

SPEAK UP For Seniors

By: Anne See, President, Greater Augusta Coalition Against Adult Abuse

As Americans, we believe in justice for all. Yet, sadly, we fail to live up to this promise when we allow older members of our society to be abused, neglected, or financially exploited. Older people are vital, important members of society and they deserve to live safe and dignified lives free from abuse.

Elder abuse is an increasingly prevalent but hidden problem that exists in every community throughout the world. Approximately one in 10 Americans aged 60+ have experienced some form of elder abuse. In 2022, there were 47,371 reports of abuse made in Virginia with 12,824 of those substantiated. In the Harrisonburg/Rockingham area there were 593 reports while the Staunton, Augusta, Waynesboro area received 1,861.

The public at large, and even professionals serving vulnerable adults often, are unaware of the problems or how to respond. Most Americans are familiar with child abuse and know that Child

Protective Services through their local Dept. of Social Services (DSS) is the agency to contact when such abuse is suspected. However, not everyone is aware that DSS also investigates reports of Adult Abuse through their Adult Protective Services (APS) unit. In addition to contacting the local DSS, in Virginia, adult abuse can also be reported anonymously by calling the DSS abuse hotline at 1-888-832-3858.

It is important to remember that proof of abuse, neglect or financial exploitation is not required. It is up to the professionals to investigate your suspicions. Even if it is determined that no crime has been committed, counseling or other services may be suggested.

What are the differences between adult abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation?

Abuse includes physical, mental, or sexual maltreatment. Neglect is when a caregiver fails to provide adequate assistance that the adult depends on—such as food, clothing, shelter, or necessary medical care. More specifically, self-neglect is when an adult is unable to meet their own essential physical, psychological, or social needs, which threatens their health, safety, and well-being. And, exploitation is when someone takes advantage of the adult or their finances for personal benefit or financial gain.

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What are the warning signs of abuse?

One way to remember them is by using the acronym SPEAK UP:

Sudden changes in behavior or finances.

Physical injuries, dehydration, or malnourishment.

Extrême withdraw from others, anxiety, or depression.

Absence of basic care or necessities.

Kept away from others.

Unsanitary living conditions

Personal items missing

June 15th is World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (WEAAD). On that day, communities worldwide will strive to bring awareness of Adult Abuse and address solutions. Locally, the Greater Augusta Coalition Against Adult Abuse (GACAAA) is sponsoring a WEAAD campaign called “SPEAK UP: for seniors!” GACAAA has business cards available listing the abuse warning signs and reporting information. For more information contact GACAAA at stopadultexploitation@gmail.com.