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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA SENATE JUDICIARY AND AGING AND YOUTH COMMITTEES TUESDAY, MARCH 14, 2023

Good morning, Majority Chairs Baker and Ward and Democratic Chairs Santarsiero and Collett. Thank you for inviting me to participate in this hearing focusing preventing elder abuse.

My name is Chelsea Robbins, and I am a Deputy District Attorney in Dauphin County.

In the Fall of 2022, the Dauphin County District Attorney's Office formally formed an Elder/Care-Dependent Multidisciplinary Investigative Team (MDIT). As a Dauphin County Deputy District Attorney, I lead the MDIT, which consists of members of law enforcement from nearly every jurisdiction within Dauphin County, representatives from the Dauphin County Area Agency on Aging, and a representative from the Attorney General's Office. Initially, the MDIT was formed in response to a need for a reporting/referral system that facilitates the intersection of law enforcement agencies, the Dauphin County Area Agency on Aging, etc. Through the infancy of the MDIT, many other areas of need were recognized by several members.

Although the Older Adults Protective Services Act provides for reporting to said agencies, there is nothing yet in place that prescribes how that shall occur. As a MDIT we are in the midst of establishing reporting/referral protocols to set forth standards and procedures to be used in receiving and referring reports and coordinating investigations of reported cases of abuse, neglect, exploitation, etc. This protocol is intended to provide law enforcement officers, area on aging caseworkers, members of the coroner's office, and other team members with a framework of actions, considerations, and activities that can assist them in performing competent, productive, and successful investigations.

Our MDIT determined that the best course of action would be to mirror that of the well-established Dauphin County Child Abuse MDIT as the psychology is similar. However, the creation of ChildLine allows for a clearer and more delineated reporting and referral system. Therefore, we intended to utilize the designated "Helpline" as a starting point for law enforcement and caseworkers to report suspected abuse, neglect, and/or exploitation. There are a few intricacies that must be worked out prior to going live with this approach. For instance, if law enforcement is first to become aware of abuse, neglect or exploitation it is quite possible that

another agency opening and conducting an investigation could hinder and/or prevent a proper investigation and ultimately prosecution. A delayed reporting method may be necessary in an instance such as this to ensure that a thorough investigation can occur. Of course, a delayed reporting method would be outlined in the protocol and would include mandated internal reports be created and maintained every 30-60 days.

In conjunction with creating a reporting/referral system, we then must turn our attention to a most critical element of this process; the individuals who will be utilizing the protocols. There is a significant need for training for those individuals who find themselves on the frontlines of identifying and investigating cases involving these special victims. Spotting elder abuse, neglect, and/or exploitation is difficult; and interacting with this vulnerable population of society also presents its challenges. Therefore, we must provide specialized training for law enforcement officers, caseworkers, and members of the coroner's office to recognize and investigate these cases.

In our development of county-wide protocols we did review current and pertinent statutory law. In that review, we determined there is a need for greater protections for this vulnerable portion of our society. For instance, there should be a more inclusive list as it relates to mandated reporters and more extensive list of circumstances surrounding alleged abuse. There are also challenges due to the lack of legislation in certain areas. For instance, a law that would criminalize interference with elder/care-dependent investigation, similar to that of child abuse, would eliminate yet another barrier to successful investigation and prosecution. Additionally, another protection that could be provided through legislation would be a statewide registry of identified perpetrators.

As a MDIT we identified several obstacles to successful investigations and prosecutions. We are working on methods to overcome those obstacles, however, one thing that is a constant is a lack of adequate funding. For instance, once an allegation is made or abuse/neglect is suspected there is no shelter or care facility to move these special victims to during the pendency of an investigation and/or prosecution.

Overall, our goal is to develop an efficient and successful county-wide protocol that could potentially serve as a model for a statewide system. Providing greater protections for this vulnerable portion of our society is our utmost desire. However, to reach those goals we all must work collaboratively and secure appropriate funding to enable those protections.