



# Wayne State

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## **Rx** DETROIT

Battling barriers  
to health equity  
from prenatal to  
end-of-life care

# Protecting Grandma

**Institute of Gerontology  
tools fight  
financial  
exploitation**

By Leslie Mertz

Will knew something was wrong as soon as he heard his mother's shaky message on his phone. When he got to her apartment, he found her sitting in a chair – a lost look on her face and a bank statement in her lap. She blinked up at him and in a tiny voice said, "I'm sorry. Your father and I saved and saved, so we could leave something for you and your babies, and now it's all gone. I'm so ashamed."

Will started to go through her records, and saw that someone had repeatedly taken advantage of his mother's trusting nature and slightly slipping mental sharpness, and drained her bank account dry in just three short months. His mind started to spin: How far behind is she in her bills? How will she pay for her living expenses, let alone her medications? Will she have to move out of her house and into his? Can he afford that?

Unfortunately, financial exploitation of the elderly is an all too common occurrence, says Peter Lichtenberg, Ph.D., director of the Wayne State University Institute of Gerontology (IOG). National assessments suggest that one in 20 older adults fall prey to financial exploitation each year, but he believes the incidence is at least twice that because so many cases go unreported.

The lost money is a major issue, but it is not the only one that results from this crime, Lichtenberg says. "It's a snowball effect. There's a sense of embarrassment, and a feeling of being exposed and extremely vulnerable, which can cause victims to begin to isolate themselves. They may also experience anxiety and depression, especially if they had a significant amount of money taken," he describes. "We're really concerned about this growing problem."

In answer, the IOG is developing a new set of tools to curb financial exploitation. One of them is a rating scale designed as means of recognizing whether an older adult shows signs of cognitive decline that may affect his or her ability to make competent money decisions. The idea came out of Lichtenberg's own research and background as a geriatric neuropsychologist, which included cognitive testing and evaluations to assess individuals for early dementia. He also serves as an expert

witness in legal battles over whether an older adult had the mental capacity to change a will, give a gift, or enter into a contract. "I started to see more and more of those cases, and a lot of instances of financial exploitation," he explains.

Lichtenberg got started on a rating scale that everyone from gerontologists and other health professionals to banks, credit companies, and legal counsel could use to determine whether an older adult was competent to make significant money decisions. He published the Lichtenberg Financial-Decision Screening Scale in the *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect* earlier this year.

Howard H. Collens of the Galloway and Collens, PLLC, legal firm in Huntington Woods, has been using the scale in conjunction with his work in estate planning. So far, he is impressed. "When someone is sitting across from me doing their will, their trust, or their power of attorney, I'll have a good sense of whether they're competent pretty quickly," Collens says. The scale is "a short 10-question survey that helps to raise those flags that should be raised."

Collens hopes banks, credit unions, his peers in the legal profession, and others on the front line for preventing financial abuse and exploitation will accept and use Lichtenberg's scale. "To the extent that it's widely adopted, I think it will have some significant effects, and I hope that's what will happen," he says. "It's a good safeguard."

A second IOG tool is a series of community workshops collectively titled "Financial Health After 60." Funded by a grant from the Mary Thompson Foundation, the series includes four two-hour workshops that cover household finance, credit, retirement and estate planning, and financial exploitation. The financial-exploitation session encompasses the types of scams that are making the rounds and how to spot them, financial exploitation by family members or caregivers, and steps seniors can take to protect their finances, explained workshop instructor and IOG community outreach specialist Latoya Hall. "We did the first workshops at the beginning of this year, and we had a very good reception from seniors," Hall says. In all, 242 older adults from

Detroit attended the four spring workshops. Hall is offering four fall workshops in Detroit, Inkster, Wyandotte, and Macomb County. More workshops are planned for 2017.

The third way the IOG is attacking financial exploitation is through a collection of one-on-one services it will begin offering to older adults in 2017, thanks to a new grant awarded by the State of Michigan on Oct. 1, Lichtenberg explains. "Services will include working with identity-theft and scam victims individually to get their credit straightened out, seeing if there are any penalties, helping them go to small-claims court or go to the police to see if they can get any of that money back, and also letting them know that they're not alone." The latter is especially important, he asserts. "It takes a major emotional toll and a stress toll on people when they've been financially exploited. We're very worried about the older population and the consequences that arise from an experience like that," Lichtenberg says.

For younger people who are scammed or otherwise tricked out of their money, they have plenty of employment years left to recoup some of those lost funds, Hall says. "But seniors are at a stage in life where they may not have the opportunity to re-create any of that wealth, so it's very important to ensure that they protect what they have planned to live on throughout their retirement."



Peter Lichtenberg

Lichtenberg says that the IOG's efforts will allow older people to become more financially secure so they don't fall prey to victimization, and if they do, to help guide them through it. "Financial exploitation is a big problem and

it's growing, so we felt we needed to focus our efforts and try to do something about it."