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# Who will protect, help the elderly?



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By **Catherine Candisky**

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Former caseworker Tande Rose worries every day about the elderly in Gallia County who may be hungry or without medications or even near death.

Laid off as the county's one-person Department of Adult Protective Services, she wonders who will take care of people like the woman in her 70s who Rose found naked and covered with feces on the floor of a locked bedroom.

Rose discovered the woman while checking on her after a Meals-on-Wheels delivery person reported a growing stench from the home. Weeks earlier, the woman's daughter had asked that the food be left on the porch so her mother was not disturbed.

"Her daughter had been opening the door (to the bedroom) and throwing in a can of Ensure each day, but (the woman) became so weak she couldn't open them," Rose said.

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A Bible lay open on the soiled bed sheets where the woman had been before ending up on the floor.

Advocates for the county agencies across Ohio have not yet compiled the number of caseworkers like Rose who were handed pink slips in the wake of state budget cuts adopted in July. However, roughly 3,000 have lost their jobs since the state started slashing aid to the county agencies nearly two years ago.

Gallia County, along the Ohio River in the heart of the state's Appalachian region, has been among the hardest hit, losing 40 percent of its Job and Family Services' staff of 51.

Rose was the county's only caseworker assigned to investigate allegations of abuse, exploitation or neglect against the elderly. Since she left in August, adult protective services have been unavailable.

"I worry that people will go hungry or not get their medications," Rose said. "I worry that someone will die."

The woman locked in her bedroom was near death, but after weeks in the hospital with a feeding tube and then in a nursing home, she recovered and is back home under the care of another relative.

Her daughter, Rose said, was prosecuted but deemed mentally ill and is now homeless.

"These are sweet little people," Rose said of her former clients. "I may be in their shoes some day, and if I am, I'd want someone looking after me."

Carol Dayton, chairwoman of the Ohio Coalition for Adult Protective Services, said some counties have been able to divert other funds to protective services while others have scaled back or eliminated services entirely.

"It's an already fragile system being stressed to the point of dysfunction," she said.

In the fiscal year ending June 30, 2008, there were 16,109 reports of elder neglect or exploitation statewide. But studies have shown that for every incident that is reported, four more go unreported.

Rose helped about 150 seniors a year.

"Elderly people are so proud," she said. "They will go without medication before they wouldn't pay their utilities. I would try and help by talking to physicians to get samples or calling the utility company."

Just before leaving her job, Rose helped a couple who lived in a trailer and relied on rainwater to cook and bathe.

"Families are supposed to help out families," Rose said. "But a family can't do what they could do 20 years ago."

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