuse, harassment, or intimidation
- Confinement: Restraining or isolating an older adult for reasons other than medical
- Passive neglect: A caregiver’s failure to provide an older adult with basic necessities, including food, clothing, shelter, and medical care
- Willful deprivation: Denying medication, medical care, shelter, food, assistive devices, or physical assistance; exposing the person to risk of harm without consent
- Financial exploitation: The misuse or withholding of an older adult’s resources

What if Elder Abuse Occurs?

Under Iowa law, any person who is 60 or older and unable to protect themselves against

these kinds of abuse may be considered a victim of elder abuse.

In an emergency situation, contact local law enforcement or medical personnel.

If you detect signs of abuse in an older or dependent person, or if you are a victim yourself, you should contact the Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS) office in your county to report abuse or apply for services. The DHS also maintains an Abuse Hotline at 800-362-2178 - available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

If you suspect that abuse is occurring in a health-related facility such as a nursing home or care center, contact the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals Nursing Home and Home Health Complaint Hotline at 877-686-0027 or email hfd_complaint@dia.iowa.gov.

An elder suffering abuse or someone working on the person's behalf may file a petition with the district court to stop the abuse.

How Can I Prevent Elder Abuse?

Older people are more likely to fall victim to scams and abuse when they are isolated from their family, friends, and neighbors. Checking in frequently with those who might be at risk for elder abuse is the surest way to prevent it: call them on the phone, make a quick visit, or be sure to chat for a minute if you see each other around town.

For general information about supporting older Iowans and referrals, contact the Iowa Association of Area Agencies on Aging. The six regional Area Agencies on Aging (the "triple As") in Iowa each have trained specialists who can help coordinate home-based services, manage public assistance programs, and can provide support to caregivers.

Visit www.i4a.org or call 1-866-468-7887.

The Attorney General's Role

In addition to handling consumer fraud complaints that affect older Iowans, the Consumer Protection Division—through a federal grant—helps train law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, and other professionals regarding the investigation and prosecution of elder abuse cases. An important part of this work is helping county attorneys across Iowa identify elder abuse cases and bring effective charges against abusers.

Still, it's a Statewide Effort

You play an essential role by looking out for the older Iowans in your family and community. Be aware of the signs of elder abuse and report it if you see it.