Elder Abuse Awareness

Saturday, June 15th, marks World Elder Abuse Awareness Day. In Michigan, prosecutors are working in their communities to build awareness and to educate seniors and their families about topics like scams and financial exploitation. In west Michigan, two prosecutors say protecting seniors is personal.

Kent County Prosecutor Chris Becker sees his community coming together to combat the financial exploitation of seniors. “Years ago, when I first started this,” Prosecutor Becker says, “you would have to drag a bank, begging and screaming, to turn over information, even though thousands of dollars were missing from a senior’s account.” Now, he says, times have changed. Banks and credit unions are focused on sharing information with law enforcement and call the police or Adult Protective Services when they suspect a possible case of financial exploitation of a senior citizen. “That’s really good to see because we’ve had a number of cases where somebody’s there, it’s mom, trying to take out $10,000, and the bank is saying, ‘This doesn’t seem right.’”

Across Kent County, Prosecutor Becker meets with senior and community groups to talk about elder abuse and increase public awareness. “The thing everybody goes to automatically is scams,” Becker says. “We do see scams and there are scams. We make people aware of them, but we also dig down into what we do see, which is the financial exploitation, where it is somebody close to a vulnerable adult, and we try to give pointers to people to be aware of what goes on. We have a pretty robust advocate for seniors group that I sponsor and talk to quite a bit.”

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Canine Corner

Basil, the Ingham County Prosecutor’s Office new canine advocate, was officially sworn in to her new job at 30th Circuit Court in mid-May.

Clinton County Prosecutor Tony Spagnuolo extends birthday wishes to canine advocate Arlo, who turned two in May.

The Michigan Elder Abuse Task Force: Five Years of Progress

The Michigan Elder Abuse Task Force (EATF) marks its fifth anniversary in 2024. Midland County Prosecutor J. Dee Brooks, a member of the group since its inception, says the EATF has produced changes that have positively impacted Michigan’s seniors and vulnerable adults. “The momentum has continued even after five years. One of the first big projects was the passage of the Financial Exploitation Prevention Act, applying to banks, credit unions and financial institutions, requiring them to have trainings and policies in place to look for financial exploitation of elder and other vulnerable adults. One of the current projects we’re working on is to expand that to financial advisors and investment consultants.”

Prosecutor Brooks says protecting seniors begins with prevention. As a result of the work of the Task Force, Brooks says “We’re actually seeing people stopping the exploitation from taking place beforehand. Of course, that’s really what ultimately we’re after. People sometimes say ‘Well, aren’t these really just property crimes?’ but they’re so much more. It’s the physical, financial and even the emotional well-being of seniors we’re protecting.”
In Muskegon County, Prosecutor DJ Hilson says crimes that target seniors are always troubling and often personal to prosecutors. “They’re some of the most heart-wrenching stories that we come across and they kind of hit you in the gut, too. A lot of us have aging parents or aging relatives that are maybe starting to rely on us more and more to take care of them. It’s unfathomable that you would take advantage of somebody who spent the majority of their lifetime either raising you or being a part of your life.” Prosecutor Hilson says the Muskegon County community comes together, though, to protect seniors through education and prevention and the work of a multi-disciplinary team.

In 2016, Muskegon County voters approved a ½ mil countywide levy to fund senior initiatives. “I’m extremely proud of our Safe Senior Task Force,” Prosecutor Hilson says. “We were able to tap into the millage for the Task Force, which is now comprised of two detectives and one Assistant Prosecutor in my office. Their sole design and mission is to investigate any situation of elder abuse, whether it be financial exploitation or physical abuse.”

Prevention and education are key, according to Hilson. “The majority of cases that we’re investigating and prosecuting have to do with financial exploitation.” Hilson says seniors are sometimes targeted by a family member or friend, or, sometimes, scam artists. “We spend a lot of time with our senior citizen community making sure they are aware of what the more prevalent scams are. Our business community has done a good job of educating themselves about the anomalies they see and being really attuned to situations where a senior comes in and buys 15 gift cards.”

Hilson says developing technologies are posing new challenges. “I would say that we’re probably less than a year away from hearing about the latest scammers using AI technology, because you can essentially recreate where you’re faking the voice of a grandson or someone else and we’re not too far away from being able to use that person’s voice pattern, so you won’t be able to tell the difference between an AI voice and a real voice.”

Combating elder abuse, Hilson concludes, is a multi-faceted effort. “If you want to talk about a community approach in tackling a criminal justice problem, this one is probably top of the list.”