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General questions: Cary Greenwood, 503-945-6069; 503-602-9221

Technical questions: Marie Cervantes, 503-945-6079

Elder Abuse Prevention Month activities highlight an under-reported but growing problem

During Elder Abuse Prevention Month, state officials are focusing on the fact that elder abuse is a growing problem nationally and in Oregon, but very few abuse cases are ever reported. National studies estimate that 3-5 million seniors age 65 and older nationwide have experienced abuse, but only one in five abuse cases is reported.

“No type of abuse should be tolerated, but elder abuse is an under-reported crime because people do not know how to recognize the signs, and they don’t know how to report it when they do see it,” says James D. Toews, Oregon Department of Human Services assistant director for seniors and people with disabilities. “We have to raise awareness of elder abuse and ways to report it before we can hope to prevent it.”

Signs of elder abuse include physical injuries, emotional or behavioral changes, a decline in self-care, and changes in financial status. For a complete list, see <http://www.oregoneverydayheroes.org/Signs.html>. Oregon law defines elder abuse as physical injury not caused by accident, neglect leading to harm, abandonment, intentional infliction of physical pain or injury, unwanted sexual contact or the inability to consent to sexual contact, and threatening to take or taking money or property.

Anyone witnessing or suspecting abuse of those populations is asked to call the toll-free Abuse Hotline: 1-800-232-3020. DHS and Area Agencies on Aging provide protective services and investigate reports of suspected abuse. They determine if abuse has occurred and work with law enforcement when a potential crime may have occurred.

DHS investigated 12,897 allegations of abuse of elderly or physically disabled Oregonians in 2007 and substantiated more than 4,200, a 5.5 percent increase over 2008. Based on national trends, the actual number of cases of elder abuse in Oregon may have been much higher.

Elder Abuse Prevention Month activities, held in conjunction with national efforts by the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA), are designed to raise that awareness and help Oregonians understand how to help this vulnerable population, Toews says.

DHS will hold an all-day open house on elder abuse prevention Oct. 22 in the lobby of its Salem headquarters, 500 Summer NE. Partners in the event include the Office of Investigations and Training (serving persons with developmental disabilities), the Governor's Commission on Senior Services, Oregon Everyday Heroes (www.oregoneverydayheroes.org) and the Oregon Senior Financial Abuse Coalition. Public Service Announcements on elder abuse, produced by NCEA and featuring William Mapother ("Ethan Rom" on Lost), are available at http://www.ncea.aoa.gov/NCEARoot/Main_Site/Index.aspx.

"Our staff do an excellent job of identifying these situations and providing assistance, but they need help from the public," says Toews. "As Oregon's population ages, this type of abuse is bound to increase unless we all become more aware of the signs of abuse and more willing to report or prevent it."

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