

## Elder abuse often unrecognized

• Problem said to be growing

**By Frances K. Foster**

*Staff reporter*

The problem of elder abuse goes “largely unrecognized and untreated,” said Shantel Moore, Sheridan Senior Center services director.

It is a “complex issue because of adult rights” to privacy and the difficulty of identifying those who are being abused, and so it is “tough” to control, she said.

Between 2003 and 2007 in Wyoming, the number of reported cases of elder abuse increased 29 percent; and in 2006, the Wyoming Department of Family Services investigated 1,100 cases statewide, Moore said.

The problem “is growing and will continue to grow” as more baby boomers age, she said.

In the United States, four out of five abusers are family members of the elderly person, Moore said. Most often, the abuse is in the form of exploitation, such as a financial scam, she said.

Elder abuse is “akin to domestic violence,” and victims often hesitate to report cases. “I hear all the time people say things like, ‘I can’t report this. He’s my son,’” Moore said.

The Elder Justice Act is currently before the U.S. Congress, but as of yet, there is no specific federal protection from elder abuse, she said. Researchers estimate that only one in 20 incidents are reported to authorities, she said.

In Wyoming, adults have the “right of self-determination,” so if abuse of an elderly person unable to protect himself is suspected, then the courts must determine whether the person has the “capacity to consent” to how he is being treated, Moore said.

“We need a community response” to identify victims and stop abuse, she said.

Consequently, Wyoming county teams made up of representatives from many organizations (e.g., law enforcement, mental health) that have contact with the elderly have been created to work together to stop elder abuse, Moore said.

The DFS or law enforcement agencies can investigate suspected cases of abuse, but if the “elderly person is capable of making decisions” for himself and doesn’t file charges, then it is legally difficult to charge someone with abuse, she said.

Sheridan Senior Center representatives can visit an elderly person who may be abused, but they cannot conduct an investigation or enter a home without permission. Wyoming Department of Health officials can help determine whether an elderly per-

son’s living conditions are unhealthy (e.g., no plumbing) but cannot force a person to move.

The Sheridan County team is working on a case of an elderly man whose guardian is suspected of “financially exploiting” him. At the suggestion of the team, the county attorney has petitioned the court for a guardian for the man while the case is investigated, Moore said.

The most common form of abuse is “self-neglect,” when an elderly person lives in an unsafe environment — often because of a physical or cognitive disability. If the elderly person declines offers of help, then a court must prove that the person does not have the “capacity to consent” before anything can be done legally to protect him.

Another elderly Sheridan man, who cannot drive or read, wants to move outside the city to a house without electricity, plumbing, or heat, Moore explained.

The county team worked with the Department of Health and, with the elderly man’s permission, had Northern Wyoming Mental Health Center examine him. He was found to have a “mild to moderate cognitive impairment” (i.e., cannot recognize the consequences of his choices).

The next step is to petition the court for a guardian who will stay in contact with the elderly man, she said.

Anyone who is concerned that an elderly person is the victim of abuse, whether by another person or self-inflicted, should call the Department of Family Services at 672-2404 and ask to speak with an intake worker, Moore said. Callers are guaranteed anonymity, she added.

Sheridan Senior Center representatives cannot make the report unless they witness the abuse themselves, but they can refer people to DFS and offer advice, legal information, and support services, she said.

Another option is to request law enforcement to make a “welfare check” on an elderly person.

A county team can act as a family mediator when needed to “give everyone a voice” and as a “clearinghouse to meet people’s needs,” she said.

“We need to set up and value a culture that appreciates and respects the needs of the elderly community and to value them instead of warehousing them,” Moore said.

Sunday is World Elder Abuse Awareness Day, and there will be a presentation on elder abuse on Monday during the noon hour in the senior center cafeteria, she said.



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Sheridan Senior Center Services Director Shantel Moore stands before a display in the senior center lobby to help raise awareness of elder abuse. Sunday is World Elder Abuse Awareness Day.