

Keeping an Eye on Our Elders

Elder abuse is a crime, too often within a family.

Elder abuse takes many forms. It has numerous venues, victims and offenders. It comes with embarrassment and denial for victims; greed and guilt for the perpetrators; shame and awkwardness for reluctant witnesses.

The Fourth Commandment urges respect and love for our fathers and mothers. But the discomfort dealing with the inconvenient problems of the elderly who are in nursing homes or other facilities, can lead to neglect — benign at the least, physically abusive at the worst. Despite well-meaning albeit shallow efforts by legislators and regulators, it remains a subject uncomfortable to discuss and difficult to enforce.

Elder abuse attacks those who are among the most vulnerable in society. They seem hidden away. We become frustrated and embarrassed by sights, sounds, odors and unfathomable language we accept from babies but not from those who raised us a generation or two earlier. Maybe it's fear that one day we will be in the same state.

These conditions and reactions can lead to crimes of theft and violence. The issue has become so volatile that 2019 was the 13th time the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse declared June as Elder Abuse Awareness Month.

But the crime has not disappeared. Indeed, Social Security estimates that 10% of American elders suffer some kind of abuse, simply because they're seen as easy targets. So it's sad but somewhat satisfying to watch as someone who was entrusted

Charitably Speaking



by Patrick Winn

Director, Rockford Diocese
Catholic Charities

pwinn@rockforddiocese.org

with the financial responsibility of an older relative goes to jail for draining accounts to cover personal debts or indulge in profligate spending.

And that leads to the questions of awareness: How did this happen? Who was not paying attention? Now what?

Awareness of any crime is multi-faceted. It is not enough to simply acknowledge a criminal act or even take the initial step of calling 9-1-1 or an anonymous hot line. Police and regulatory agencies can only address elder abuse if the staff or volunteers in a facility bring neglect or abuse of any kind to their attention. They certainly are not to blame if a family member abuses the legal designation of guardian or trustee.

Rather than look for someone to blame, Catholic Charities Long-Term Care Ombudsmen look for problems to resolve and advocate for residents long before police are called on site.

For our ombudsmen, every month is elder abuse awareness month. We must watch for elder abuse, whether financial, emotional or physical every day and every month, not just the ones observed or declared by a government agency.

When former Chief Justice Earl Warren advised, "Don't complain about getting old. Many people don't have that privilege," he was not inviting silence about abuse or advising residents to "let the buyer beware," and thus become fair game for scammers, thieves and abusers.

No one has the right to strip the prior generation of their dignity or take the gold from their golden years simply because of age or infirmity.

We can do better than that.

Old age does not
announce itself.

— Zulu proverb
