

HELPFUL HINTS

Preventing Elder Financial Abuse

For Family Caregivers

Issues to consider and steps to take to protect your family members from becoming victims



Overview

Older individuals can be especially vulnerable to elder financial abuse or exploitation at the hands of others. Individuals with physical or cognitive impairments are at even greater risk. The source of mistreatment may be a stranger or someone an individual trusts—even a family member. As a caregiver, it is important that you are alert to signs of elder financial abuse and that you are able to help your family members take precautions to prevent them from becoming victims.

These *Helpful Hints* have been prepared in collaboration with the National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (NCPEA) and the Center for Gerontology at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.



Key Considerations

Executing Certain Legal Documents

- If you are a caregiver, it can be difficult to begin this conversation with family members. Reassure them that you are raising these issues because you want to be certain that their wishes regarding financial matters and health care decisions are respected and carried out, especially if there comes a time when they are unable to make these wishes known.
- Two important documents related to financial matters are a will and durable power of attorney. If completed, they can assure that family members' wishes regarding asset distribution upon death will be honored and that financial decisions will be made by a trusted individual.
- Your family members should also consider completing two other documents. A living will provides a blueprint for treatment that they would and would not want carried out in the event of life-threatening medical situations or end of life care. A health care power of attorney would permit a trusted individual to follow the guidance in the living will and make medical decisions if your family members become unable to do so.
- It is important that your family members understand that these documents can only be completed at a time when they are capable of comprehending and making these decisions.



Encourage Organization of Legal and Financial Documents

Important documents such as insurance and banking information, deeds, investment information, wills, and power of attorney papers should be kept in a secure location. Another person who is trusted by you and your family members should know of this place and also have access to it. Encourage your family members to review these documents yearly to make sure that they still reflect their wishes.

Stress the Importance of Monitoring Financial Affairs

Reinforce the importance of checking monthly credit card, banking, and other financial statements to ensure they are correct. Offer to assist if it is difficult for your family members to manage these tasks. Encourage the use of direct deposit for Social Security and other payments to prevent mail fraud, and pay attention to protecting passwords they may use for the Internet, ATMs, and telephone transactions.

Suggest Caution in Making Financial Decisions

Advise careful consideration of financial decisions. Suggest that it is helpful to have another set of ears to help review their options before making a decision and another set of eyes to review financial documents before signing. Your family members need to be careful when responding to any in-person, mail, Internet, or telephone invitations. Fraudulent solicitors are very skillful in trying to gain someone's trust.

Your family members should never be pressured into making an immediate decision. Let them know that if a solicitation sounds too good to be true, it most likely is. Encourage them to speak with family or trusted friends

before sending money or providing bank account, credit card, or Social Security numbers to solicitors.

Provide Tips on Dealing with Telephone Solicitations

Billions of dollars are lost each year due to fraudulent telemarketers. Let your family members know that they are not being rude by hanging up when a solicitor calls. You may want to suggest using an answering machine or caller ID to screen calls. Your family members can also add their names and phone numbers to the National Do Not Call Registry by calling 1-888-382-1222. This will greatly reduce the number of telemarketing and other unwanted calls.

Maintain Open Dialogue

As a caregiver, it is important that you maintain open communication with your family members. Encourage them to speak with you about any concerns or issues that arise at any time. If you notice that they seem unduly worried, ask about it.

Whatever the problem may be, it is often better if shared. Victims of elder financial abuse and other forms of abuse are often reluctant to discuss it because of embarrassment or sometimes fear, especially if it is a family member or someone else close to them that is the perpetrator.

Take Their Concerns Seriously

Take any concerns from your family members seriously and try to get as much information as possible. If you are reporting an instance of financial abuse or other form of abuse, it is critical to provide as much information as possible. Assure your family members that they are not alone and that you are there to listen and help.

If the information provided suggests that there was possible financial or other elder abuse that took place, there are resources to assist, including your family members' local police department, bank (if money is being taken from accounts), and Adult Protective Services. To obtain the contact information for Adult Protective Services in your family members' local area, call the Eldercare Locator, a government-sponsored national resource line, at 1-800-677-1116 or visit their Web site at www.eldercare.gov.

Watch for Changes in Your Family Members' Appearance or Mood

Your family members may not report that they have been financially or otherwise mistreated; therefore, it is crucial that you are observant for changes in their mood or appearance that may suggest abuse or neglect. Changes in mood or behavior may not be specific to financial or other forms of abuse, but they should be investigated as something is causing the change. Changes to watch for include hesitation in speaking openly with others, especially when a particular person is around, agitation, anxiety, fear, and changes in sleep, eating habits, and behavior.

It is important to understand that financial exploitation may be a motivating factor behind other forms of abuse. Physical or psychological mistreatment or neglect may be other ways that a person abuses an elder, thus hoping to gain access to his or her financial or material assets.

Recognize the Signs of Elder Financial Abuse

Signs that your family members may have been victims of elder financial abuse include: changes in usual banking habits, excessive use of ATM cards and credit cards, abrupt changes in their will or other financial documents, unpaid bills, unexplained disappearance of valuables, unexplained transfer of assets or money to a family member or someone outside of the family, and discovery of your family members' signature on forged or blank checks, financial documents, or titles in their possession. Reassure your family members that you are asking out of concern and want to help if there is a problem.

For More Information

Visit the MetLife Mature Market Institute at www.MatureMarketInstitute.com to access the *Broken Trust: Elders, Family, and Finances* study and the *Preventing Elder Abuse Since You Care* Guide. You may also e-mail a request to: MatureMarketInstitute@MetLife.com.

Keep Safety in Mind

If you suspect or discover a situation of elder financial abuse or other form of abuse, always be aware of your family members' safety. If you are considering confronting the perpetrator, be certain you are not putting your loved ones in a more vulnerable position. Be sure to have their consent, if they are able to give it, and that you are able to remove them from the situation immediately if needed.

Be Especially Vigilant if Your Family Members Have a Cognitive Impairment

Individuals with cognitive impairments, such as those caused by Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia, are especially vulnerable to financial abuse.

If your family members are diagnosed with a cognitive disorder, make sure that their financial affairs are being managed and closely monitored. A decrease in one's ability to manage financial matters is often a sign of cognitive problems. If your family members have not been diagnosed with a cognitive problem, but you observe changes in their abilities to manage daily activities, pay bills, remember appointments and discussions, and use sound judgment, it is important to explore what is causing these changes. Start by discussing your concerns with your family members. They may need to visit the doctor to evaluate the changes you are observing.



This material is for educational purposes only and should not be construed as legal advice. Please consult with an attorney for legal advice specific to your situation.

Additional Resources

The National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) **www.ncea.aoa.gov**

The NCEA Web site contains a wealth of information on all aspects of elder abuse, including financial exploitation. It provides the ability to search for state agencies and other resources on a state-by-state basis. It also provides telephone numbers for reporting elder abuse for each state.

The National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse **www.preventelderabuse.org**

The National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse provides information related to elder abuse. Their Web site has a designated section to help victims and those vulnerable to elder abuse. The site contains information on what to do if you feel someone you know is being abused, provides services available to stop abuse, and offers resources in the community.

The National Center for the Victims of Crime **www.ncvc.org**

The National Center for the Victims of Crime Web site includes information for victims of any type of crime. The organization also has a help line, INFOLINK, which is intended to help callers find the most appropriate local services if they have been a victim of a crime. They can be reached at 1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255).

The National Consumers League's Fraud Center **www.fraud.org**

The National Consumers League's Fraud Center allows individuals to submit an online complaint if they feel they have been a victim of possible fraud. The Web site includes information on common Internet and telemarketing fraud schemes and a specific section on "Scams Against Elderly," with tips for prevention.

The MetLife Mature Market Institute®

Established in 1997, the Mature Market Institute (MMI) is MetLife's research organization and a recognized thought leader on the multi-dimensional and multi-generational issues of aging and longevity. MMI's groundbreaking research, gerontology expertise, national partnerships, and educational materials work to expand the knowledge and choices for those in, approaching, or caring for those in the mature market. For more information about the MetLife Mature Market Institute, please visit: **www.MatureMarketInstitute.com**.

The MetLife Mature Market Institute partnered with these organizations on its study *Broken Trust: Elders, Family, and Finances*:

The National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (NCPEA)

The NCPEA is an association of researchers, practitioners, educators, and advocates dedicated to protecting the safety, security, and dignity of America's most vulnerable citizens. Established in 1988 to achieve a clearer understanding of abuse and provide direction and leadership to prevent it, the Committee is one of six partners that make up the National Center on Elder Abuse, which is funded by Congress to serve as the nation's clearinghouse on information and materials on abuse and neglect. The mission of NCPEA is to prevent abuse, neglect, and exploitation of older persons and adults with disabilities through research, advocacy, public and professional awareness, interdisciplinary exchange, and coalition building. **www.preventelderabuse.org**

Center for Gerontology at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Established in 1977-78, the Center for Gerontology serves as the organizational unit and focal point for aging-related research and education activities at Virginia Tech. The Center focuses primarily on three streams of coordinated research that enhance the quality of life of older adults: Family Gerontology, Health and Aging, and Elder Rights. **www.gerontology.vt.edu**