

# Officials Urge Public To Look For Signs Of Abuse Of Elderly

BY RANDY DOCKENDORF

randy.dockendorf@yankton.net

When it comes to the treatment of older adults, elder abuse is a real crime. World Elder Abuse Awareness Day, observed June 15, shines a spotlight on the issue. Elder abuse is classified as a crime and should be reported when suspected. Cases can occur in a variety of settings and include physical, emotional and sexual abuse; neglect; and financial scams.

In the Yankton region, the elderly account for nearly 25 percent of some counties' population – and the number stands to grow. In turn, the welfare of older adults looks to require even more attention.

South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley noted the elderly represent a particularly vulnerable group of individuals.

"Older Americans are often the targets of abuse," he said. "This is because they are often unable to make a complaint or are afraid to lodge a complaint."

In many cases, the elderly person knows the abuser, Jackley said.

"Elder abuse is especially tragic because, in many of these cases, the abuser is in a position of trust: as a caregiver, a guardian, a trustee, or even a family member," he said. "By being aware of the signs of possible abuse and neglect, you (in the public) can help protect abuse victims."

Representatives from the South Dakota Department of Adult Services and Aging (ASA) will conduct an outreach event June 24 at The Center in Yankton. The session begins at 11:30 a.m. and will serve a complimentary lunch. Individuals interested in attending the event can contact Michelle Ziegler at (605) 665-1055.

At the event, the ASA provides attendees with information on elder abuse, where to report suspected cases, and other resources to help the elderly across South Dakota protect themselves.

Yankton Police Chief Brian Paulsen noted his office forwards all of its abuse cases to the state ASA office and doesn't separate out elder abuse.

However, he said his office does maintain separate records on fraud cases involving adults over the age of 50. Those cases targeting older adults saw a slight increase from 42 cases in 2013 to 48 cases in 2014.

For Yankton, the total number of reports to Adult Services and Aging stood at nine for all of 2014, according to the South Dakota Department of Social Services. That figure has already been surpassed this year with 11 reports for the first four months of 2015.

Yankton County Sheriff Jim Vlahakis said his office has handled more fraud cases than elder abuse.

"We've not had a case of elder abuse reported to this office for many years," he



said. "We've had incidents where the elderly have become the victims of typical phone scams – where they've been told they've won something and have sent money to claim their prizes."

Unfortunately, those phone scams are difficult to prosecute, the sheriff said.

"The majority of these scams originate out of country, and the chances of recovery of monies or catching the perpetrators is very low," he said.

Both South Dakota and Nebraska state statutes list the groups of "mandatory" reporters who must contact the authorities with cases of suspected abuse or neglect. The mandatory reporters cover a wide range of medical personnel, mental health professionals, law enforcement, care givers and other groups.

The Yankton County ambulance crew falls under those mandatory reporters, according to Emergency Medical Services (EMS) director Steve Hawkins.

"We've received training on (handling elder abuse and neglect)," he said. "We're trained on things to look for and how to go about doing a report. If we even suspect it, we're to report it."

#### NEBRASKA OFFICIALS RESPOND

Nebraska officials are using the 10th observance of World Elder Abuse Awareness Day as a call to action, said Courtney Phillips, CEO of the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Every year, about one in 10 older Americans is a victim of elder abuse, neglect or exploitation, Phillips said. It's estimated that, for every report of elder abuse or neglect, as many as 23.5 cases go unreported, she said.

"With the number of older Americans expected to grow to 20 percent of our population before 2030, elder abuse must be an ever-present concern," Phillips said. "They (older adults) are likely to live longer, but not necessarily better as cognitive and physical abilities decline. We must be there for them and learn the warning signs."

In Nebraska, the state Health and Human Services office tracks elderly abuse and neglect cases.

The Northern Service Area, headquartered in Norfolk, reported 334 cases of abuse and neglect in 2014. The Norfolk office reported 122 cases during the first three months of this year.

The Adult Protective Services (APS) has seen fairly constant trends in recent years, according to Nebraska HHS spokesman Russ Reno.

"The number of reports of adult abuse and neglect reports to the APS Hotline has increased 13 percent the last four years," he said, "but the number that was accepted for investigation has remained relatively constant."

#### PROVIDING FOR SENIORS' NEEDS

Tony Erickson serves as the executive director for senior services for Avera Sacred Heart Hospital in Yankton. He said his long-term care facilities act quickly on any suspected elder abuse.

"We really take a pretty hard stance on it because of regulations that require it," he said. "From that perspective, we have immediate reporting guidelines that we have got to meet if we suspect it."

Elder abuse covers a wide range of areas and can occur in any setting, Erickson said.

"If you look at it, the public perception of elder abuse is on the physical or sexual side, but that's not necessarily always the case," he said. "You have the neglect side or the exploitation side or the emotional abuse with humiliation, intimidation or threats."

The elderly are also vulnerable to scams, Erickson said. "You have the case where (elderly homeowners) are told they need a new roof, and they don't need one at all," he said.

The public has gained more awareness about elder abuse, he said. However, an emphasis also needs to be placed on helping older residents meet their daily needs, he added, noting self-neglect falls under elder abuse.

In his work, Erickson sees area residents not only living longer but also remaining in their own homes longer before entering a long-term care facility. Quite often, family members have moved away and aren't readily available on a daily basis to meet an elderly person's needs, he said.

"Most seniors out there in the community setting are still living in their homes," he said. "But in some respects, they need assistance

in certain ways with meals (and things) like that."

An individual may wish to remain independent as long as possible, Erickson said. However, there comes a time when the person is no longer able to take care of daily tasks such as eating and taking medication, he said.

"In some cases, the one thing we do see with any person is pride – I can still do it, I can still handle it," he said. "But there are some triggers where the 'doc' says you can't stay home anymore. You see their health deteriorating, and they aren't physically able to take care of themselves."

At times, an elderly person may fall or face other emergencies while home alone, Erickson said. He pointed to the well-known commercial of the elderly woman calling for help because she has fallen and can't get up. In some real-life cases, a person has lain on the floor for days before someone checked on the individual, he said.

"It's good that people are remaining independent," he said. "But individuals are coming to us (at long-term facilities) with more need of care because of the fact that they stay home longer."

Yankton is fortunate in that it offers a number of services, such as transportation and meal programs, for the elderly who need assistance, Erickson said. He encourages elderly residents to become involved with The Center, adult day care programs, Meals on Wheels and other services.

During the past 13 years, Yankton has responded with more and varied housing options for the elderly, Erickson said. However, there remains a growing need for affordable housing, especially for senior citizens, he said.

Whether it's growing awareness of abuse or providing more services, it's all part of preparing for a growing elderly population in the years ahead, Erickson said.

"We need to be able to meet their needs. That's the big thing," he said.

Persons who suspect someone is being abused, neglected or exploited are encouraged to contact local law enforcement, the state's attorney's office or the Department of Social Services.

In South Dakota, contact the Office of Adult Services and Aging at 605-773-3656, or the Attorney General's Medicaid Fraud Control Unit at 605-773-4102. The Fraud Unit can also be reached by logging onto atg.sd.gov.

In Nebraska, call the 24-hour toll-free hotline at 1-800-652-1999 or contact local law enforcement.

More information on elder abuse can be found on the South Dakota Department of Human Services website at dhs.sd.gov and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services website at dhhs.ne.gov/.

Be first in line for kindergarten & sports physicals.

Call NOW to book your appointment.



#### CLINIC PHYSICIANS \*Board Certified



**PEDIATRICS**  
Matthew Krell, MD, FAAP



**FAMILY MEDICINE**  
William Dendinger, MD



**FAMILY MEDICINE**  
Charles Yelverton, MD



**FAMILY MEDICINE**  
Michelle Chaussee, MPAS, PA-C



**FAMILY MEDICINE**  
Amy Fluit, MPAS, PA-C



**VERMILLION MEDICAL CLINIC®**

101 SOUTH PLUM STREET • VERMILLION, SD 57069

[www.VermillionMedicalClinic.com](http://www.VermillionMedicalClinic.com)

#### JUNE VISITING SPECIALISTS

##### AUDIOLOGY

Jason R. Howe, MS, FAAA, CCC-A  
June 2, 4, 9, 11, 16, 18, 23 & 30

##### DERMATOLOGY

James W. Young, DO, FAOCD\*  
June 18 & 25

##### EAR, NOSE & THROAT

Patrick J. Collison, MD, FACS\*  
June 2, 9, 16, 23 & 30

##### GENERAL SURGERY

Jesse L. Kampshoff, MD\*  
June 1 & 15

##### NEPHROLOGY

Byron S. Nielsen, MD\*  
June 4

#### OBSTETRICS / GYNECOLOGY

Curtis M. Adams, MD\*  
June 5, 12, 19 & 26

Jill F. Sternquist, MD, FACOG\*  
June 3, 10, 17 & 24

#### ORTHOPEDIC SURGERY

Jeremy Kudera, MD, ABOS\*  
June 8 & 22

#### PULMONOLOGY

Lori A. Hansen, MD, FACP, FACCP\*  
June 25

#### RHEUMATOLOGY

Leann Bassing, MD\*  
June 16

#### UROLOGY

George Fournier, Jr., MD, FACS\*  
June 5 & 19

Please call 605-624-8643 to schedule your appointment today!

Most insurances accepted, including Medicare and Medicaid.

#### REGULAR CLINIC HOURS

Monday – Friday  
8:00AM to 5:00PM



Monday – Friday  
5:00PM to 9:00PM