

Preventing elderly abuse: Conference educates about growing problem for seniors

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - A conference was held at **Senior Services Plus (SSP)** Friday afternoon to prevent a daunting problem for seniors - elderly abuse.

The conference featured several speakers from law advocacy and enforcement, including **Madison County Circuit Judge Barbara Crowder** and **Madison County Associate Judge Sarah Smith**. **Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation Alton Managing Director Clarissa Gaff** and **Ella York** from the **Illinois Attorney**

General's Office also spoke on behalf of resource programs designated to help seniors with civil law issues. Besides physical, sexual and emotional abuse, the speakers also warned against an often-unreported type of abuse committed against the elderly - financial abuse.

Gaff spoke about an elderly woman she helped through **Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation** she called "Lisa." Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation helps people living below the poverty, as well as all seniors, with legal civil matters. Lisa was referred to the foundation by her physician who saw her health was decreasing as a result of her living situation. Gaff said Lisa had recently allowed her nephew and his friend to move into her home with her.

"Like many young people, they weren't thinking correctly and drugs were a part of that," Gaff said. "Soon, Lisa lost the use of half of her home, and she wasn't allowed to eat enough. She admitted all of this stress to her doctor, who noticed it was destroying her health. A case worker from the doctor brought her to us, and she was able to use an emergency order of protection to get them out of her home."

Emergency orders of protection were methods Judges Crowder and Smith both advocated in severe situations of abuse. An emergency order of protection may be filed with the court and lasts for two weeks. It allows someone to keep another person away from them for that time, and the person against whom it is used does not have to be present to challenge it.

If that emergency order of protection requires further action, Smith said a person may file a "more permanent" plenary order of protection. A plenary order of protection requires someone to stay away from a person for two years. The offender may show up in court to defend himself/herself as well. If a judge allows for this order of protection, which was ultimately given to "Lisa" in Gaff's case, other measures may follow as well.

"The governor just signed a piece of legislation into law, which states anyone who has such an order of protection against them must give up their weapons as well as their FOID card," Smith said.

Violations to these orders can result in criminal charges and being held in contempt. Besides these measures, a judge may order the offender to go through counselling as soon as possible. Smith said the longer an offender waits for counselling, the less effective it is.



Orders of protections are valuable resources within Madison County's Third Circuit Court System, which has implemented a new program to deal with people within intimate partnerships, Crowder said.

" occurs in every age group and every economic reality," Crowder said.

The new court system would allow the same judges to preside over matters of family court as well as criminal charges. Orders of protection as well as charges of domestic abuse may overlap in this context. Crowder said the new initiative is only one of seven of its kind being implemented in the nation. While it is new to **Madison County**, Crowder said it has seen success when implemented elsewhere.

Currently, the program is being better implemented through law enforcement training, which includes financial exploitation for seniors as well as how to deal with abuse and pressure from loved ones. Judge Crowder said the program should be able to prevent people from coming to court multiple times, which results in less repeat offenses for the offenders and less court appearances for the victims. Crowder said the daunting reality of multiple appearances sometimes prevents victims from pressing charges.

Another aspect of elderly abuse, which often prevents seniors from pressing charges involves love. Judge Smith said, as a mother of three, she understands the trials which result from the unconditional love a parent has for his or her child. She encourages people close to an individual they think is being abused to go ahead and file a report for

them, saying people may not take care of themselves due to the closeness they share with their abuser.

"Keep a lookout for the signs," Smith said. "You can be their advocate if you don't think they'll do it themselves. Many people come to us in tears and reluctant, because their abuser is a loved one."

Another person in seniors' lives who can be responsible for their abuse is their caregiver. Caregivers often go through a lot of stress when caring for the elderly. That stress can sometimes cause them to snap or neglect a person under their care, said **Centerstone Senior Services Clinician Lara Kunz**.

Kunz was on a panel of local experts in the field of elderly abuse. That panel answered questions from the audience regarding warning signs of elderly abuse as well as resources. Kunz said she worked with both seniors and caregivers in need of assistance throughout Madison and Bond Counties.

" is an issue which needs to be addressed," Kunz said. "As a caregiver, I see a lot more financial abuse than emotional or physical."

Previous to working at **Centerstone**, Kunz worked with elderly abuse cases, many of which involved caregivers.

"Caregivers are tired, worn out and high-stressed," she said. "They're stressed by their jobs and not having the proper services for relief. They try to do it all by themselves."

Shannon Markus, who was on the panel from the **Caseworker Adult Protective Services**, said she investigates many charges of elderly abuse with the **Southwestern Illinois Visiting Nurses Association**. She said she works with mainly financial abuse cases as well, often involving family members. Her organization does not work with scams, however, which can be other ways for seniors to part with their life-savings or monthly checks.

York, who spoke from the Illinois Attorney General's Office, said the attorney general also oversees the consumer protection division. She said consumer protection is based on complaints by consumers. She said people can call or email the office to report a complaint as a consumer. The only information needed is the person's name, the name of the business and "what went wrong."

"We'll assign a consumer advocate to reach out to the business on the consumer's behalf," York said. "We send a letter out on our letterhead informing the business we have received a complaint from a consumer. Usually, they get a little nicer about things after that."

Consumer protection is usually about mediation, York said. She said the division has lawyers, however, for when they receive several complaints coming from the same business or when mediation falls through.

Another function of the consumer protection division involves following trends. York said she likes to "stay on top" of issues facing the state, including ones specifically directed at seniors. She said fake Internal Revenue Service (IRS) scams are the number one problem in the state for seniors.

To answer questions regarding the criminal aspect of elderly abuse, **Alton Police Department Public Relations Officer Emily Henja** joined the panel after a 15-minute break. Before joining the panel, Henja said certain criminal charges such as, battery, sexual assault and robbery, are aggravated based on the victim's age. Financial exploitation of the elderly or disabled is another charge, which is levied against those who have explicitly victimized seniors.

Officer Cody Thomas of the **Roxana Police Department** was accompanied by fellow **Roxana Officer Lee Bazzel** to become more informed about detecting and responding to charges of elderly abuse.

"We're here to get more training and figure out more signs and be more aware," Thomas said. "We want to get more resources and learn more about it."

Gale Lee, activities coordinator at SSP, said the organization hosts the event each year to inform the community about the importance of reporting elderly abuse as well as resources which may be used to prevent or put an end to it.

Associate Executive Director of SSP Theresa Collins was on the panel to discuss the resources SSP has to help with seniors who may be victims of abuse. She said SSP also relieves stress on caregivers by providing programs such as Meals-on-Wheels and caregiver respite.

Resources for Seniors

- **Madison County Courthouse Law Library**, which is open as long as the courthouse is opened, courthouse is located at 155 North Main Street in Edwardsville
- **Madison County Third Circuit Pro-Bono Committee**, which meets in the courthouse every second and fourth Tuesday to provide low-income people with a half-hour of civil law advice. Can be reached at (618) 296-5921 for appointment.
- **Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance**, located at 310 Easton Street #330 in Alton, provides free civil law services to low-income residents and seniors. They can be reached at (877) 342-7891 or (618) 398-0958. They also have an office within the Madison County Courthouse, and paralegal, **Felicia Voellkel**, who was also on Friday's panel, operates within SSP on the second and fourth Monday of each month, with follow-up meetings on the first and third Fridays of each month.
- **The Oasis Women's Center**, located at 111 Market Street in Alton, provides assistance for female victims of domestic violence. They can be reached at (618) 465-1978.
- **Centerstone** is located at 2615 Edwards Street in Alton. It is a mental health service provider and can be reached at (618) 462-2331. Kunz is also at SSP every first and third Mondays to provide free counselling for seniors.
- **The Illinois Attorney General Consumer Protection Division** can be found at <http://www.illinoisattorneygeneral.gov/consumers/>. The hotline, based out of Carbondale, is 1-800-243-0607.