Elder Abuse of Individuals with Alzheimer’s

How significant is the problem of elder abuse among people with dementia?

• Elder abuse is the intentional or negligent act by any person that causes serious harm to an older adult. This harm may be physical, mental, emotional, sexual, and/or financial.

• Older adults with dementia are especially susceptible to abuse — as many as 62% of them experience psychological abuse and as many as one-fourth have been physically abused.

• Additionally, one study found that 60% of elderly victims of sexual abuse have cognitive impairment.

• Nearly one-third (31%) of adults with dementia have experienced more than one form of abuse.

What barriers exist in helping people with dementia who are victims of abuse?

• Police, firefighters, emergency personnel, and social workers increasingly encounter individuals with dementia — and working with them can be fundamentally different from working with other victims of abuse or exploitation.

• Individuals living with dementia often have difficulty understanding or explaining situations, and their behaviors may be viewed as uncooperative, disruptive, or combative. Furthermore, those with dementia may have difficulty assisting investigators or prosecutors due to their cognitive impairment.

• Yet professionals and staff throughout the health care, social services, and criminal justice systems receive little or no training in the special needs of individuals living with dementia.

How does the Promoting Alzheimer’s Awareness to Prevent Elder Abuse Act (P.L. 116-252) address the problem?

• The law requires the Department of Justice (DOJ) to develop training materials on how to work with victims of abuse who have Alzheimer’s and other dementias. These materials will be designed to assist law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, medical personnel, and others who support individuals living with Alzheimer’s.

• In addition, the DOJ is required to report annually to Congress on the dissemination and use of the materials.