

Protecting Your Loved Ones From Financial Exploitation

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Mickey Rooney recently took on a different role after decades of performing and earning money. The 90-year old entertainer spoke before Congress to share the shame and embarrassment he felt when a family member withheld medicine in order to coerce Mr. Rooney into allowing more access and control of his money. Rooney went on to say, “for years I suffered silently, unable to muster the courage to seek the help I knew I needed.” He urged lawmakers to do something about the issue. If this can happen to him, Rooney said, it could happen to anyone.

As the country continues to struggle with “the great recession” with record unemployment, the possibility for financial exploitation of the elderly continue to be a growing concern. According to a recent study by Met Life in 2009 the financial loss from abuses was at least \$ 2.6

billon a year. Financial exploitation is a severely underreported problem. The Met Life study found that only one in six cases of elderly financial abuse is ever reported and even that figure appears to be conservative.

Financial exploitation is defined as a person in a position of trust taking advantage of a vulnerable person to gain control of their money and or property. It also includes using the money or assets contrary to a person’s wishes, needs or best interest—or for the perpetrator’s own personal gain.

Following are warning signs of financial exploitation:

- Significant withdrawal from banking or saving accounts
- Sudden changes to financial condition
- Items or cash missing from the household
- Suspicious changes in wills, power of attorney, titles and policies
- Unpaid bills or lack of medical care although there is enough money to pay for these services.

- Unusual financial activity such as an ATM withdrawal when the account holder is bed ridden
- Unnecessary purchase of goods, services, or subscriptions.

The financial exploitation of older adults not only takes a financial toll. Studies have shown that the emotional stress of addressing the exploitation can shorten the lifespan of the victim. This is sometimes coupled with the fact that the exploited individual, due to lack of funding, is now limited in access to medical care due to inability to pay. The exploitation may even affect eligibility for government programs such as Medicaid based on improper asset transfers.

Some tips for families and older adults to protect themselves:

- Family members or trusted advisors should request duplicate bank statements. A “second set” of eyes will be able to review bank statements every 30 days and be able to catch suspicious

activity in the early stages.

- Inventory Jewelry and Valuables: Jewelry is the number one item that is stolen from homes occupied by older adults. Photographs of valuable items should be kept in a separate location in order to document what was taken should a theft occur.
- Get caller ID. The telephone is the number one choice for financial scammers. If an incoming call is classified as “private” or “unknown” your level of suspicion should go up.
- Identity Protection: Identity theft is very common. Take steps to prevent it by running a credit check

to learn whether anyone has applied for or obtained credit in your name. In New Jersey, you are entitled to one free credit check annually from each of the 3 major credit agencies.

- Protect your mail- consider purchasing a locked mailbox, renting a post office box or installing a mail slot in your front door.
- Shred important documents- every piece of mail containing your name, address or any other identifying information should be shredded before discarding
- Always use an agency when hiring a caregiver- It initially may seem more costly but the layer of

additional protection offered in the form of supervision, accountability criminal a background check is invaluable.

Consider hiring a professional. A bank trust department will limit access and parcel out money only to certain people. Many Geriatric Care Management agencies offer a combination of services aimed at protecting venerable individuals. These services can include management of personal affairs and finances with reporting to family members and other loved ones at set intervals. They also maintain staff of trained social workers to coordinate and oversee care to limit any kind of abuses. Although these options do involve costs, it is money well spent in order to avoid exploitation.

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