

Facts on Self-Neglect and Older Adults

Do you know someone whose home is extreme disrepair? Are the utilities shut off? Do you know someone who does not take care of their health and safety? If so, that person could be suffering from self-neglect.

Self-neglect is characterized by actions that threaten health or safety. Self-neglect generally shows up in an older person as inadequate food, water, clothing, shelter, personal hygiene, medications (when indicated), and safety precautions. The older adult shows no concern about this situation and does not, therefore, understand the dismay of the community.

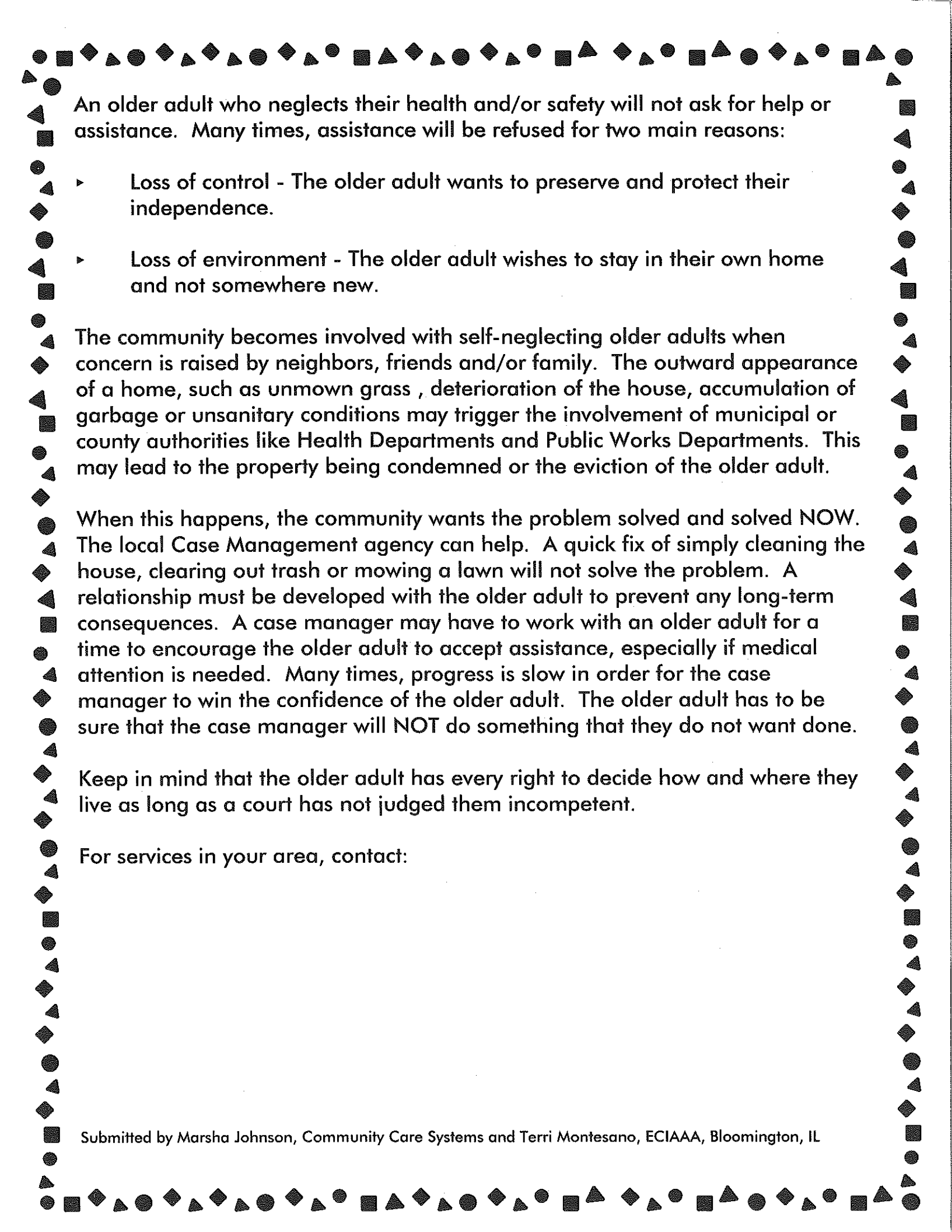
Signs and symptoms of self-neglect include by are not limited to:

- ▶ dehydration, malnutrition, untreated or improperly attended medical conditions, and poor personal hygiene;
- ▶ hazardous or unsafe living conditions/arrangements (e.g. improper wiring, no indoor plumbing, no heat, no running water);
- ▶ unsanitary or unclean living quarters (e.g. animal/insect infestation, no functioning toilet, fecal/urine smell);
- ▶ inappropriate and/or inadequate clothing, lack of the necessary medical aids (e.g. eyeglasses, hearing aids dentures); and,
- ▶ grossly inadequate housing or homelessness.

Everyone participates in some form of self-neglect by not following medical advice, using tobacco or alcohol, not being our ideal body weight, driving too fast or without a seatbelt. However, these actions may not impact an adult in any serious way unless combined together to result in a crisis. Many times, an older adult who suffers from self-neglect will come to the community's attention when a life event happens. A life event could be:

Loss of a loved one;
Relocation/Move;
Abandonment by family;

Loss of support;
Retirement;
Acute medical illness such as stroke,
pneumonia, a fall or frailty.



An older adult who neglects their health and/or safety will not ask for help or assistance. Many times, assistance will be refused for two main reasons:

- ▶ Loss of control - The older adult wants to preserve and protect their independence.
- ▶ Loss of environment - The older adult wishes to stay in their own home and not somewhere new.

The community becomes involved with self-neglecting older adults when concern is raised by neighbors, friends and/or family. The outward appearance of a home, such as unmown grass, deterioration of the house, accumulation of garbage or unsanitary conditions may trigger the involvement of municipal or county authorities like Health Departments and Public Works Departments. This may lead to the property being condemned or the eviction of the older adult.

When this happens, the community wants the problem solved and solved NOW. The local Case Management agency can help. A quick fix of simply cleaning the house, clearing out trash or mowing a lawn will not solve the problem. A relationship must be developed with the older adult to prevent any long-term consequences. A case manager may have to work with an older adult for a time to encourage the older adult to accept assistance, especially if medical attention is needed. Many times, progress is slow in order for the case manager to win the confidence of the older adult. The older adult has to be sure that the case manager will NOT do something that they do not want done.

Keep in mind that the older adult has every right to decide how and where they live as long as a court has not judged them incompetent.

For services in your area, contact: