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**The golden years for some are not so golden anymore**

**AS I SEE IT**

**By Stephen Slaten**

Reports of elder abuse are rising, a trend expected to continue with increased longevity and the arrival of senior baby boomers. It has taken a long time for society to acknowledge the existence of domestic violence in marital or dating relationships among younger individuals, and now is the time for society to recognize that violence knows no age limits.

This year during the national Week Without Violence, Oct. 14-20, members of the Worcester County Elder Abuse Protection Roundtable want to shed light on the issue of elder abuse as a form of domestic violence. The roundtable is a coalition of local law enforcement, elder services, domestic violence and community agencies committed to addressing the root causes of abuse against elders through coordinated prevention, education and advocacy efforts.

Abuse is a growing problem for too many seniors.

Our most common associations of elder abuse are probably a senior being swindled or a defenseless person in a nursing home being victimized. The statistics tell a somewhat different story.

According to a 2006 National Center for Elder Abuse study, many of the alleged abusers are adult children (32.6 percent) or other family members (21.5 percent) and spouses/intimate partners (11.3 percent). The types of abuse range from a combination of physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse to neglect by a caretaker and financial exploitation. Most elders who are being abused reside in the community, so a victim might be a next-door neighbor, a fellow church member or the older woman one might encounter at the grocery store.

With elders, abuse is rarely reported to 911 during an incident. Unfortunately, most are reluctant to acknowledge abuse for a variety of reasons. An elder may be torn among divided loyalties. He/she may be mistreated, but concerned about causing trouble for the abuser, or even protective toward the abuser. "Telling" may not be the safest way to change the situation; trusting strangers, even if they are authorities, can be a risky proposition. The elderly may blame themselves for the problem, and fear being sent to an institution to be warehoused. If the elder victim has some form of diminished capacity, they may not recognize that they are being abused or unable to report it.

In some instances the abuse can be a long-standing pattern to which the elder has “adapted.” In other instances the abuse is “late onset,” due to the stresses of retirement, frailty and dependence, and caregiving may trigger outbursts of rage. Often, a partner may become abusive as a result of dementia.

The fact is that many abused elders cannot restore their safety alone due to shame, guilt or fear, and rely on help from others. It is important that anyone who knows of or suspects elder abuse do something. If someone is in immediate danger, the local police department should be called. In other cases, a confidential report can be made via the Massachusetts’ Elder Abuse Hotline, (800) 922-2275.

Elders who are not ready to make a change still can protect themselves by developing a safety plan with a trusted friend or professional. Local “aging access point agencies” can help locate specialized services to protect older victims of abuse. People can learn more about the issue of elder abuse by joining the Worcester County Elder Abuse Prevention Roundtable by contacting an elder agency in the community.

During the Week Without Violence, people should think about what it would take to have a world without elder abuse. Residents then should take the steps that can help make this a reality: becoming familiar with the signs of elder abuse, learning about services, sharing this information with seniors, and offering friendship and support to victims. No one deserves to be abused — there is a way out to safety, dignity and respect.

Stephen Slaten, Ph.D., is the executive director of Jewish Family Service of Worcester Inc. Other members of the Worcester County Elder Abuse Prevention Roundtable who contributed to this article are Patricia O’Leary Engdahl, director of the Molly Bish Center for the Protection of Children and the Elderly at Anna Maria College in Paxton, and Dianne Sandman, a senior paralegal at Legal Assistance Corp. of Central Massachusetts.