

A responsibility to care: Peninsula forensic team aims to reverse rise of elder abuse

By **Sarah Fearing** - November 13, 2017



Peninsula Elder Abuse Forensic Center coordinator Stephanie Williams speaks to a forensic team. The forensic center started operations Nov. 1, boasting a multi-disciplinary team of experts who will investigate elder abuse cases reported on the peninsula. (Courtesy York-Poquoson Social Services)

With high-end resorts, golf courses, lush green gated communities and a dozen nursing homes, Williamsburg is a top retirement destination for senior citizens.

But with an aging population, the demographics also make the colonial city and surrounding area ripe for another problem: Elder abuse.

After seeing elder abuse steadily increase on the Virginia Peninsula and surrounding area, local officials and agencies are pooling their resources and expertise to fight back.

The Peninsula Elder Abuse Forensic Center started operations Nov. 1 to combat growing concerns of elder abuse. The new center will have a multi-disciplinary team of experts who will investigate elder abuse cases reported on the peninsula, according to a forensic center news release.

Elder abuse grows in Virginia

Addressing elder abuse is particularly important in Williamsburg, where more than 16 percent of the population is over the age of 65, according to the United States Census Bureau.

In Virginia, elder abuse – whether physical, financial or psychological – is a growing problem, state officials say.

In 2016, Virginia’s Adult Protective Services received 23,432 total reports of abuse, according to 2016 [report](#) from the Adult Protective Services Division of the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services.

Of over 23,000 reports, 497 abuse reports came from York County, Poquoson, James City County and Williamsburg, the report states.

But the actual number of elder abuse cases in the Historic Triangle is unclear because not all elder abuse incidents are reported.

Williamsburg-James City County Commonwealth’s Attorney Nathan Green said his team prosecutes a “few” elder abuse cases each year, but hopes the new multi-disciplinary team at the forensic center will help identify and investigate more incidents.

Green has assigned a prosecutor and a victim witness advocate from the courthouse to be on the forensic center team.

Financial exploitation

Although the Williamsburg-James City County Courthouse only sees a “few” elder abuse cases each year, Green said financial exploitation is the most common.

In December 2016, adult protective services released a report to the General Assembly stating adult financial exploitation cost elderly and vulnerable Virginians an estimated \$28.2 million in 2015 alone.

But the figure could be up to \$1 billion, the department believes.



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Pete and Claudia McDonald pose together in an undated photo.

One federal case received attention from [local media](#) after over \$550,000 went missing from a senior Williamsburg couple’s Wells Fargo bank account in 2014.

Pete McDonald, a then-80-year-old attorney from Florida, had settled in a home at Williamsburg Landing with his wife,

(Courtesy Claudia McDonald)

Claudia. The pair hired a housekeeper, Dana Morris, in 2012 and quickly forged a [close friendship](#).

Years after hiring Morris, McDonald realized he was short over \$500,000. His housekeeper, Dana Morris, had forged and altered 117 checks in McDonald's name.

Although Morris was [sentenced](#) to 37 months in federal prison in January, the betrayal McDonald and his family felt still lingered [long after](#) her case was heard in court.

On the local level, Green expects to prosecute more cases of elder abuse in future years.

"I'm not sure that can be correlated back to a growth in elder abuse but rather to our growing ability to identify those cases that in the past had gone unidentified and therefore were never investigated," Green said.

"Any incident of elder abuse is a problem," Green wrote in a Nov. 6 email.

The Peninsula Elder Abuse Forensic Center

The mission of the new center is to "create a safe community in which older and incapacitated adults are empowered and free of abuse, neglect and exploitation," the forensic center release said.

The experts include individuals from adult protective services, law enforcement, commonwealth's attorney offices, victim-witness advocacy, mental health agencies, domestic violence centers, the Center for Sexual Assault Survivors, the Peninsula Agency on Aging, geriatric services, forensic nursing, neuropsychology and forensic accounting.

"I hope this new [multi-disciplinary team] will advance our ability to identify incidents of elder abuse that may have gone unreported to law enforcement in the past or at the very least under-reported," Green wrote.

The center was developed by York-Poquoson Social Services and the Riverside Health System, with collaboration from the cities of Newport News, Hampton, Poquoson and Williamsburg and the counties of York, James City, Gloucester and Isle of Wight.

As a branch of the nonprofit Riverside Center for Excellence in Aging and Lifelong Health in Williamsburg, the center will only accept case referrals from its team members, and will meet

twice monthly at the York-Poquoson Social Services building and Riverside Regional Medical Center in Newport News.

The forensic center is also seeking grants to fund its annual operating budget of \$150,000, center coordinator Stephanie Edwards said.

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