

Protecting seniors should be a priority

Study finds too little awareness about elder abuse and few prosecutions

THE REGISTER'S EDITORIAL

Child abuse is not simply a “family matter” others should ignore or dismiss. We all know this. Educational campaigns and troubling news stories prompt people to take action when they believe a child is being mistreated. In fact, we feel obligated to report it to authorities.

Yet there is less public awareness and feeling of communal responsibility when it comes to mistreatment of older people.

Elder abuse may not be on our radar, even though older adults, particularly those who are frail or have diminished cognitive function, can be just as vulnerable as children. They need to be protected too, a point made in a recent report compiled by University of Iowa researchers for the U.S. Department of Justice.

Researchers focused their study on 1,000 square miles in east-central Iowa, including Cedar Rapids and Iowa City. They held meetings, conducted interviews, compiled information from law enforcement and reviewed laws, regulations and other data.

They found prosecution of elder abuse is a relatively rare occurrence. That means abusers go unpunished, seniors continue

about family members moving into homes and taking advantage of seniors. A bank worker shared an anecdote about an elderly customer’s relative trying to withdraw thousands of dollars. A law enforcement officer said victims themselves frequently do not want to file charges against an abuser, particularly if it is someone they rely on for daily help.

Kaskie hopes eventually there can be as much awareness about senior abuse as there is about child abuse and domestic abuse.

“Protecting seniors is a bipartisan issue,” he said.

Iowa lawmakers can do more to help. They should begin by recognizing government is not the enemy, but the best entity for helping protect the most vulnerable people, including the more than 500,000 Iowans over the age of 65. And government can do its job only if it’s adequately funded.

Recommendations from the report include: increased funding for state and county attorneys to prosecute elder abuse; involving social workers and therapists in the investigative process; funding for individuals and organizations who can serve as

of hospitalization and death. Victims are also more likely to be placed in a nursing home and are at an increased risk of developing mental disorders such as depression and anxiety,” according to the report.

In 2017, the Iowa Department of Aging received about \$250,000 in state appropriations specifically to support elder abuse prevention and awareness, according to the report. Yet budget shortfalls meant the use of those funds was limited to supporting efforts and making referrals to understaffed government agencies. Iowans understand the importance of looking out for those who cannot look out for themselves. The people we elect to represent us need to make sure government has the resources to do it.

to suffer and the rest of us are in the dark about problems.

guardians for elders; and public awareness campaigns.

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“One thing that really jumped out at us was a sort of acceptance or lack of awareness about elder abuse in general,” said Brian Kaskie, an associate professor at the U of I and co-author of the report.

Those things are not free. Yet the GOP- controlled Iowa Legislature insists on cutting taxes and trying to shrink the size of government. A lack of funding for state agencies has consequences for not only older Iowans, but all taxpayers who fund their health care through Medicare and Medicaid.

Abuse is not necessarily physical. He’s heard stories

“Victims of elder abuse have an increased risk

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