

Nursing homes are supposed to provide specialized care for our aging or ailing family members. Due to their extreme vulnerability, elders need their dignity and individuality safeguarded to the greatest extent possible. Too often, though, we wonder whether our loved one is receiving the courtesy, respect and the special care they are entitled to by law. Sometimes, when visiting a loved one in a nursing institution we notice that something is just “not quite right.”

Maybe your loved one is uncharacteristically disoriented or depressed. Maybe there is unexplained bruising. Maybe he or she appears unkempt or disheveled. These signs should alert you to the possibility of abuse or neglect. Even when there is no active abuse, elders in nursing homes who do not have anyone actively advocating for their welfare can find themselves in less than optimal conditions.

What types of abuse are prevalent in nursing homes?

Awareness of different forms of abuse and their warning signs is the first step to protecting family members from harm:

Physical – Hitting, pushing and inflicting pain or injury by use of restraints, over-medication or under-medication. Warning signs: bruises, bone fractures, presence of unjustified restraints.

Sexual – Assault or molestation. Warning signs: New emergence of sexually transmitted diseases, pelvic injury, bruises on inner thighs or around the genital area, anal or genital pain, bleeding, or irritation, bloody, torn, or stained undergarments, extreme agitation.

Emotional – Harassment, scolding or verbal cruelty. Warning signs: disorientation, depression or isolation, fear or anxiety, unexplained refusal or inability to communicate.

Financial – Improper use of funds or property. Warning signs: billing for treatment or medications not received, forged signatures on important documents or checks, disappearance of valuable possessions, odd withdrawals from a bank account.

Neglect – Failure to provide adequate nutrition, hydration, clothing, hygiene, medical treatment, or other necessary assistance and/or attention. Warning signs: bedsores or pressure sores, skin rash, falls from lack of adequate precautions or assistance, significant weight loss, dehydration.

The Department of Aging in Pennsylvania recognizes that abuse is not uncommon in nursing homes and has set up the statewide elder abuse hotline, the Area Agency on Aging and the local long-term care Ombudsman to help address this problem.

Since your loved one may not be able or willing to complain, attentive family members and friends may be the

first to discover that their loved one has been abused or neglected. Pay attention to the warning signs and call an attorney if you suspect that your loved one's rights are being violated.

Understand what you can do to help

If you suspect nursing home abuse or neglect, you need an attorney who can help your loved one and hold the ones causing the abuse responsible for their actions. Rosenn Jenkins & Greenwald LLP offers caring and experienced legal representation in this area.