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November 12, 2014 11:56AM

Needham forum puts spotlight on elderly abuse, human rights issues

Human rights are often taken for granted in this country, and places where they are not, are considered barbaric. But a discussion last week at Olin College revealed that the human rights of one population here are routinely being violated, and not much is being said about it. This population – which is also the country’s fastest growing one -- is the elderly.

“Issues Facing Older Adults in Our Communities” was the title of the forum lead by Olin Professor Caitrin Lynch that featured Boston Attorney Betsy Crimmins, who specializes in elder justice, including housing, benefits, health, nursing home law, elder abuse/exploitation, guardianship and consumer fraud.

Crimmins provided a harrowing picture of the tough issues faced by the elderly, and implored the audience to raise their awareness about this topic.

“This is a difficult conversation to have,” Crimmins said. “Think about child abuse. We all know what it is, everyone understands it. The public has been educated about this subject.” She said that while there are many advocates and systems in place to recognize, prevent and deal with child abuse, the same is not the case for abuse facing the aging population. “These people can be isolated, maybe suffering mental decline; it’s a complex subject.”

Crimmins said elder abuse is an extremely prevalent -- though under-reported -- crime: it is estimated there are more than 5 million cases each year in the United States, and it transcends every socio-economic group in the country. “It can happen to anyone who is vulnerable, especially those with mental health issues.” She said, “We know, for example, that 90 percent of elder abuse victims know their perpetrators – it’s their family, friends, neighbors, caretakers.”

Crimmins described a scenario she’s dealt with many times: an elderly woman facing eviction due to a lease violation. “Very often an adult son is living with the older mother and she’s getting evicted, because it’s against the (elderly housing) lease to have him living there. But the son doesn’t have an income or a home, may be taking her medications, and may be causing problems with other tenants in the building.

“The landlord tells the woman she can stay, but she must get the son to move and take out a restraining order against him. These women always say ‘no.’ We see the son as a perpetrator, because he’s putting her at risk of being homeless, but that’s her son, they’ve had a 50-year relationship. These elders know they’re being taken advantage of, but they’ve made a compromise: she thinks of him as the one who takes her to the doctor, watches TV with her, helps her change and bathe, and she doesn’t want a stranger doing these things.”

The multi-faceted subject also includes the topic of self-neglect, another form of elder abuse. Crimmins described a typical situation: “Someone in cognitive decline will inadvertently put their health or maybe their finances at risk. You’ve got a proud and independent elderly uncle who served his country in WWII. He’s living at home alone, still driving, but getting confused. He’s still using the stove, smoking, et cetera, but maybe he can’t remember where he put down his lit cigarette, or falls asleep smoking. These people are putting themselves - and others- at risk... they are vulnerable.”

Very often, the aging hide this vulnerability and do not discuss their situations out of pride, embarrassment, and fear of losing their autonomy.

“Self-determination is a key cultural value in America, but there’s a fine line between self-determination, and determining when someone is unable to care for themselves. And who decides?” Crimmins asked. “There is no medical definition.”

The problems are compounded by the fact that “Many older people don’t think of themselves as elderly. There’s a real fear and denial of aging. People need to recognize these issues exist,” Crimmins said. “There are dozens of scams that prey on the elderly... letters, emails, phone calls that ask for personal information (leading to identity theft), or for money. These issues reside in the shadows and we need to shine a light on them.” She said the elderly are swindled out approximately \$3 billion a year, according to one estimate.

“Prevention should be focus of this conversation, rather than waiting till there’s a crisis. Information is the best weapon,” Crimmins said, and the forum split into three follow-on group discussions about financial fraud, fitness at every age, and how the media portrays the elderly.

The forum was co-sponsored the Needham Human Rights Committee, the Needham Council on Aging, Olin College and by North Hill, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary.



Olin College Associate Professor Caitrin Lynch, left, led a forum about human right issues facing the elderly. The forum featured legal expert Betsy Crimmins, right, who has been advocating on behalf of the elderly for 25 years. Wicked Local photo / Susan Curtin

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