

Protecting our Elders

■ Although Native Americans have one of the lowest rates of Elder abuse in the United States, it is becoming a national epidemic — and Indian Country is not immune.

By Oscar Johnson

When a Grand Ronde Elder placed a classified ad in a newspaper for a caretaker last year he thought the 32-year-old woman he hired would be the help he needed around his modest trailer home.

But after little more than a year, the Elder, who wants his story told but his name withheld, had been allegedly terrorized, manipulated, robbed of at least \$60,000 and worse, by a woman who reportedly had numerous prior felony convictions.

"In March I got an anonymous call from someone who said (the client) was in danger," recounts Sharon Woods, Grand Ronde domestic violence advocate. "They said the caretaker had taken out a loan of \$85,000 on the client's property without his knowledge and planned to buy the property next to his."

Woods, who revealed details of the case with the Elder's permission, spent a year collecting enough evidence to warrant an arrest. Finally, she learned that the caretaker violated parole by taking the Elder across state lines to apply for their marriage license.

She says an informant also recorded the caretaker detailing plans to draw up a false will for the Elder and quotes her recorded plans "to take him for a walk down by the river — and everyone knows old (the Elder) can't swim."

"After hearing the tape there was no doubt in my mind," says Woods, a 13-year-veteran domestic violence worker.

With the ongoing help of watchful neighbors and Polk and Yamhill county law enforcement, the caretaker is now in jail awaiting trial on four counts of criminal mistreatment of an Elder, four counts of theft and two counts of aggravated theft.

Though not necessarily a 'happy ending,' concerned neighbors and local authorities can take some solace in knowing they were able to intervene before things got worse.

But the senior tribal member is one of more than 10 percent of the nation's 60 and over population in the last year estimated to have fallen victim to Elder abuse.

Experts say this rampant crime includes physical and emotional abuse; financial or material exploitation; and neglect and abandonment, and is most often committed by someone well known to the victim.

The amount of overall reported cases in the United States have spi-

raled more than 150 percent, from 117,000 in 1986 to 293,000 in 1996 (the newest available statistics), according to a National Center on Elder Abuse report.

In 1997, the allegations of Elder abuse in the state of Oregon alone were reported at 9,182, according to a Senior and Disabled Service Division report.

The Center on Elder Abuse estimates the problem is so under reported that only one in 14 incidents are ever reported to authorities, making the already epidemic-like statistics "only the tip of the iceberg."

Woods says that since she started working for the Grand Ronde Tribe 17 months ago, she has seen nine varying degrees of Elder abuse cases.

Native Americans, along with Asian Americans, have the lowest rate of Elder abuse (less than one percent) compared to any other racial group in the nation.

Native American cultures place high value on honoring Elders but advocates say there's still certain issues specific to the problem of Elder abuse in Indian Country.

While Elder neglect nudges ahead of financial exploitation as the No. 1 type of abuse in mainstream America, at first glance various forms of monetary theft seem to take the lead in Native America (from a 1989 study).

Woods also says about half of the Elder abuse cases she has dealt with in Grand Ronde involve allegations of financial exploitation.

High poverty, unemployment and substance abuse; the loosening of extended family ties; subtle yet strong pressure to assimilate non-Indian culture; and increased conflict across the generation gap are all contributing factors to Native Elder abuse, the study says.

In addition to the secrecy and denial that often shroud all forms of domestic violence, Navajo/Gerontology Institute and Center on Elder Abuse data site severe isolation as

Possible indicators of Elder abuse

- Irregular injuries such as cuts, bruises, burns or welts
- Irregular weight loss, malnutrition, soiled bed or clothing
- Unusual feelings of fear, withdrawal, denial or agitation
- Helplessness or hesitation to talk openly
- Unusual bank account activity
- Change of will or power of attorney
- Numerous unpaid bills, missing items or money
- Untreated medical conditions

Ways to avoid Elder abuse

- Avoid isolation: frequent community activities such as Elder luncheons, bingo, clubs or community groups
- Keep in touch with friends and relatives
- When hiring a worker check their background by calling previous employers, personal references or check for criminal records
- Keep money and financial documents in a safe place, preferably in a bank
- Maintain access to a telephone
- Be familiar with available local services such as clinics, social workers and community groups

another contributor to Elder abuse — especially those incidents that go unreported.

Isolation can also indicate that abuse is in play.

"Seniors should make sure that they don't become isolated," says Aileen Kaye, Senior Services' Abuse Prevention Unit coordinator. "They should keep in touch with friends by doing things like attending meal sites or making sure they have a friend they can talk to regularly."

In the case of the Grand Ronde Elder, the caretaker came on the scene and she perpetuated the isolation to the extent of trying to deny Woods and police access to the victim on several occasions.

"The caretaker took total control — she isolated him," says Woods. "Of course, that's how these things are done."

This isolation might have been fatal if not for neighbors, friends and fellow tribal members who maintained contact with the Elder, made near weekly calls to Grand Ronde Community Resources' 24-hour crisis line and continue to provide meals, transportation and refuge after the crisis.

"It's like a huge community watch," Woods says about her latest case of Elder abuse. "A hats off to everyone who helped out in this community. To have 100 eyes out in the community really helps."

Report Elder Abuse to:

- Sharon Woods, Grand Ronde Domestic Violence Advocate: 1-888-654-8198
- Polk County Sheriff Grand Ronde Substation: 879-2420
- Your local law enforcement agency

If you suspect abuse, report it. You could be saving a life.