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STATE SENATOR

Op-Ed: Working to Protect Wisconsin Seniors from Abuse

The phone rings; the person on the other end of the line claims to be a relative or calling on behalf of the relative. They say they are in trouble and need to be wired money immediately. What happens next? In too many cases, Wisconsin seniors end up sending their hard earned money to the caller, who quite often is a scam artist. This needs to end.

Last session, I had the opportunity to be a member of the Attorney General's Task Force on Elder Abuse. That task force was made up of representatives from several state agencies, law enforcement, the Wisconsin Court System, the Board on Aging and Long Term Care, the Wisconsin Bankers Association, victim services, and citizen advocacy organizations. We were tasked with studying the impact of elder abuse in Wisconsin and assessing ways to improve outcomes for the elderly population.

Unfortunately, elder abuse is becoming all too common in our society, and reports of elder abuse continue to grow. This abuse can take multiple forms. It can be financial, as in the scenario mentioned above, or it can be emotional or physical. Since 2001, there's been a 160% increase in reported elder abuse in Wisconsin. Research shows that for every reported case of elder abuse, 24 cases go unreported. These numbers are likely to grow as Wisconsin's senior population is set to increase by 72% in the coming decade.

That is why I've worked with Rep. John Macco (Ledgeview) and Rep. Robert Wittke (Racine) to introduce four proposals that we believe will help reverse some of these unfortunate trends.

Two of the bills provide financial advisors and financial institutions with a strengthened ability to block or delay suspicious transactions of financial exploitation against older adults. Frontline staff at a bank or credit union can play crucial roles in preventing these crimes.

The third bill in this package makes a number of criminal law changes including increased penalties to signify that these are crimes against a vulnerable population, enhanced protections for older adults seeking restraining orders, streamlined court process to freeze the assets of a defendant, and enhanced penalties for physical abuse of an older adult.

The last bill strengthens the process for older victims and witnesses who may have declining health by allowing for expedited hearings and the ability to preserve testimony through a video-taped court hearing. We want to ensure that justice is available to all, regardless of age.

By working together with experts from across the state, I believe that we have found concrete ways to make a difference for Wisconsin seniors.