

California Courts News

Title: Elder Court Roundtable

Date: July 14, 2010

There are 6-point-4 million people aged 60 and older in our state. That's almost 20% of our total population. 628-thousand Californians are over the age of 85. And those numbers are growing dramatically. So too is elder abuse.

In Ventura they noticed a significant increase in the number of elder abuse crimes – physical, financial and emotional.

Hon. Colleen Toy White, Ventura Superior Court *"We knew we had the cases. What we had to ask was, 'what are we going to do with them?'"*

Elderly victims are best served when there's accommodation for their special needs, as there is here in Contra Costa County in their Elder Protection Court. They've realized it's far more efficient in the long run to have a separate, unique court session for seniors.

Hon. Joyce Cram, Contra Costa Superior Court *"This takes them out and gives them their own special place for a hearing so that they're not lost in the shuffle."*

More time is allowed for each case.

Hon. Colleen Toy White, Ventura Superior Court *"Even physically for an elder to get in and out of the courtroom, for an elder to express themselves, sometimes that takes longer. You'll notice in an elder abuse courtroom even the bailiff deals with the litigants differently. The court clerk does. Sometimes it's a matter of talking loud enough so the elder can hear. Making sure that the elder gets to the appropriate chair so they're not embarrassed."*

The judges are specially trained, too, in cognitive functioning, ageing, and elder abuse. It sharpens their insight.

Hon. Joyce Cram, Contra Costa Superior Court *"I think it makes a lot of sense in terms of the court to have a judge who is interested in the issue, which I am, and is trained in these issues."*

Volunteer peer counselors are on hand.

Magda Lopez, Program & Services Director, Contra Costa Superior Court *"We have somebody that talks to the folks before they come into the courtroom, and walks out of the courtroom with them and explains to them 'this is what just happened and these are the next couple of steps' so they know what they need to do."*

There's follow up, too, to make sure court orders are obeyed. Community service providers are right there on the site, including a drop-in Senior Legal Services Clinic, the department of public health, and senior mediation services.

Hon. Joyce Cram, Contra Costa Superior Court *"Our greatest success I think is in the matching of seniors and the necessary services."*

Magda Lopez, Program and Services Director, Contra Costa Superior Court *"There's a tremendous synergy that happens when you have the various community agencies collaborating with what happens in the courtroom. It makes things more efficient and much more effective."*

A specialized elder court also results in fewer jury trials, hearings, delays, and continuances.

So on this day, judges, court staff and justice partners gathered in Martinez to hear about best practices in elder courts. Funded by two grants, the event was sponsored by the Administrative Office of the Courts, the Center for Families, Children and the Courts.

By sharing best practices, they hope that one day there'll be an elder court in every county in California; to provide meaningful access to justice and preserve the dignity of our elders.

I'm Leanne Kozak reporting from Martinez.

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