

Holidays time to check for elder abuse

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By PETER KING pwking@aol.com



Photo credit: Kacso Sandor | If an elderly relative, friend or acquaintance doesn't look or act right, they may need help -- and in some cases could be the victim of elder abuse.

The holiday season offers a chance to reconnect with older family members and friends. Most reunions can be filled with joy. But some may leave you filled with concern.

If an elderly relative, friend or acquaintance doesn't look or act right, they may need help. There may be numerous causes for their condition, but in some cases you may have to think the unthinkable -- they may be a victim of elder abuse.

"If their physical appearance has changed in any way, if they've lost a lot of weight, seem somewhat more confused or something suddenly has changed in their financial circumstances, those types of things are red flags," says Donna Dougherty, attorney in charge of JASA's legal services for the elderly. JASA, an acronym for Jewish Association Serving the Aging, is a Manhattan-based, not-for-profit organization that provides social services, legal advice and nutrition services for seniors in the metropolitan area. JASA also teams with Nassau and Suffolk counties to operate several senior centers.

Martha Pollack, JASA's director of elder abuse programs, says abuse can take several forms. The most obvious is physical abuse, which can be life threatening to an already frail senior. "If there are bruises, if there are marks, if the person is limping, if they have broken glasses or broken dentures, it warrants more questioning as to what has gone on," she says. There is also financial abuse, where a senior is exploited by relatives or caregivers or where the senior falls victim to scams from strangers. Abuse also can be passive, where the senior is a victim of neglect by a caregiver or relative.

Pollack and Dougherty say the biggest hurdle to getting help for an abused senior is the victim, who may be afraid to tell anyone, and observers might be reluctant to report the problem. JASA says for every 100 cases of elder abuse reported, more than 500 go unreported.

But even if the senior is not a victim of elder abuse, he or she may need help. "The person may need some social services, meals on wheels or help with benefits and entitlements," Pollack says.

If you suspect elder abuse or simply want to find out how to get services for a senior in need, call JASA at 212-273-5272. You also can call the Nassau County Office for the Aging at 516-227-8900 or the Suffolk County Office for the Aging at 631-853-8200.

JASA's nonsectarian network of professionals and volunteers also provides services for homebound seniors. If you'd like to volunteer or find out more, go to jasa.org.