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Sacramento County shelter to serve abused, neglected seniors

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They are society's forgotten victims.

When elderly people suffer abuse or neglect, it often happens in isolation. When they are rescued, they typically are shuttled to motels, homeless shelters or other places unequipped to respond to their needs.

In Sacramento, these fragile seniors soon will have a temporary home where they can find safety and healing.

After nearly a decade of fits and starts, the Sacramento Senior Safe House will open its doors this spring to older people who have been physically abused or neglected, often by their own loved ones. The home, under construction in the Arden Arcade area, will be one of the first facilities of its kind in the country.

"It brings me to tears to realize that this finally is happening," said founder Maxine Krugman, who has been an advocate for senior citizens in Sacramento County for more than a decade.

The county's Adult Protective Services division will make referrals to the safe house. The nonprofit Volunteers of America will own and run the home, which will have room for six to 12 people.

"The county has, for years, had a children's receiving home," said Judy McGarry, a former county probation officer who has championed the project. "I view this as an adult receiving home. As society gets older, and the economy gets worse, the need is greater than ever. It's just the right thing to do."

Adult Protective Services in Sacramento handles some 900 cases of alleged abuse and neglect each month, said program manager Elizabeth Foster-Ward. But the actual number of older people who are in jeopardy is probably far higher.

"When seniors are being abused, they typically are ashamed to talk about it, especially if the abuser is a relative or someone they rely on to care for them," she said. So they suffer in silence.

"When they do report, they feel stuck because they have nowhere to go, nowhere to turn," Foster-Ward said. If they are unable to stay with other family members, their only option may be

a hotel or a shelter "with a much younger population, and that can be very intimidating to them."

Many older neglect and abuse victims are in fragile health, mentally and physically, with medical problems ranging from pressure sores to malnutrition, she said. Older people also are at risk for being abused financially by predatory caretakers, she noted.

"I have seen horrifying things, cases that just broke my heart," said Krugman. "I just felt something needed to be done."

Advocates began working toward a safe house for seniors a decade ago, when Krugman chaired the county's Adult and Aging Commission. Mercy Housing donated land for the project, and Lennar Charitable Housing Foundation pitched in with a \$125,000 grant.

After years of delays, construction began earlier this month. Volunteers of America will take over the home when it opens in late spring or early summer, said Christie Holderegger, the organization's vice president and chief development officer.

Abused or neglected seniors ages 62 and older will be able to stay at the shelter, which is in a residential neighborhood and will be furnished like a typical family home, for up to 90 days. The home will be decorated with artwork created by senior citizens.

VOA will need to raise some \$300,000 a year to operate the safe house, and will rely mainly on volunteers to provide staffing, transportation for residents, meals and other services. "We're going to need plenty of community support," Holderegger said.

If the project is a success, Krugman said, it should serve as a national model and spawn similar homes around California and beyond.

"For me," she said, "this is a dream come true."

Call The Bee's Cynthia Hubert, (916) 321-1082.