

At some point in their lives, many seniors must face the reality that certain everyday tasks begin to become too difficult for them to manage on their own. This loss of independence can leave some seniors with a worrisome feeling of vulnerability. Thankfully, many seniors who find themselves in need of assistance also find the help they need from friends, family, neighbors, or community organizations.

Unfortunately, there are vulnerable seniors who fall victim to elder abuse through emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, financial exploitation, or neglect. According to the Minnesota Department of Human Services, between 2017 and 2020 an average of almost 1,200 cases of elder abuse were substantiated each year. Often, victims of elder abuse are reluctant to come forward, fearing that doing so may result in worsening abuse or greater vulnerability. Frequently, abusers have worked hard to convince their victims that they have no other choice but to accept their abuse or are unworthy of any other kind of life. Abusers often work to keep victims isolated, fearing that outside contact with others may expose their criminal deeds. These dynamics mean that it is very important that all of us be part of the solution to elder abuse.

First, it is important that seniors protect themselves. If you are a senior and believe you are a victim of elder abuse, it is vital that you reach out to someone and talk about what is happening to you. Local law enforcement and human service departments are ready and able to assist seniors. If a senior you know reaches out with concerns about elder abuse, be ready to listen and act.

Those seniors who find themselves reasonably independent should be alert for signs of trouble as well. Invest your trust in people cautiously and wisely. One of the great things about our community is that there are many great people who wish only to help others. Among that sea of decent souls, however, lurk a few monsters. A bit of healthy skepticism can keep seniors from falling into a vulnerable position. Be alert for people who work to gain increasing amounts of control over your everyday affairs. If you are not comfortable with something another person is asking of you, know that you have the right to say no. If someone consistently asks you for something that you have already refused, this is a warning sign. Family, friends, local law enforcement, social workers, and community groups are all options to help seniors with concerns about elder abuse.

It is equally important those who are not yet ready to be considered a senior citizen be watchful for warning signs in the lives of seniors around us. Some signs a person is experiencing elder abuse may include physical injuries, sudden shifts in a person's financial situation, a drop in personal hygiene or alertness, unusual changes in weight, withdrawal from friends and family, or withdrawal from normal personal activities. Minnesota has established the Minnesota Adult Abuse Reporting Center (MAARC) to accept reports of elder abuse. MAARC may be contacted 24 hours a day, seven days a week by telephone at 1-844-880-1574. Reports made to MAARC are evaluated and forwarded to the appropriate human services agency and law enforcement agency for investigation. If you suspect someone you know is being abused, please take the time to report this to MAARC.

For those who would like to be counted among the sea of decent souls helping seniors, many options exist in our community. Groups like the Central MN Council on Aging, Retired Senior and Volunteer Program (RSVP), Community Action Respecting Elders (CARE), and many others are actively seeking volunteers to provide services to seniors in our community. Church groups, neighborhood groups, or personal relationships provide even more opportunities to assist seniors in our area. If you have the time to be part of the solution, the need exists in Benton County.

Working together as a community we can provide seniors with the support they need and with the protection they deserve. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.