

Elder Abuse: Respect Needs to Start Now

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According to Illinois' Elder Abuse and Neglect Program, between 1 and 2 million Americans age 65 or older have been injured, exploited, or otherwise mistreated. As a large portion of the American population ages, elder abuse is becoming increasingly prevalent in our society. Older Americans do not deserve to spend their last years in pain and misery. This form of violence can be prevented through community awareness, public efforts for prevention, and taking responsibility for our nation's elderly on an individual basis.

The Illinois Elder Abuse Annual Report stated in 2006, that "Elder abuse is the least recognized form of family violence." In order to stop elder abuse, awareness must be raised on a national scale. It is not widely known that elder abuse can come in many forms. According to the Illinois Department of Aging, not only is physical abuse a common problem, but elder abuse can come in the form of sexual, emotional, and financial abuse as well. Signs of physical abuse can be wounds, burns, bruises, dehydration, malnourishment, soiled clothing, signs of confinement, and weight loss. Signs of financial exploitation can be apparent if an elderly person is not adequately provided with personal needs, even if they appear to have enough money, or if a caregiver appears to be spending the funds on themselves instead of the elderly person. The elderly person's caregiver can also demonstrate signs that they are the abuser by exhibiting indifference, anger, or aggression towards the patient. Abusers might also have a history of abuse or problems with alcohol, drugs, or mental illness. This devastating form of cruelty could be happening in a nursing home or assisted living facility near you.

Mistreatment of our elders can be greatly reduced on a state and national scale with action taken for new legislation and creating organizations to take proactive measures to prevent abuse among older Americans. Harsher punishments for abusers of the elderly, stricter regulations for the care of the elderly who are not capable of taking care of themselves, and closer monitoring of suspicious situations are just a few of the legislative acts that could prevent future abuse of aging Americans. Furthermore, creating organizations that look out for the welfare of elderly people that are not capable of fighting for their own wellbeing can make a huge difference in improving the quality of life in nursing homes.

I have had personal experience with witnessing nursing home residents who did not have a family to visit them or make sure that they were comfortable and had their needs met. As my grandparents were being cared for in a nursing home, my family visited them constantly and was in frequent contact with their nurses about their medication and diet. But I took note of the fact that many of the other residents sat alone for the vast majority of the day. They did not have a dutiful nuclear family or church family to look after them. Unfortunately, nurses and caregivers do not always give the attentive care that they are paid to give, they have many patients that they are responsible for and simply do not have time to meet the minute details of every patient's needs and desires.

Furthermore, taking personal responsibility for respecting our nation's elders is a key factor in preventing the mistreatment of older Americans. While you can not take the place of an elderly person's family, you can provide advocacy for the treatment of the elderly and company for nursing home residents that would otherwise have no one to talk

to. I have personally been involved with community service activities such as caroling at nursing homes, carving jack-o-lanterns for nursing home residents, and visiting an Alzheimer's unit to do puzzles and just keep the residents company. During all of these visits it was amazing to see how all of the residents lit up at the prospect of having someone to visit with and having someone there that cared about them. Elderly Americans were not always helpless, bedridden, and confused. They have shaped America with their courage, work, and determination through wars, economic crisis and amazing technological advances. They deserve nothing but to be treated with the utmost respect. Taking responsibility for the older citizens in your own community is one step towards better treatment of the elderly.

Avoiding the exploitation of elderly Americans is not something that can be overlooked. By raising awareness, involving national organizations, and taking personal responsibility, elder abuse can be eradicated. Older Americans have shaped our country into what it is today, they do not deserve ill-treatment. Their rights must be fought for, their dignity preserved. If we want our last years to be enjoyable, we must set a precedent for our descendents, we must fight for the rights of our elders today.

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