

**Testimony before House Judiciary Committee
February 25, 2020**

**Support of House Bill 780
Criminal Law – Crime of Violence – Vulnerable Adult
Support**

On behalf of the National Association of Social Workers, Maryland Chapter (NASW-MD), we would like to express our support for House Bill 780 - Criminal Law – Crime of Violence – Vulnerable Adult.

As social workers who serve older adults, we know that elder abuse is a hidden epidemic. Every year, five million older Americans experience physical, sexual, emotional or financial abuse, or neglect. However, only one case in every 14 is reported to authorities. In our experience, most of those reported cases never result in prosecution. The cases that are prosecuted generally involve extremely serious abuse.

One example of such a serious case is a seventy-year old woman with dementia who was severely beaten and strangled by her husband. We learned that she had suffered years of physical, sexual and emotional abuse throughout their 40-year marriage. Although her husband was arrested and held without bail, he was eventually convicted of a lesser crime and only sentenced to time served.

Although first degree vulnerable adult abuse is already a felony, it is not included as a crime of violence under Criminal Law 14-101. Consequently, and unlike child abuse or sexual abuse of a minor, the mandatory sentences prescribed by Criminal Law 14-101 do not apply for repeat offenders of abuse of vulnerable adults. In fact, under a relatively new Maryland Law, perpetrators who commit crimes that are not considered crimes of violence are eligible for parole after they serve only a quarter of their sentence (versus one-half). Therefore, actual sentences served are potentially significantly less for such serious and violent crimes against vulnerable adults. Violent crimes against vulnerable adults and seniors need to be recognized as the devastating and life altering crimes that they are, with levels of accountability matching those of violent crimes committed against children.

We support this bill because caregivers and others who abuse vulnerable adults should be held accountable for their actions to the fullest extent of the law. Victims of First-Degree abuse have suffered tremendous physical and psychological trauma, sometimes leading to death or serious long-term physical and emotional harm. It is fitting that abuse or neglect of a vulnerable adult in the first degree should be viewed as a crime of violence. This bill would lead to more jail time for abusers and prevent further harm to victims.

We need to do everything possible to protect vulnerable adults from abuse. This bill would save lives by increasing the penalties for the most serious forms of abuse. **We urge you to vote YES on HB 780.**

Thank you,

NASW-MD Committee on Aging