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# Elder Abuse Awareness

*APS provides protection for the elderly and disabled*

Retirement is supposed to be a time for relaxation, travel and spending time with the grandkids.

But for too many of our seniors, the Golden Years become the nightmare years; a time of struggling to pay the bills, provide health care and, for some, even to put food on the table. When that struggle gets to be too much, it falls to all of us to ensure that the people who laid the historical foundation on which we all build our lives are taken care of and do not have to suffer abuse, whether at the hands of another or because of their own circumstances.

Key in the effort to care for our seniors and disabled people are the hundreds of dedicated Adult Protective Services workers who, every day, go to work looking to make a difference in the lives of someone who needs help. They take their mission to “Protect the Unprotected” seriously, and work hard to live up to the highest of standards.

The time is right to take a look at some of the challenges facing our elder and disabled populations, as well as the resources available to them through APS. Perhaps even more importantly, we need to take a look within ourselves and see what we can do, as citizens, to help some of the most vulnerable members of our society.

APS, a program of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, is tasked with investigating abuse and neglect of the elderly and disabled, then finding the resources to help those clients be protected from abuse. In print, it seems a simple task, but it requires an incredibly dedicated staff willing to put in long hours to help the nearly four million people in Texas who are either disabled or over the age of 64. APS staff investigated over 51,000 confirmed cases of abuse in Texas last year.

In Lubbock County alone, more than 45,000 people are disabled or over the age of 65. In fiscal year 2006, APS completed 2,415 investigations and provided services to nearly 2,000 clients.

“Working for APS is truly a calling,” said Val Joiner, regional director for APS. “Our workers believe in what they do so deeply, that they go above and beyond every day to make a difference in a person’s life.”

APS workers are skilled at finding resources in our community to help elders who are in need. Some common tasks for an APS worker are getting clients signed up for resources, such as Social Security or Medicaid; helping them adapt to a life-changing event, such as building a ramp for a newly wheelchair-bound client; or even such basic tasks as finding food for a client who simply does not have the money that month to get to the grocery store.

The work can be demanding and the stories they hear are heartbreaking, but APS workers are always there for their clients.

They cannot do the job alone, however. Stopping abuse of the elderly must be a community priority with a community-based solution.

That's why APS launched the "Elder Abuse – It's Everybody's Business" campaign last year. The campaign's goal is to raise awareness about this growing problem.

One of the key roles the public can play in stopping elder abuse is to just keep an eye on the people you know and care enough to find out if they need help.

"Many people think abuse is only something one person does to another, but that's not the case," said Greg Cunningham, DFPS spokesman. "Over and over, we see people being abused by themselves or their circumstances. The either cannot, or will not, care for themselves. It's crucial we have the public's help in finding these people so we can get them assistance."

Sometimes it can be difficult to make that call, as it is hard for many of us to ask for help, and even harder to be perceived as someone who needs help. But when the alternative is continuing to struggle to survive, getting help for your neighbor or family member is the kindest thing you can do.

The public can also help out by becoming even more directly involved in aiding the elderly and disabled. APS supports a Silver Star Board in Lubbock, staffed with caring members of the community who give their time to help fight abuse. Board members help organize and staff events, raise awareness of the issue and provide support for APS workers.

One of the key areas of support provided by the board is the Silver Star Room, which stocks a variety of items – ranging from personal grooming supplies to toiletries to food items – that can be used to help APS clients. The room is stocked completely through donations, so members of the public who would like to make a difference can do so through a small donation.

Although donating time or goods to help APS can be a blessing, perhaps the most important thing a member of the public can do to help stop elder abuse is just to care. Take an interest in your elderly neighbor or the disabled person down the street. Talk to them about whether they have enough blankets to get through the winter. Listen to what they have to say.

A few minutes of your time and a small piece of your heart could literally save a life.

"Helping the elderly and disabled is all about caring," said Cathy Uzzell, APS program administrator. "We all need to take the time out to care about the people who are struggling in our community. It's what APS does every day, and it's what each of us, as citizens, should also strive for."

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If you know of anyone who is being abused or neglected, please call the DFPS abuse reporting hotline at 1-800-252-5400. If you would like to help out APS by volunteering or donating, please contact the APS offices at 698-6969.

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