

Independence House, Yarmouth team up to help older victims of abuse

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While younger victims with children may be guided to enroll in education and job training programs and receive services such as food stamps, older people seeking to rebuild their lives may need assistance figuring out their Social Security and Medicare benefit options, said Lysetta Hurge-Putnam, executive director of Independence House in Hyannis.

Now, Independence House is teaming up with the town of Yarmouth to offer specialized counseling and safety planning for Yarmouth residents 50 or older who are victims of domestic abuse or sexual assault.

"It's something that's been on our list for a long time," Hurge-Putnam said. Barnstable County, in which Yarmouth is located, has one of highest percentages of older residents in the U.S., and it's not unusual for the Independence House hotline to receive a call from older people, she said.

One recent call was from a 72-year-old woman who "just wanted support," Hurge-Putnam said.

Independence House, which provides court advocacy, referral services and counseling for victims of sexual assault and domestic violence, is collaborating with agencies including the Yarmouth Senior Center to come up with a menu of services for older people, Hurge-Putnam said.

The program was funded with a \$2,500 grant from the town of Yarmouth in July and kicked into gear this past fall, she said.

Just within the past month, two older Yarmouth residents have gone to Independence House for private counseling, Hurge-Putnam said. The new program also tailors safety plans for older people that can include drawing on the support of adult children and will offer specialized support groups if there is enough demand, she said.

According to information released by Independence House, up to one in 10 older Americans experience abuse in their homes each year.

Elder Services of Cape Cod & the Islands investigates 1,200 reports of abuse each year, although not all are substantiated, said Louis Eppers, a protective services supervisor at Elder Services.

Most of the reports concern cases of self-neglect from seniors living on their own, but the agency also receives scores of reports of alleged physical, emotional and financial abuse, he said.

Elder Services is charged with doing the initial investigation of non-stranger abuse among people 60 or over, Eppers said.

The alleged perpetrators may be spouses or partners with a long history of abuse — or spouses who have recently developed agitated dementia, Eppers said.

Adult children who are addicted to alcohol or drugs may be secretly draining their parents' coffers or threatening them physically to hand over their money, he said.

The abuse may come from a caretaker or take place in a nursing home, Hurge-Putnam said.

She said part of the goal of the program is to have individuals and agencies who work with older people understand what constitutes abuse.

"Abuse is a pattern of behavior," Hurge-Putnam said. The behavior is meant to control and harm the other person, be that person a spouse, parent, child or elderly client.

"We see this as a program that's here to stay," Hurge-Putnam said. "We plan to expand and enhance the program."

For more information, call Independence House at 508-771-6507.