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Jeanne Cacciatore, director of the Safe Observant Seniors — “SOS” — program at the Family & Children’s Association in Garden City, meets with a client.

BY LIZA N. BURBY
Special to Newsday

If your adult child was abusing you financially, emotionally or physically, what would you do?

In New York State, for every one reported case of elder abuse, about 23 typically go unreported, according to the “Under the Radar: New York State Elder Abuse Prevalence Study.” Those who work in the adult services field said the study, issued in 2011, continues to correlate with what they see on Long Island.

There are approximately 260,000 older New Yorkers who are victims of physical, sexual, financial or psychological abuse each year, the study said. A spokesperson for the state Office for the Aging confirmed that the 14-year-old

FIGHTING ELDER ABUSE

About 260,000 in state are likely affected, but stigma causes underreporting, experts say

report “is still the most recent and definitive study on elder abuse prevalence.”

“There are a lot of reasons that people don’t report the abuse,” said Haley Gordon, who coordinates a Suffolk County elder abuse multidisci-

plinary team at EAC Network, a social services agency in Central Islip. “They’re fearful of retaliation by the person who is abusing them. There’s sometimes shame or guilt. They feel it’s their fault. They worry if they report that their

caregiver is abusing them and that person is arrested, what’s going to happen to them?”

What adds to the stigma is who the abusers tend to be: 90% of senior abuse is perpetrated by an adult child, grandchild or other family member living with

them, according to Lisa R. Stern, assistant vice president for senior and adult services at the Family & Children’s Association in Garden City.

“People imagine it’s a 99-year-old person in a nursing home being physically abused, which is horrible, and it happens,” said Cate Carbonaro, executive director of The Retreat, which provides shelter and support services for those affected by abuse. “But that’s not what we see as much as adult children doing it.”

Carbonaro said transportation and housing issues add to the vulnerability of those on Long Island.

“We have clients that are in places here that, if they don’t have a car, the abuser is really able to isolate them and abuse

See ABUSE on E18

Groups battle elder abuse

ABUSE from E17

them,” she said. “Regarding housing, if they do have somewhere that they’re living, they’ll say, ‘I’m not moving from this place even if my son’s abusive, because where am I going to go?’ ”

NO CLEAR-CUT OPTIONS

Gordon said financial abuse — defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta as the illegal, unauthorized or improper use of an older individual’s resources by a caregiver or other person in a trusting relationship — is the most common form of abuse.

“These are very complex and unhealthy family dynamics that make these cases really difficult because it’s not necessarily clear cut,” Gordon said. “A lot of the time we see adult children who are misusing their parents’ funds. Sometimes they feel entitled to it, like ‘it’s going to be my inheritance anyway.’ ”

Helen Atkinson-Barnes, director of prevention programming of the Abuse in Later Life program launched at The Retreat in September, said, “Financial abuse is particularly insidious because very often older adults do need support and help from a caregiver in managing finances, so it’s hard to untangle.”

Adding to this dynamic is simply that the older person loves their children or grandchildren, said Manda Kristal, coordinator of the financial exploitation and abuse program for the Family & Children’s Association. “A lot of times they will be giving them their credit cards and money and you can see their funds are dwindling, sometimes even to the point they would lose their own house,” she said. “They love their children more than they love themselves and are willing to do anything for them, even to their own detriment.”

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Another complexity is that often the abuser will either have some degree of untreated mental illness or substance abuse issues, said Jeanne Cacciatore, program director of the Family & Children’s Association’s Safe Observant Seniors (SOS) program, which supports seniors in Nassau facing abuse. “I have



SOS program director Jeanne Cacciatore said elder abuse problems are usually quite complex and “there are many gaps in the system.”

“When I went to a support group, I was surprised at how many other families had these issues.”

— L.R.

found that 90% to 95% of my clients have been abused by their own children who are not able to be independent. . . . They’re looking for help and there are many gaps in the system.”

That’s what happened to L.R., 69, of Seaford, who asked that her name be withheld for her safety. She said her son had a cycle of substance misuse, psychiatric hospitalizations and incarceration. In addition to abusing his parents emotionally, in 2021 he assaulted his father,

now 70, in their home, she said.

“When my husband speaks about it, he says ‘My son tossed me around the house like a rag doll and I wound up having to go to the hospital,’” L.R. said. “Thank God he was not seriously hurt. I jumped in, so I had a couple of bruises on my arm and he was pulling my hair. I was able to call 911. And then 20 police cars showed up. It was horrible.”

She said it’s hard to make the decision to call when it’s your child. Her son is on probation

after serving time in Nassau County jail and an upstate prison and has a stay-away order that prevents him from being near his parents.

VICTIMS ISOLATED FROM SUPPORT

While the majority of elder abuse is at the hands of adult children, experts note the perpetrator can be paid help or someone who has inserted themselves into the senior’s life.

When Doreatha Hirsch, 71, was hired in 2024 to be a senior

companion three days a week for an 88-year-old Huntington man, she said it immediately became clear that the aide who had moved into his home to also help take care of him was doing anything but. She said the senior, who was experiencing dementia, was being neglected and his finances were also being controlled.

“He would tell me how unhappy he was, and he thought something was wrong financially because he was signing his checks over to the live-in person,” said Hirsch, who has worked as a senior companion since 2005. “He went [almost two weeks] without a shower and didn’t have clean clothes, and he said the person living with him would just make fun of him and curse at him. The live-in also tried to have the



Doreatha Hirsch works as a senior companion, and she's seen how isolated a victim can be.

older person sign his property over to him.”

Hirsch, a Port Washington resident, added that because the live-in had also alienated the neighbors, they were no longer checking on the senior, which isolated him. It took the coordination of people from the senior's church and a relative to get the live-in out of the house, and now there's more oversight to ensure his health and financial safety, she said.

Other cases have had worse outcomes. Last month, home health aide Amanda A. Fraser, of South Richmond Hills, Queens, was charged with attempted murder in the stabbing of an 84-year-old Massapequa woman in her care. The elderly woman was listed in serious critical condition, according to Nassau County police.

ACTIVE VS. PASSIVE NEGLECT

Abuse can involve active or passive neglect on the part of the caregiver, said Gordon.

“Active neglect is knowing that someone needs their diaper changed and not doing it or withholding care,” she said. “Passive neglect really stems more from a lack of knowledge or skills or being overwhelmed. There's no malicious intent, but it doesn't mean that they're properly caring for the senior.”

Gordon said sometimes these cases come to her team's attention through hospital referrals. “Passive neglect can reach that level. It's very dan-

gerous for the seniors.”

That's when local organizations can provide education, and services to families, said Gordon, who with the multidisciplinary team reviews cases and makes connections between local professionals and their senior clients.

“There are support services so that the seniors have better quality of life and stay in their home if that's what they want to do,” she said. “That can mean finding home health aides or a visiting nurse. There are supports like bathing services, nutrition programs and a transportation service that can take your parent to an adult day care center while you're at work.”

ADVICE FOR SENIORS

Older adults can also take preventive steps by making sure they know what services are available and maintaining social connections.

“Make sure your doctors know what's going on,” Gordon advised seniors. “Talk to people who care about you. Go to church, if that's what's important to you, or the senior centers. Just being in the community, knowing that people care about you and are looking out for you can be a support.”

L.R. said what helped her was joining the Family & Children's Association's SOS support group. “When I went to a support group, I was surprised at how many other families had these issues. . . . The support group gave me that place

where I could talk to somebody openly,” she said.

Programs like SOS also offer safety planning, Cacciatore said. “One of my mantras is: I know you love the person, but you must stay safe. So we talk about ways to do that, which is a different plan if the abuser is still living in the home.”

RED FLAGS

Community members can also help by being observant, said Carolyn Villegas, community development and education specialist for ECLI/VIBS, a nonprofit victims' services agency in Islandia.

“Obviously, bruises are something you can see, but the emotional abuse is harder to detect, so look for behavioral changes,” she said. “Are you starting to see that somebody who normally goes to a rec center is all of a sudden not coming or they're showing up and they're disheveled? That's neglect. That's why we've been doing faith-based training so that places of worship can be aware of what is happening in their communities.”

If you do suspect that a senior could be in danger, Villegas advises reaching out to local hotlines offering domestic violence support.

“There are resources you can call that could be anonymous, like Adult Protective Services or the police department, and ask them to do a wellness check,” she said.

FINDING SUPPORT

If someone's in immediate danger, call 911. To make a referral to state Adult Protective Services, call 516-227-8395 in Nassau and 631-854-3232 in Suffolk.

■ **The Retreat Hotline:** 631-329-2200; offices in East Hampton, Riverhead, Hauppauge and Central Islip offering confidential, free support services, including a 24-hour hotline, legal advocacy, counseling, an 18-bed emergency shelter and prevention programming.

■ **EAC Network:** 516-539-0150; offices in Nassau and Suffolk counties and offers senior programs in both, including Meals on Wheels, senior community service programs and guardianship services.

■ **ECLI/VIBS 24-hour "Hopeline":** 631-360-3606; offers compre-

hensive services in cases of violence and abuse, legal advocacy, counseling and safe housing.

■ **Family & Children's Association Safe Observant Seniors (SOS) Program:**

516-485-3425, press 3; elder abuse prevention services, including virtual or in-person short-term crisis counseling and support groups, legal assistance and more.

■ There are also **Elder Abuse Enhanced Multidisciplinary Teams (E-MDT)**, which include representatives from various agencies and municipal departments. In Nassau, contact Arlene Markarian at amarkarian@fcali.org. In Suffolk, contact Haley Gordon at 631-512-4228, or visit nysemtdt.org.

— LIZA N. BURBY



Helen Atkinson-Barnes, left, director of prevention programming at The Retreat in Riverhead, and Alex Sulca Leonardo, bilingual prevention and community development specialist.