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Frail, isolated senior citizens are fearful, abused, exploited

Agencies say they work to keep vulnerable elderly residents independent, safe

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Photo from the home of a Senior Resource Center client who suffered from self-neglect. The 80-year-old woman has been placed in a nursing home. Contributed photo

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A contractor charged Geraldine Moran thousands of dollars to install a sump pump. The contractor said it would be a remedy for small cracking in the ceiling, but the pump has never been used because no water ever collects in that area. Attorney Craig Matthews said he's seeing an increase in elderly clients who believe they have been victims of financial exploitation. Staff photo by Jim Witmer

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By [Joanne Huist Smith](#)

Staff Writer

DAYTON — Nancy Manuel's 86-year-old mother lived in her own home, shoveled snow, gardened and walked to the grocery store, though her adult children pleaded with her to call them for a ride.

Now, mom doesn't realize her home has been foreclosed, that she has lost everything — her savings and life insurance, gone.

The family did not want their mother identified for this story.

The family is selling mom's furniture to ensure there is money to bury her when the time comes. And, they are chastising themselves for not realizing the extent of mom's self-neglect due to confusion from Sundowner Syndrome, a form of dementia.

"She was smart enough to hide it from us," Manuel said. "To other families I say, 'Don't wait to get involved.'"

Reaching age 60 certainly isn't a death sentence and many senior citizens are able to remain active and independent for decades. Others, more frail and often living in isolation, are increasingly becoming victims.

- Ohio Department of Job and Family Services data shows county reports of elder abuse, neglect, self-neglect or financial exploitation rose to 16,370 in 2009, 1,000 more reports than in 2008.
- Montgomery County saw its Adult Protect Services referrals rise by 100 during the same time period for a total of 1,404. About 61 percent of the cases involved self-neglect; 17 percent resulted from neglect by others; 11 percent were from abuse;

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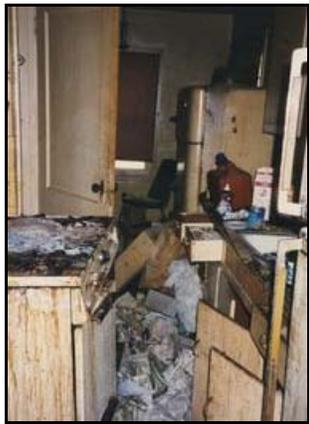


Photo from the home of a Senior Resource Center client who suffered from self-neglect. The 80-year-old woman has been placed in a nursing home. Contributed photo

[Extreme cases of self-neglect seen among elderly](#)

and, 11 percent were from exploitation.

Patrick Bailey, manager, Senior Services, Income and Support Division, Montgomery County Dept. Job & Family Services, said the overall rise in referrals is concerning.

"Last year we saw more of an upward trend than we ever saw in the past," he said.

Collaboration sought to help seniors

The upward trend in cases of elder abuse has brought together representatives from 35 Montgomery County agencies to form the Collaboration Against Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation. The hope is to use education, advocacy, intervention and services to improve the lives of these vulnerable citizens.

"I think collaboration will not only educate the public, it will educate the professionals," said Chuck Komp, vice president of the Senior Resource Connection.

Freedom over safety, a client's right to self-determination, is a guiding principle.

"People want us to go in and fix things," said Peg Spencer, social services supervisor at the Senior Resource Connection. "We tell people if you want things to change, you're going to have to work with us."

Referrals investigated by Montgomery County's Adult Protective Services or the Senior Resource Connection come in 24 hours a day from relatives, neighbors, doctors, landlords and even bank employees.

Investigations of routine referrals must be started in three working days and emergencies within two days. The goal is to help people, mostly 60 and older, to remain independent if that's what they want while preventing or reducing dangerous conditions.

"It's all about choices," said Sharon A. Minturn, president of the Senior Resource Connection. "Often the result goes from terrible to not so bad. We help them as much as they're willing to accept."

Self-neglect cases can be extreme

Self-neglect cases, such as Manuel's mom, can range from a diabetic with a freezer full of ice cream to a recent widower who eats poorly because he never learned to cook. Then there are extreme cases.

The house appeared tidy, but the Senior Resource Connection case manager couldn't help but notice the infestation of fleas and a strong odor of mold.

An 87-year old woman with dementia lived alone in the home with her dog.

She had no relatives and depended on a neighbor to get her groceries. A back room was packed with layers of clothing. Everything was covered in black mold due to a leaky roof.

The woman hadn't been paying her bills because she didn't think she had to. She had notices for all of her utilities to be turned off — water, electric and gas. The case manager located an attorney to get emergency financial guardianship to pay her bills. She needed to leave the house so it could be cleaned.

"As long as the person is not adjudicated and found unsound, they have the right to stay in their

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own home," said Komp. "We're there to serve the elderly and their wishes, even if the decisions they are making are bad. We're not there to serve the referral source."

Gaining access to the client is the first challenge.

Jeffrey Phelps, a Montgomery County adult protective services worker, responded to the call from a relative of a woman in her 80s who lived alone in a two-story, three-bedroom home in Dayton. The house looked pretty normal from the outside.

"Inside, it was like a thrift store gone wild. There were items stacked up to the ceiling. She had 400 large plastic storage containers filled with all kinds of stuff. I nearly fell trying to walk up the steps," Phelps said. "There never used to be a name for this. There is now, hoarding."

The woman wasn't home when Phelps and the relative stopped by the first time. The second time she didn't answer the door. Phelps called her.

"She said she didn't need any help. At that point, I had to back off," Phelps said. "People who have this disorder have perfect cognitive ability. It's still a form of self-neglect."

Senior citizens fear going to nursing home

State of Ohio data shows that of the 6,966 individuals in need of protective services in 2009, 2,055 refused help.

Lacy Cowdrey, the only adult protective services worker with the Warren County Department of Job and Family Services, said her caseload has grown steadily over four years to 264. Self-neglect cases make up about 80 percent of the total.

Her clients often aren't happy to see her. Her task, conveying to them that asking for help doesn't have to mean going to a nursing home.

"Clients themselves are very fearful," she said. "It takes a lot for someone to be fully stripped of their rights and placed in a nursing home. That's not our goal. We're a resource, not a punishment."

The Area Agency on Aging serving Champaign, Clark, Darke, Greene, Logan, Miami, Montgomery, Preble and Shelby counties gets about 1,800 calls a month from people looking for services such as transportation, home-delivered meals or light housekeeping. About 70 percent are from first-time callers. Though some services are income based, anyone can get an assessment.

"We build a care plan around resources that are available," said Doug McGarry, executive director of the agency. "The individual has to ask us for services."

Salesmen, contractors exploit elderly

Sometimes, opening the door to a salesman can be a senior's downfall.

Attorney Craig Matthews said he's seeing an increase in elderly clients who believe they have been victims of financial exploitation.

"These are people who are competent, but fragile and living independently. They are lonely," Matthews said. "A fast-talking salesman comes to the door and the next thing they know their name is on a contract."

Geraldine S. Moran just wanted the hairline cracks along her ceiling and wall joints repaired in her 50-year-old Dayton home. When a persuasive contractor told the 88-year-old widow the cracks were caused by water under her house, she believed him.

"I guess I was overwhelmed because he was so personable," Moran said. "I wasn't thinking."

Moran claims the contractor told her the house needed a \$13,000 fix. The company installed an

air purification system in a bedroom, drilled a whole in a closet floor and put in a sump pump. Ten men worked on the job last January that included digging up her yard to bury a pipe.

"The sump pump has never come on and the walls are still cracking." Moran said. "I'm not fixing things anymore."

A lawsuit is pending in Montgomery County Common Pleas Court.

Where to get help

Montgomery County Adult Protective Services 24-hour hotline: (937) 225-4906

Senior Resource Connection: (937) 223-8246 or www.seniorresourceconnection.com

Area Agency on Aging, serving Champaign, Clark, Darke, Greene, Logan, Miami, Montgomery, Preble and Shelby counties: (937) 223-HELP (4357)

Greene County Adult Protective Services: (937) 562-6000, ext. 6315

Miami County Adult Protective Services: (937) 440-6000, ext. 8391

Warren County Adult Protective Services: (513) 695-1423

Area Agency on Aging serving Butler, Clermont, Clinton, Hamilton and Warren counties: (513) 721-1025



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