**THE REGISTER’S EDITORIAL**

County leads in prosecuting elder abuse

Sarcone’s office pursues family members who exploit relatives by stealing money

A recent University of Iowa study about elder abuse focused on 1,000 square miles in the east central part of this state. It found Iowans have little awareness about the mistreatment of older people, and there are relatively few prosecutions when abuse occurs.

After the Register editorialized on the research, Polk County Attorney John Sarcone contacted us. He wanted to underscore the importance of bringing attention to this issue. Iowa has more than 500,000 residents over age 65. Older adults, particularly those who are frail or have diminished cognitive function, can be vulnerable to abuse.

Sarcone has a personal passion for protecting seniors. His mother suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. Though she had good family support, he recognized there are many older Iowans at risk.

“ I believe you could ask most people and they could tell you of a loved one or someone they know who has or had some form of dementia which would make them vulnerable to financial or physical abuse unless there was a caring family member( s) or devoted caregiver to watch over them,” he told a Register editorial writer.

The Polk County Attorney’s Office was the first in Iowa to create a specialized Dependent Adult and Elder Abuse Unit in 2002. It has the highest rate in the state of prosecuting this abuse and regularly gets calls from law enforcement and other county attorney offices seeking information about the issue.

Polk County prosecutors currently are working at least 12 active elder/dependent

adult abuse cases and 18 cases involving emergency protective orders.

Unfortunately, prosecuting elder abuse is rare in rural areas, according to the U of I report. Yet these seniors may be the most vulnerable because they are more likely to be isolated, have fewer interactions with the community and may not be able to find reliable caregivers.

Granted, Iowa’s most populous county has more resources than smaller counties, but protecting seniors is also a matter of setting priorities.

Counties can band together to form specialized units that cultivate expertise on this complicated issue. Local leaders can encourage training, particularly for law enforcement, hospital personnel and bank workers. These individuals interact frequently with older people, and knowing what to look for can aid in reporting suspected criminal activity.

Unlike other crime victims, dependent adults are often reluctant to report wrongdoing because it involves someone they rely on for help. That someone is frequently a family member or friend.

“ What is really sad to see is an elderly parent who has worked hard all of his or her life, saved money for retirement, only to be taken advantage of by his or her own child, and they, for whatever reason, do not want to report what happened,” Sarcone said.

His office has prosecuted family members who exploited relatives by stealing, securing mortgages on houses that had been paid off and running up credit card debt in the name

of an older Iowan.

Sarcone talked about the case of Blossom Deering, a Des Moines woman left by her live- in caregiver to lie in her own waste for weeks, too weak to move. When paramedics finally found her in January 2000, they had to wear oxygen tanks and masks to breathe through the stench. Deering died days later of septic shock. Her caregiver was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

“She was found stuck to the floor in her own excrement while the person responsible for her care was using her money to gamble at Prairie Meadows,” Sarcone said.

His office should be an example for other Iowa counties, and his passion should be an example for other elected officials, including state lawmakers, who can choose to dedicate more funding to protecting our most fragile residents.