

Guest column

Increased referrals show need for levy

Thursday, February 14, 2008

Patty Ciripompa

"These sure don't feel like the 'golden years,'" my father used to lament.

Pride often kept my father from asking for my help. Having voluntarily surrendered his car keys following the diagnosis of a seizure disorder when he was 84, he became all too satisfied to stay in the house, working his daily puzzles, scratching off three lottery tickets a day and watching television.

Even in the face of increasing dependence, he would tell anyone who would listen how blessed he felt to have my wonderful husband and me. I often dismissed this show of gratitude, believing with all my heart that we were the ones blessed.

When I began my job as supervisor of Fairfield County Adult Protective Services, my father was still with us. I often consulted him about the various situations involving older adult customers, valuing his advice and perspective.

He reminded me daily that, far worse than the steady loss of physical prowess or the inherent loss of independence that comes with it, would be the devastating feeling of being alone.

Older adults who live in isolation and who no longer have meaningful connections are the most vulnerable to all types of abuse. Telemarketing scams, exploitation by acquaintances or distant relatives who suddenly appear to "help," door-to-door salespeople who offer bogus services, or theft by intermittent and uncertified caregivers are most often perpetrated against elders who have no close support systems.

The most insidious type of elder neglect is often self-neglect, occurring incrementally over the course of weeks and months. Failing health, combined with the onset of (very prevalent) clinical depression, makes it difficult for isolated older adults to continue regimens that have previously sustained them.

Medication mix-ups, neglect of hygiene, negligence in caring for cherished pets, hoarding and overwhelming feelings of hopelessness contribute to the high risk of their often gradual and tragic demise.

From 2000 to 2007, the number of referrals to Adult Protective Services tripled from 232 in 2000 to more than 600 in 2007. In addition to the spike in referrals, APS investigators validated more severe cases of elder abuse, neglect and exploitation. In 2007, the first case of reported elder sexual abuse was confirmed. Exploitation cases comprised 17 percent of the entire APS caseload and included financial losses to elderly residents in hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Validations of severe self-neglect also increased, comprising 49 percent of the APS caseload. Elder abuse, in its many forms of physical, sexual and emotional abuse, exploitation, neglect by others and self-neglect, is all too prevalent in our own county.

The Protective Services levy -- Issue 12 on the March 4 ballot -- will prevent Adult Protective Services from being eliminated in Fairfield County. Combined with Child Protective Services, passage of the Protective Services levy will provide both child and elderly victims of abuse, neglect and exploitation

with a voice.

This 1-mill levy will cost the owner of a \$100,000 home \$2.56 per month. For about \$30 a year, each resident in Fairfield County can make certain that our most vulnerable and innocent citizens -- the very young and the very old -- are protected and remain safe from victimization.

I refuse to imagine our county saying "no" to Adult Protective Services, knowing we are all getting older and would want this service in place, should we ever need it.

More information about the Protective Services levy is available online at www.VOTEtoPROTECT.org or by calling the Protective Services Hotline at (740) 687-6815.

Patty Ciripompa is the director of Fairfield County Adult Protective Services.