



CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Alliance fights to prevent abuse of developmentally, intellectually disabled children



By Mark Hare

Child sexual abuse is at epidemic levels, but even more so when the victims are intellectually or developmentally disabled children.

Nationally, according to the Rochester-based Bivona Child Advocacy Center, one in 10 children are sexually assaulted before their 18th birthdays; among disabled children, the rate is three to six times higher.

That grim reality prompted the formation of the I/DD (for Intellectually and Developmentally Disabled) Alliance of Greater Rochester in the fall of 2015. The collaboration of 12 agencies (including law enforcement, funders, and organizations that serve the developmentally disabled population) are working together to investigate, evaluate, treat and prevent sexual and physical abuse of children with disabilities.

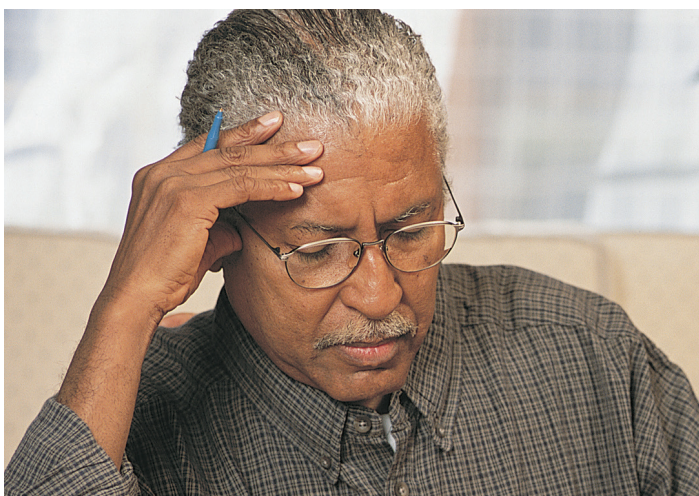
The alliance is under the umbrella of the Bivona Center, itself a multi-disciplinary collaboration that brings together educators, law enforcement, child protective services, treatment providers and others to streamline the response to reports of abuse and ease the trauma children are subject to when they are forced to retell their stories again and again.

At Bivona Center, children can be interviewed by a highly-trained investigator, receive a medical exam and connect with a victim advocate and therapist under one roof.

Helping child victims of abuse to recover from the crimes committed against them is always difficult, but when those children are I/DD the

Continued on page 2

Financial abuse of elderly a growing problem



Yes, scam artists do make cold calls to elderly people hoping to score a credit card or bank account number in exchange for a phony promise to seal a driveway, book a Caribbean cruise or turn \$1,000 into \$10,000 with a can't-lose stock buy.

But the fleecing of seniors is not chiefly the work of strangers. Older people are far more likely to be robbed into poverty by relatives, neighbors or family friends, says Art Mason, the director of Elder Abuse Prevention Programs at Lifespan of Greater Rochester.

And the exploitation is getting worse. According to a June 2016 report from the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, allegations of elder financial abuse jumped by 35 percent in the state between 2010 and 2014. Financial abuse referrals to Adult Protective Services or law enforcement represent only a fraction of the suspected actual cases, the report said. Victims rarely report, even when they are aware their assets have been drained.

Continued on page 3



challenges are greater.

“Sometimes they are being cared for—having someone dress or bathe them—until they are older,” says Lindsey Macaluso, program manager at Bivona. “And often they have a much harder time verbalizing what has happened to them.”

“Parents must talk with their children with disabilities about sex and sexuality for several reasons,” says Scott Modell, a national expert on the abuse of I/DD children.

Modell, who has co-authored a concise parent-friendly brochure, “Protecting Children with Disabilities from Sexual Assault: A Parent’s Guide,” did a two-day training for Rochester professionals last year.

In his Parent’s Guide, Modell says these conversations are critical because “some children may not understand what constitutes abuse...and ... many children with disabilities do not have a clear understanding of how to set boundaries. For example, they may not have had the experience of setting boundaries regarding what parts of their body should or should not be touched.”

These conversations should be just a part of the proactive approach to protect children with disabilities, Modell says.

For example, he says, parents can ask several screening questions of agencies that may provide services to their children:

- What are your agency’s policies and procedures for identifying and responding to

suspicious staff behavior and signs of abuse or exploitation of your clients?

- How are staff trained and educated about these policies and procedures and how do they handle allegations?

- What kind of sexuality education is offered for clients they serve?

- What staff screening procedures are in place?

- How are investigations of sexual abuse handled?

• When and if abuse occurs, what supports are offered to help clients recover? “The only way a parent can be certain there is no abuse is to be present with the child 100 percent of the time,” Modell writes. Clearly that’s not possible. The goal is to strive for a “balance between being overly protective and allowing the child to be a child.” What that means, Macaluso says, “is that we cannot have kids living in fear. We need kids to be able to play outside, to develop healthy relationships and to grow with proper supervision.”

It’s important for parents and other adults who care for children with disabilities to take advantage of the resources the community offers and to know what to look for.

“The Rochester region has abundant resources,” Macaluso says. But the “whole point (to the alliance) is to look at the gaps. We always need to do better. We can make the environment more safe, we can develop more therapy alternatives.”

With guidance, most children with developmental disabilities can acquire the skills needed to recognize experiences that are potentially dangerous or uncomfortable. Never hesitate to ask for advice, or more information, she says.

Mark Hare is a Rochester-based freelance writer

WHAT TO DO AND SAY

What matters most to children who speak out about being abused, what helps them recover, is being believed and supported. Here are some basic tips.

DO:

Remain calm. A child may retract information or stop talking if he/she senses a strong reaction.

Believe the child. Children rarely make up stories about abuse.

Listen without passing judgment. Most children know, love and trust their abusers and often have confused feelings.

SAY:

- I believe you.
- I know it’s not your fault.
- I’m glad I know about it.
- I’m glad you told me.
- I’m sorry this happened to you.
- I will take care of you—you don’t need to take care of me.
- I’m not sure what will happen next.
- Nothing about you made this happen.
- I am upset, but not with you.
- I’m angry at the person who did this.
- I’m sad. You may see me cry. That’s all right. I’m not mad at you.
- We need to get help, so this doesn’t happen again.
- I know this isn’t easy for you to talk about, but there are some people who need to know what happened so they can help keep you and other children be safe.

Source: Bivona Child Advocacy Center (bivonacac.org)

SOME SIGNS THAT COULD SUGGEST ABUSE:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Problems at school or with peers
- Sudden changes in behavior
- Returning to bedwetting, thumb sucking, etc.
- Fear of a certain person
- Skipping school, running away or acting out
- Writing or artwork that’s strangely sexual
- Excessive sexual curiosity, masturbation
- or promiscuity
- Seductive behavior toward adults or peers
- Unexplained headaches, stomach aches, vomiting, fainting or blackouts
- Bedwetting or soiling
- Loss or gain of appetite and/or weight
- Injury, itching, pain or soreness in genital or anal area

BEWARE OF ADULTS WHO:

- Refuse to let child set limits
- Insist on hugs, touching, kissing, tickling, etc., even when child resists
- Are overly interested in child’s physical or sexual development
- Insist on uninterrupted time alone with child
- Frequently walking in on the child in the bathroom
- Allow child to get away with inappropriate behavior

Source: Bivona Child Advocacy Center (bivonacac.org)

SEEKING HELP

If you suspect any kind of abuse, call The New York State Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-342-3720.

The call will trigger an investigation by child protective workers.

Call the Bivona Child Advocacy Center before or after a call to the abuse hotline. 585-935-7800 Bivona can provide advice and direct services.

Those who live outside the Rochester region, should also feel free to call.

Bivona will help parents access vital services in their region.

The documented victim losses over that period were nearly \$25 million, but the report estimates that the true cost to victims was likely in excess of \$109 million.

"The financial exploitation of the elderly is a reflection of what's going on in our society," Mason says. Children or grandchildren are living with addiction to heroin, or crack or gambling, he says, and elderly relatives often have the money they need to support an addiction.

"The victims often don't take action," Mason says, "because they feel responsible in some way for problems a child or grandchild has." Sometimes they are embarrassed; they've always been very careful with their finances and credit and when something like this happens, they don't want to call attention to it.

Financial abuse is often present when there are other forms of abuse—verbal, bruising, neglect. "But in some ways," Mason says, "financial abuse is worse. Bruises or broken bones can heal. You can remove an abusive caregiver from the scene and the victim can recover. But when they lose all their money, there's no recovery."

And the victim losses aren't the only costs. The June state report estimates that financial abuse leads to more than \$6.2 million every year in additional expenditures by Adult Protective Services and law enforcement agencies in the state, and to at least \$8 million in additional public benefits—Medicaid and various public assistance subsidies—for people who have lost their assets. Sometimes the abuse starts with a "sense of entitlement" by adult children or grandchildren, Mason says. Several years ago, he recalls a criminal case involving a young man who sold his mother's house and emptied her bank accounts. When he was caught he defended himself saying that he was her only heir and he was taking an early inheritance.

It's also a reflection of the fact that family members often live far from each other because of jobs or other commitments. "In those cases," Mason says, "families of an elderly person may turn to a relative who is unemployed, unreliable, but available. The person moves in. The family hopes caring for grandma will help focus him, but it's like putting a fox in the hen house."

Often that relative manages the older person's finances, controls the mail in and out of the house, and keeps the older person isolated. Older people often don't use computers or manage their finances online, so a younger person can use those tools



without fear of being caught. "If a pre-approved credit card offer for \$5,000 comes in the mail," Mason says, "the caregiver intercepts it, applies for the card online, and then uses it freely when it arrives in the mail."

So what can be done to protect older people in our communities from financial exploitation?

Churches and church volunteers are in a "unique position" to help, Mason says. Without a complaint, Adult Protectives can't force their way into a house to look around, nor can the police. But church volunteers—visiting for conversation, to pray or bring Communion—are not usually seen by caregivers as a threat.

The same is true for family members who visit, but don't live with or have daily contact with an elderly relative.

You can learn a lot, Mason says, with simple conversation and by asking some general questions. Be observant.

Was the person a faithful church-goer, but no longer attending—even when there are no physical impairments?

Has the person stopped making regular financial contributions?

These could be warning signs. So could sudden weight loss, or poor hygiene, or sudden signs of fear or agitation, or the sudden inability to pay for medications (or utility or phone bills) that have always before been affordable. None of these signs, of course, necessarily indicate any form of abuse, Mason says. And volunteers are right to guard against overreaction.

But over several visits, volunteers or relatives can ask similar questions and see if the answers change. Ask about doctor appointments. If the older person says he or she has missed appointments because a live-in grandchild/driver has been so busy looking for work, and then a week or two later says they've had unexpected car repairs, maybe run it by an expert.

Don't confront a suspected perpetrator, he says. That could make the situation worse. But feel free to call Lifespan at 585-244-8400 (in Monroe County) or 1-800-454-5030 (outside Monroe County). Lifespan can investigate and intervene as needed.

"If you see changes that make you suspicious," Mason says, "give us a call."



SUSPECT ABUSE OF THE ELDERLY?

Call Lifespan

In Monroe County: 585-244-8400

Outside Monroe County: 1-800-454-5030

SIGNS OF ABUSE:

- Unexplained injuries, bruises or burns.
- Excessive fear, withdrawal, agitation.
- Sudden inability to pay bills, buy food or personal items
- Changes in appetite; unusual weight gain or loss.
 - Poor personal hygiene.
- Does not know personal finances.
- Unexplained changes in health.

Source: Lifespan of Greater Rochester



ROMAN CATHOLIC
DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

Creating a Safe Environment Newsletter

is published quarterly by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester with the aim of helping all of us keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home, at church and in all places in our community.

Comments can be directed to:
Karen Rinefierd,
Diocesan Coordinator
of Safe Environment Education
and Compliance,
585-328-3228, ext. 1255
or krinefierd@dor.org.

Victims of sexual abuse by any employee of the Church should always report to the civil authorities.

To report a case of possible sexual abuse and to receive help and guidance from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, contact the diocesan Victims' Assistance Coordinator:

Deborah Housel
(585) 328-3228, ext. 1555;
toll-free 1-800-388-7177,
ext. 1555
or dhousel@dor.org.

All photos in this newsletter are for illustrative purposes only.

ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

Webonauts Internet Academy:

<http://pbskids.org/webonauts/>

PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.

NSTeens:

<http://www.nsteens.org/>

A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.

FOR PARENTS:

Common Sense Media

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns>

A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education

Family Online Safety Institute:

<http://www.fosi.org/>

iKeepSafe:

<http://www.ikeepsafe.org/>

Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies

Faith and Safety:

<http://www.faithandsafety.org>

Safety in a digital world, a joint project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Greek Orthodox Church in America

LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Bivona Child Advocacy Center

(Monroe, Wayne counties):

www.BivonaCAC.org

585-935-7800

Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:

607-737-8449

www.chemungcounty.com

Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:

315-253-9795

www.cacofcayugacounty.org

Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program

(Ontario County):

www.cacfingerlakes.org

315-548-3232

Darkness to Light organization:

www.d2l.org

STEBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:

www.sthcs.org

716-372-8532

NYS State Central Registry

(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):

1-800-342-3720

NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)

866-313-3013

Tompkins County Advocacy Center:

www.theadvocacycenter.org

607-277-3203

Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:

585-786-8846

Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:

315-531-3417, Ext. 6