

STATE OF ALASKA

DEPT. OF HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES

Alaska Commission on Aging

SEAN PARNELL, GOVERNOR

P.O. BOX 110693
JUNEAU, ALASKA 99811-0693
PHONE: (907) 465-3250
FAX: (907) 465-1398

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Governor Sean Parnell
P.O. Box 110001
Juneau, AK 99811-0001

Dear Governor Parnell:

On behalf of the Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA), we would like to share our sincere and heartfelt appreciation for your recent commitment to launch a campaign aimed at addressing domestic violence and sexual assault in Alaska, social problems which have increased to epidemic proportions in recent years. Alaska's rank in the top five states for per capita rates of domestic violence, and our state's high rates of sexual assault against women and children, are intolerable. We applaud your efforts to put an end to this violence, and the pain and suffering endured by victims, through an extensive public awareness campaign and greater emphasis on holding abusers responsible for their crimes.

Domestic violence can affect anyone at any age. In developing your plan to address domestic violence, we strongly encourage you to consider support of legislation and funding to prevent and respond to elder abuse in Alaska. ACoA asks that you incorporate prevention of elder abuse in your domestic violence public awareness campaign including how to identify elder abuse and neglect and how to report it to appropriate authorities. Well-meaning family and other unpaid caregivers who suffer from "caregiver burnout" may benefit more from education, enhanced respite and counseling than from punitive measures. The needs of victims must also be considered and addressed.

Elder abuse is a devastating and unrecognized problem that oftentimes goes unreported and can have life-threatening consequences. According to a report from the National Institute of Justice (March 2009), approximately 11% of people age 60 years and older suffer some form of abuse every year. Other studies have shown that elderly victims of abuse, exploitation, and neglect have twice the risk of dying within a year. The National Center on Elder Abuse estimates that only one out of six elder abuse incidents (excluding the cases of self-neglect) are reported to authorities. The majority of cases go unreported as elders/seniors are often reluctant to report the abuse, particularly if the abusers are family members, for fear of shaming the family or losing that person's care. In rural Alaska, elder abuse is so culturally sensitive that reference to this problem is made instead to "elder disrespect." According to Dr. Lisa Gibbs, University of California, "Elder abuse is where child abuse was 30 years ago," referring to society's lack of awareness of the mistreatment of vulnerable adults.

Elder abuse refers to intentional or neglectful acts by a caregiver or "trusted" individual that may lead to harm of a vulnerable older adult. Physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, financial exploitation, neglect, abandonment and self-neglect are considered forms of elder abuse. Abusers may be spouses, family members, neighbors, friends, professional caregivers, or opportunistic strangers who prey on the vulnerable. Mental health problems and substance misuse by both abusers and victims can contribute to risk. Isolation is also a risk factor. Older adults with dementia are particularly vulnerable to abuse.

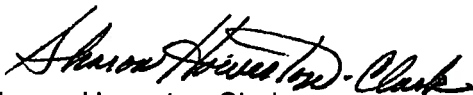
In Alaska, reports of elder abuse are increasing at an alarming rate. The Long-Term Care Ombudsman's Office (LTCO), mandated by the federal Older Americans Act and State statute to investigate and resolve complaints concerning persons aged 60 years and older who reside in long-term care facilities, reported a 204% increase in the number of complaints filed concerning the safety and welfare of older Alaskans during the past year (August 2009). The LTCO investigated 150 complaints in FY08 and 337 complaints in FY09. Although the majority of Alaska's long-term care facilities provide quality service and are not causing harm, there has been a substantial increase in the number of facilities opened in the last three years, according to the Division of Assisted Living Licensing, to provide care for the increasing number of elderly Alaskans who are most prone to Alzheimer's disease and related dementias.

The Office of Fraud and Elder Abuse, an agency created by statute in 2006 within the Office of Public Advocacy to investigate claims involving financial exploitation of elders 60 years and older, reports 464 cases of elder fraud and financial exploitation investigated during its first two years.

Adult Protective Services (APS), an agency under the Division of Senior and Disabilities Services, is charged with responding to and resolving complaints of neglect, abuse, and exploitation against vulnerable Alaskans (seniors and persons with disabilities). APS reports a 169% increase in the number of reports received over the last four years (August 2009). According to APS, the number of reports has steadily increased every year from 1,021 in FY05, 1,666 in FY06, 1,866 in FY07, 1,982 in FY08 to 2,748 in FY09. While the National Adult Protective Services Association recommends an average case load of 25 cases per worker, the Alaska APS worker manages 78 cases. The majority of cases reported to APS relate to persons age 60 years and older. While the annual increase in reporting may be partly attributed to growing social awareness, the increase in the senior population, particularly the oldest old (persons aged 85 and older), and the current times of economic insecurity may also contribute to mounting threats of neglect, fraud, and abuse directed toward the most vulnerable.

Please accept our sincere appreciation for your efforts to end domestic violence in Alaska and for your dedication to improve the welfare of abuse victims. We look forward to working with you to raise public awareness about the prevalence of elder abuse in Alaska and to develop strategies to protect Alaska's oldest citizens from harm. The Alaska Commission on Aging stands ready and would be honored to assist your office on this important issue. Please feel free to contact Denise Daniello, ACoA's Executive Director, by phone (465-4879) or email (denise.daniello@alaska.gov). Thank you.

Sincerely,



Sharon Howerton-Clark
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,



Denise Daniello
ACoA Executive Director

Cc: Commissioner Bill Hogan, Department of Health & Social Services
Deputy Commissioner Pat Hefley, Department of Health & Social Services