



Date: March 31, 2014

## **Elder Financial Abuse: Are Your Parents/Grandparents Targets?**

*Information on what it is and how to prevent it*

As people have become more cautious about saving money, scammers are getting better at finding ways to separate it from innocent individuals. One such common target for money fraud is senior citizens. More cases are surfacing where an elderly person has become the victim of financial abuse and has lost a large sum of money.

As a community bank, The Stephenson National Bank & Trust (SNBT) is committed to educating consumers about various scams, and understands that an educated, cautious consumer is the number one defense.

Elder abuse doesn't have to come in the form of physical abuse or neglect. According to the National Center on Elder Abuse, when it comes to financial activity, elder abuse can be defined as the exploitation of senior citizens to gain access to their property, investments, cash, or real estate. As many as one in five cases remain undetected and unreported, often because the perpetrator is a family member of the victim.

Some examples of elder financial abuse or exploitation include: cashing checks without authorization; forging a signature; misusing or stealing money or possessions; coercing or deceiving them into signing any document (e.g., contracts or will); and the improper use of conservatorship, guardianship, or power of attorney. Financial abuse often occurs with the implied consent of the older person and therefore it can be more difficult to detect or prove.

"Elder financial abuse can be devastating to the victim," says Daniel J. Peterson, SNBT President & CEO. "Sadly, these criminals are oftentimes family members, trusted friends, or caregivers who have grown close to the individual in order to overtake their account."

Look for these warning signs if you suspect an older person is being exploited:

**Isolation.** The number one tactic used by perpetrators is to separate the victim from family and friends who would stop the abuse. Watch for victims to stop attending social events or even disconnect their phone line.

**Changes in spending habits.** Drastic changes in account balances or unusually flamboyant purchases like cars and real estate are a sign that the senior citizen is not in charge of their finances. This could also include frequent or inconsistent withdrawals using an ATM card. Keep a close eye on lavish "gifts" to new friends or acquaintances.



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**Unfamiliar names on joint accounts.** Sometimes perpetrators convince their victims they will help organize their finances by creating a joint account. In reality, this gives the perpetrator unlimited access to the victim's funds. If a senior citizen wants another person to manage their finances, they should use a Power of Attorney (POA) account instead, which puts a legal obligation on the co-signer to protect the elderly person's interests.

If you notice these warning signs, the first step is to talk to the suspected victim. Often, victims are afraid or ashamed, which makes them hesitant to seek help because they don't want to admit they've been scammed. This can be especially true if the alleged perpetrator is a family member, because the victim may not want their relative to get in trouble. Many are afraid if they do admit to being taken advantage of they'll be put into a nursing home.

Another option is to report the suspected abuse to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. Wisconsin's Elder Adults-at-Risk Help Lines are listed by county here: <http://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/aps/Contacts/eaaragencies.htm>. However, the best thing to do is educate your elderly family members and friends about how they can protect themselves from becoming victims in the first place.

For information on protecting yourself from other types of scams and identity theft, visit SNBT's website Consumer Alerts page at <https://www.snbt.com/about-us/consumer-alerts>.

The Stephenson National Bank & Trust is a 139-year old independent community bank with \$800 million in Bank, Mortgage, and Trust & Investment assets under management. Offices are located in Marinette and Oconto, Wis. and Menominee, Mich. with a Trust & Investment Office in Marquette, Mich. For more information about The Stephenson National Bank & Trust visit [www.snbt.com](http://www.snbt.com).

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