

Protecting elderly Ohioans from abuse and neglect

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Ohio needs to do more to protect its growing senior population from abuse. Approval of the \$10 million proposed in House Bill 483 would be a good start. Even better would be to provide the \$20 million recommended by an advocacy coalition, which would help Ohio counties strengthen Adult Protective Services (APS) and more adequately reflect current need.

The “silent epidemic” of elder abuse gets little public attention, but estimates of prevalence in Ohio, based on the findings of national studies, indicate it should be a public health priority.

Ohio law requires counties to investigate allegations of abuse of people age 60 and older, as well as disabled and other vulnerable adults. Yet state aid, always low, has fallen dramatically. Some counties receive as little as \$2,000 a year for the services, and 39 of Ohio’s 88 counties lack a full-time APS staff person.

Sequester-impacted federal Title XX dollars are used to support these services, so APS competes with other pressing needs for shrinking funds.

The number of Ohioans age 60 and older is projected to grow by 13.7 percent to 2.6 million from 2010 to 2015. This growth will drive need for better services with most counties expected to see senior population growth topping 10 percent. This growth comes as the state moves toward caring for the aged and disabled at home, where studies find elder abuse more prevalent than in institutional settings.

More than 15,000 incidents are reported statewide each year. Estimates of actual incidents range from 75,000 to more than 214,000, a wide variation that illustrates the difficult nature of the problem. In 2003, the Ohio Commission on the Prevention of Injury speculated that victims’ lack of capacity (e.g., dementia), reluctance to seek treatment, and dependence on perpetrators may deter reporting. Outreach is needed to find the afflicted and to educate communities.

Ohio has never adequately funded APS. In 2005, a task force convened by Ohio’s Attorney General found a long history of neglect, “substandard budget allocations,” and frequent cuts. An estimated 277 to 714 caseworkers are needed statewide for investigations, a number that does not include supervisory or administrative staff. At least \$11.7 million a year is needed for an adequate number of caseworkers in all 88 counties. It would take \$16.2 million to adequately fund services for the 114,000 incidents estimated in one study, while \$30 million would meet needs under higher estimates.

Abuse and neglect of elderly Ohioans are growing problems and far more prevalent than current statistics suggest. This makes it imperative that Ohio meet its obligations to provide a higher level of protection to vulnerable residents.

Key findings

- As Ohio’s population 60 years and older increases, more protection is needed.
- Estimates of elder abuse range above 214,000 annually, but the vast majority of cases go unreported.
- 39 counties lack any staff assigned to Adult Protective Services.
- Ohio needs state funding of \$11.7 million to \$30.2 million for caseworkers to prevent and address elder abuse.