



## **Our Seniors Are Worth Protecting**

***By City Attorney Mara W. Elliott***

My maternal grandmother, who helped raise me and my brother, spent her final years in a safe and comfortable care facility. My mother visited with her every day to ensure that she was properly cared for, fed, and bathed.

Sadly, this is not the case for many seniors in San Diego.

As our aging population grows, so, too, do opportunities to rob seniors of their independence, their financial resources, and their dignity.

Yet society often averts its eyes from mistreatment of our seniors, especially when it is perpetrated by their own family members. When mistreatment is reported, the resources to combat the problem are sparse and difficult to identify.

That's why my Office has made it a priority to protect our vulnerable elderly residents from violence, neglect, and economic crimes. Since 2017, my office has prosecuted approximately 85 elder abuse cases, allowing us to holding offenders accountable.

Early intervention in elder abuse situations can prevent more serious crimes from happening in the future, which is why we are enlisting the public's help. The elderly are uniquely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Unscrupulous caregivers isolate an elder from friends, family, and other support networks in order to carry out their abuse in secret. Neighbors and anyone else concerned about an elder's well-being should speak up if they see something suspicious.

We recently filed criminal charges – including charges of willful cruelty – against the owners and operators of two independent living facilities that held elderly and dependent residents in deplorable conditions.

The residents of these facilities, run out of single-family homes in quiet neighborhoods, feared that speaking up would get them thrown out on the street. Yet the 11 victims, ranging from 57 to 84 years old, were subject to vermin infestations, exposed to feces in the community shower, and denied access to food, water, and telephones. One elderly victim had to live in an unventilated garage, another in a tent on the side of the house. Some residents suffered from heat exposure and had to be transported to local hospitals for medical attention. Due to our intervention, residents were removed from these dangerous conditions. Our priority is to ensure victims secure safe and stable housing.

My Office also acts when seniors fall victim to financial crimes and scams, which they are increasingly vulnerable as social isolation and cognitive changes affect their financial decision-making abilities.

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Whether it is a caretaker fraudulently writing checks from their accounts, or an elusive stranger who convinces a victim to send money or share financial information, these crimes are widely underreported. Often, victims are too embarrassed to speak up.

Sometimes the harm is done by a beloved and trusted family member, and the victim does not wish to pursue criminal charges.

In a recent case we filed against a family-member “caretaker,” the defendant, the victim’s alcoholic daughter, pleaded guilty to physically assaulting her mother. When her mother tried to call 9-1-1, the defendant slapped, pushed, and threatened her. The mother fled to a neighbor’s house to call the police.

If you know of an elder who is being mistreated by a caregiver or family member, please contact my Office’s Domestic Violence and Sex Crimes unit at (619) 533-5544, or the San Diego Family Justice Center at (866) 933-HOPE (4673) or (619) 533-6000.

Once a victim is connected to our office, we help get them the support they need so they don’t return to a dangerous situation.

Not everyone can spend their golden years in the company of family, but mistreatment should never be the price of companionship.

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City Attorney Mara W. Elliott 1200  
Third Ave., Suite 1620  
San Diego, CA 92101  
Phone: 619-236-6220  
Email: [cityattorney@sandiego.gov](mailto:cityattorney@sandiego.gov)  
[www.Sandiego.gov/cityattorney](http://www.Sandiego.gov/cityattorney)