May is Older Americans Act Month as proclaimed by the president of the United States on April 30: “As vital members of our communities, seniors deserve the resources and information to stay healthy and safe. This year’s Older Americans Month theme, ‘Safe Today. Healthy Tomorrow,’ raises awareness about injury prevention. To take control of their safety, seniors can talk to their health care provider about the best physical activities for them, make sure their homes have ample lighting, and install handrails wherever they are helpful — particularly near stairs and in bathrooms.”

As important as this kind of safety is, I’d like to put a different spin on the theme and talk about exploitation prevention and staying financially safe. So for Older Americans Month 2014, I want to call to your attention three unsung heroines and their organizations that protect the older adult population: Cindy Hounsell, founder of the Women’s Institute for a Secure Retirement (WISER), Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) for the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), and Brooke Astor for her unfortunate but pivotal role in helping the Elder Justice Coalition (EJC) secure passage of the Elder Justice Act. I have worked with these organizations and know first-hand the value of what they have been able to accomplish for older Americans.

We all should know the stark difference in the quality of life that older Americans have if they age with sufficient financial resources versus aging in poverty. I am not just speaking of being able to travel the world, play golf, go to the theatre, and help family members in need. I am referring to being able to pay for the care one needs, prescription drugs, and other basic necessities of life such as food and housing. The work of WISER, CFPB, and the EJC have all led to better financial health and safety of older adults.

WISER
Cindy Hounsell and WISER have been in the not-for-profit business of helping older women become more financial literate and protect themselves from fraud and exploitation for more than 18 years. Although I have said her work and organization have not received the credit they deserve, Hounsell has been recognized on occasion. Money magazine called her one of its “Money Heroes” and Women’s e‘News honored Hounsell as one of 21 Leaders for the 21st Century. The ForbesWoman column named WISER’s website, www.wiserwomen.org, as one of its Top 100 Websites for Women 2012.

As current director of the National Resource Center for Women and Retirement Planning, funded by the U.S. Administration on Aging, Hounsell improves the lives of thousands of women each year by leading workshops, training grassroots advocates, and working closely with organizational partners to promote financial security and retirement planning.

Older women are targeted for financial exploitation and scams twice as often as men are. As a demographic, single women (unmarried, divorced, and widowed) comprise the largest segment of the senior population. Seniors, in general, control large amounts of wealth. Coupled with dependence on a trusted family member, attorney, or friend and a cognitive impairment or situation of isolation, it is easy to see how a person can be taken advantage of. Con artists and scammers can be quite convincing to an isolated, confused, or ill individual. The family member, attorney, friend, or neighbor can take advantage of these problems plus employ the element of familiarity to earn trust. As well, seniors are exploited financially by those who also physically and mentally abuse them. Seniors, older women especially, are a vulnerable group who need protection and education and advocacy.

WISER has devoted nearly two decades to educating women about how to avoid poverty in retirement. Preventing financial exploitation is an important aspect of being financially safe. A common refrain among victims is “Before I knew it, my money was gone.” Studies show that nine percent of financial abuse victims must turn to Medicaid after their own funds are stolen. In addition, financial fraud and abuse victims suffer health declines, are three times more likely to die prematurely, and four times more likely to go into a nursing home.

WISER has developed a training program for professionals who work with seniors, in partnership with the National Council on Aging, called Savvy Saving Seniors. WISER also works closely with the National Adult Protective Services Association to train APS workers on the different types of financial fraud and abuse scams and schemes and how to spot them.

Common types of financial fraud and abuse include misuse of assets by guardians and those with power of attorney; sweetheart scams, and telemarketing and mail fraud; theft, whether through identity theft or outright stealing of money or possessions; and negligence which involves neglecting an elder’s financial matters.

WISER uses print media, webinars, fact sheets, workshops, and its website to raise awareness of the telltale signs of financial abuse: failure to pay bills; failure to buy food or medication; missing personal property or belongings; large amounts of money transferred or withdrawn; and isolation of the elder from friends or family.

WISER advises seniors to learn to protect themselves but family members need to be aware of these suggestions too.

1. Be alert to situations involving strangers or people who quickly become close to the older person over a short period of time.
2. Avoid isolation — stay involved in community and family activities. Get to know the resources in your community so you know who to ask if you have suspicions.
3. Always tell solicitors: “I never buy from (or give to) anyone who calls or visits me unannounced. Send me something in writing.”
4. Invest in a shredder and shred all receipts with credit card numbers, as well as unsolicited credit and debit cards that arrive in your mailbox.
5. Sign up for the “Do Not Call” list (1-888-382-1222) and get off multiple mailing lists.
6. Use direct deposit for benefit checks.
7. Never give credit card, banking, Social Security, Medicare, or other personal information over the phone unless you initiated the call.
8. Be skeptical of all unsolicited offers. As WISER says, “If it’s too good to be true, it probably is!”

As I move on to my second unsung heroine, I should mention that WISER was the only consumer organization specifically mentioned in the Dodd-Frank legislation, which created the CFPB’s Office for Older Americans.

CFPB

Many have certainly heard of the CFPB, which was originally proposed by Warren when she was a professor at Harvard Law School in 2007. The CFPB was created as part of the controversial Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act in 2010. Within this agency is the Office for Older Americans; the primary goal of the office’s first head, Hubert “Skip” H. Humphrey III, was to spread the word far and wide about the issue of financial exploitation of the elderly and the new office’s work.

The current assistant director, Nora Dowd Eisenhower, has continued this outreach with numerous publications and reminds us that this is “the only office in the federal government specifically dedicated to the financial health of Americans aged 62 or older.” The office’s mission is to help older consumers get the financial education they need to avoid unfair, deceptive, and abusive practices. It helps consumers find answers to questions about financial products and services, powers of attorney, accepting assistance with bill paying and banking, and tips to avoid financial harm. The office also accepts consumer complaints, and works to coordinate efforts with federal and state regulatory agencies and law enforcement. What follows are a few of the Office for Older Americans’ excellent products and initiatives.

“Money Smart for Older Adults: Prevent Financial Exploitation” is an instructor-led training curriculum.

“Managing Someone Else’s Money” guides address issues millions of Americans face when managing money or property for a family member or friend who is unable to pay bills or make financial decisions.

“Interagency Guidance on Privacy Laws and Reporting Financial Abuse of Older Adults” clarifies that reporting suspected financial abuse of older adults to appropriate agencies does not, in general, violate the privacy laws. CFPB has disseminated the Guidance through stakeholder calls, speeches, webinars, press interviews and other vehicles.

“Protecting Residents from Financial Exploitation: A Manual for Assisted Living and Nursing Facilities” is a guide for administrators and key staff focuses on prevention, identification and early intervention in financial abuse cases. This document will be released this summer.

To find these materials, go to the office’s website at www.consumerfinance.gov/older-americans

EJC

I would be remiss if I did not mention the role that the Elder Justice Coalition has played in our nation’s awareness of and effort to end elder abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation. A great deal of the credit for this work and the passage of the Elder Justice Act goes to Bob Blancato, the EJC’s national coordinator, but in the messy world of legislation, there are sometimes tipping points that help bring an issue forward in the public or congressional eye. When the grandson of Brooke Astor, a wealthy New York socialite, went to court and filed a complaint charging his own father and his father’s lawyer with, among other things financial elder abuse, many saw for the first time that a well-known and seemingly financially secure person could be victimized.

Liz Lowey, the prosecutor in the case from the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office, doggedly pursued the case and by doing so raised the visibility of the case in the national media. This served to educate hundreds of thousands about what elder abuse is and that it can happen to anyone, rich or poor. So, Brooke Astor, the final heroine for my column, and her unfortunate victimization in her late 90’s helped to cast the issue in such a prominent light as to compel the passage of the Elder Justice Act.

For more than 12 years, the EJC has advocated for comprehensive approaches to addressing elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation, including the EJA and the language in the Dodd-Frank bill that created the Office of Older Americans in the CFPB. The EJC has provided congressional testimony and technical advice to members of Congress, influenced local and national media coverage, presented recommendations to the Elder Justice Coordinating Council, participated in the Department of Justice road map project, and continues to work to secure funding for the Elder Justice Act.

Suffice it to say, Older Adults are frequently targets for financial exploitation losing an estimated $2.9 billion each year. Many older adults, their families, friends, and policy makers are not aware of this crisis and are doing little to protect their life savings and financial futures. The ramifications of elder financial exploitation range from losing one’s sense of security to literally losing one’s ability to live independently. These three organizations through their outreach, education, and advocacy have helped prevent the loss of millions of dollars, piece of mind, and protected the independence of many older Americans. Happy Older Americans Month!