

PROGRAM HELPS PROTECT ELDERLY FROM ABUSE



ALEX MUNTER

She's 86 years old. For years, she was the victim of financial and emotional abuse at the hands of her own family. And now, in the cruelest irony of all, she has ended up exactly where they wanted her: In a nursing home.

"It's OK here, but it's very very lonesome," she says. "I play solitaire, I watch politics on TV, I listen to Lowell Green on the radio."

Let's call her Ethel. It's not her real name, but she wants to protect her anonymity. She doesn't want to embarrass her family, she says. But she also feels embarrassed for herself. "I was so stupid about things."

When Ethel's 47-year-old son died of cancer in the early 1990s, she and her granddaughter bought an east-end bungalow with the money he willed them. Their relationship began to sour after the granddaughter got married and had children. According to one of Ethel's social workers, the growing family became steadily more resentful of the matriarch's increasing frailty.

Though they all lived together in the one house, they soon cut off all verbal contact with her. Ethel's two great-grandchildren were not allowed to speak to her. The family stopped cooking for her.

"I started to get Meals on Wheels," she recalls. "I would eat the soup and dessert at lunch and eat the rest at suppertime."

Her granddaughter's husband rebuilt the front and back doors. Because of her severely arthritic ankles and legs, she couldn't step over the elevated threshold without help. And no one would help. She was a prisoner

in a home where she was unwelcome.

"Finally, I decided I couldn't endure it any more," she says.

But leaving wasn't easy. Her family wanted her out, but did not want to buy her half of the house. They had already secured her power of attorney, giving Ethel's granddaughter the legal power to make decisions in her place. They argued they were entitled to her half of the house to compensate for taking care of her.

That's when she turned to Citizen Advocacy, a 30-year-old area agency that recently started a program to help seniors with disabilities. With the assistance of social workers and lawyers, Ethel was able to revoke the power of attorney and keep the money to which she was entitled. She's used those funds to pay for her current accommodation.

Experiences like Ethel's have led Citizen Advocacy to organize a one-day workshop next Thursday: The Elder Abuse Puzzle — Where Do I Fit?

One speaker at the workshop is Heather Haw, whose mother was abused in a Brantford retirement home where she was paying \$100 per day to convalesce. When Ms. Haw came to see her mother one morning, she saw her arm was black and blue with bruising.

"It was like none other that I had ever seen," she remembers. "My son played all sports, even dirt bikes. I've seen bruises."

Her mother told her that an attendant had hit her after she had wet the bed. Ms. Haw and her sisters started staying with their mother, 24 hours per day, in shifts. She died of cancer a few weeks later.

Ms. Haw confronted the home's management and assumed the problem had been dealt with. A year later, media coverage revealed grisly hidden-camera footage of another elderly patient being savagely beaten at the same retirement residence. Ms. Haw was galvanized to action.

Along with other resident advocates, she has launched a new group that wants the Criminal Code amended to make elder abuse a specific crime. Abusing the trust or powerlessness of vulnerable seniors isn't well enough covered by assault laws, she says. "It's like child welfare laws. That's what we need for seniors."

She's also pressuring the Ontario government to deliver on its promise to regulate private retirement residences. Right now, there are absolutely no rules governing the care in retirement residences. Anybody can put up a sign, advertise their services and rent out rooms. The fire inspector might drop by, but that's about it.

Ms. Haw's activism is just one example of a blizzard of recent activity on elder abuse. Earlier this year, Ottawa police set up an Elder Abuse Section headed by a veteran detective.

The Ontario government has launched a strategy to combat the problem. Estimates of the rate of abuse and neglect of seniors vary between four and 10 per cent, though most believe it's much higher than that.

All of this sounds a lot like discussion about drunk driving or spousal violence 20 years ago. Communities and governments are beginning to understand there's a major problem that is mostly invisible. Solutions can only be found by shining a spotlight on the issue.

We seem to be stumbling towards awareness. Naming the problem comes first, making the behaviour socially unacceptable is next and then come solutions.

Unfortunately, that's too slow — and it'll be too late — for Ethel or for Ms. Haw's mother.

TO REGISTER FOR THE ELDER ABUSE PUZZLE — WHERE DO I FIT?, CALL 761-9522.

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