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Task force formed to tackle elder financial abuse cases



Erie County District Attorney John J. Flynn announces the creation of a task force to more aggressively pursue cases of suspected elder financial abuse Thursday in Amherst Senior Center.

- By [Joseph Popiolkowski](#); Published Thu, May 11, 2017

On one day in early April, three thieves admitted in unrelated court cases that they stole thousands of dollars from three elderly women who trusted them.

The women are not alone, and their experiences are becoming all too common, experts say.

Scams targeting the elderly, such as those by thieves posing as IRS or FBI agents, get a lot of attention because of the large sums of money that can be stolen at one time.

"What's more common actually are these small amounts of money that people will steal from their grandparents, their aunts and uncles or their own parents over a period of time that adds up to an entire life savings," said Karen Nicolson, CEO of the Center for Elder Law & Justice in Buffalo.

In fact, 90 percent of elder financial abuse cases are committed not by strangers, but by friends, family or caregivers of the victim, she said.

In the April cases, a North Tonawanda man admitted duping an elderly woman out of more than \$9,000, telling her he was investing her money. A Cheektowaga health care aide admitted stealing \$41,590 from an 82-year-

old woman who was in her care. And a Cheektowaga man admitted stealing \$188,000 from an elderly neighbor, who thought she was writing checks for her household expenses.

Citing the disturbing pattern, Nicolson was joined by Erie County officials Thursday in the Amherst Senior Center to announce [the creation of a new task force](#) designed to make it easier for law enforcement and other agencies to prosecute cases of elder financial abuse.

"It provides our senior citizens with a mechanism to come forward if they believe they've been a victim of financial abuse," said District Attorney John J. Flynn, noting the region's growing elderly population.

Seniors who feel they may have been victimized often also feel a sense of embarrassment and shame, especially if the perpetrator is a family member, officials said.

"Who wants to admit they were taken advantage of, whether it's family or not?" asked Kathy Kanaley, a social worker who will coordinate the task force.

Only 1 in 24 cases of suspected elder abuse are ever reported to the authorities, said Anne Marie Cook of Lifespan of Greater Rochester, which conducted a study with Cornell University and is funding the Erie County task force. Lifespan has recovered over \$1 million in court-ordered restitution, Cook said.

The task force, dubbed a "multidisciplinary team," also includes the county's Sheriff's Office and Adult Protective Services, which reported receiving 1,600 referrals for investigation of suspected elder abuse in 2016.

"We're really hoping with this task force that it is going to become a single point of entry for these cases," said Nicolson. "You call any of the partners at the table, you will be able to get to the team."

Officials said the task force is further enhanced by the inclusion a forensic accountant and geriatric psychiatrist. The accountant will sift through years of bank records to spot patterns of suspicious withdrawals, while the psychiatrist will assess the victim's mental capacity at the time of the crime and their capacity to testify in court. As a result, authorities feel they'll be able to present stronger cases with more evidence in court.

Working on the complex cases evokes a range of emotions, said Kanaley, including sadness for the victim, anger for the perpetrator and frustration with the system.

"But today we feel hope," she said. "We feel hope that those in this room who are supporting our [multidisciplinary team] will bring us to a whole new level of success and justice for the victims in our community."