

Mickey Rooney's Story

Q: Is there an elder abuse reporting law in this state?

A: Yes. Massachusetts has had an elder abuse/protective services law for 27 years---but there are many people who have no idea what protections it offers to seniors.

Although it is not thought of as a social pandemic, abuse of the elderly is increasing at an alarming rate in Massachusetts. When protective services were first created in 1984, a total of 1,529 reports were investigated. This year, an estimated 19,554 reports will be investigated. That's an average of 54 new elder abuse reports every day—or more than 2 new abuse filings every hour of every day.

The issue of abuse against the elderly took center stage recently when child star Mickey Rooney testified before Congress---not as a Hollywood personality---but as an abuse victim. "Unfortunately, I'm testifying not just as a concerned citizen, but as a victim of elder abuse." Rooney said. The actor charged that \$400,000 was "stolen from me by someone close, a family member...You feel scared and disappointed, and can't believe it's happening to you. You feel overwhelmed."

Rooney said he suffered "emotional blackmail" as part of his abuse. He said he was told that his financial matters "were none of his business." "It came out of nowhere," Rooney said. "It started with something small, but it was rather sinister. For years I suffered silently. I was told to shut up and be quiet---you don't know what you're talking about." Rooney urged seniors to tell their story, "especially for those seniors who suffer in silence. You are not alone, and you have nothing to be ashamed of. You deserve better. You deserve the right to control your life. To end the cycle of

abuse, not to allow yourself to be silenced. Tell your story. If it can happen to me, it can happen to anyone," Rooney concluded.

Elder abuse is not just physical and sexual violence. It includes emotional abuse, as well as neglect by a caregiver, and financial exploitation. Most abuse is at the hands of relatives or friends, and each report can be volatile and dangerous to investigate.

State law created the protective services program as the Commonwealth's reporting and investigation program for elder abuse and neglect in the community. Abuse in nursing homes is handled by the Department of Public Health. Self-neglect was later added to the law to deal with situations in which elders are unable to provide for their own basic day-to-day needs, like shelter, clothing and food.

The abuse law requires certain "mandated reporters," such as doctors, nurses, police, firefighters, directors of home health agencies and home care agencies to file a report if they have "reasonable cause to believe" that an elder has been abused or neglected. But anyone can make an abuse report. If an investigation confirms abuse or neglect, the elder is offered an array of support services. Cases of serious abuse are reported to the District Attorney's office for possible prosecution.

If you witness a case of elder abuse, you can call 1-800-AGE-INFO and press "4", or the protective services hotline at 1-800-922-2275. Reports can be made any time day or night, seven days a week. Reporters have immunity from civil or criminal liability resulting from a report, provided the reporter did not commit the abuse and the report was made in good faith.

