

Law would target abuse of parents

Kate Santich, Staff Writer

In the final years of her life, Rosemary Pate was a prisoner in her own home, terrified her teenage son would break through the extra locks and fortified hinges on her bedroom door and hurt her. She tried kicking him out, getting a restraining order and even taking weekend "vacations" to avoid him.

But last July, police found the 51-year-old mother stabbed to death in her Ocoee home. They arrested 19-year-old Everett Pate on a charge of first-degree murder.

At an Orlando news conference this morning, Pate's relatives will join state Sen. Geraldine Thompson in announcing proposed legislation supporters say could become the nation's first parent-abuse law. Senate Bill 904 would define parent abuse as a separate category of domestic violence and include not only physical abuse but also threats, intimidation and financial abuse -- such as falsely reporting child abuse or racking up debts for which parents are held liable.

"I want other parents who are victims of abuse to know they're not alone," said Pate's sister, Alice Flowers. "I want them to know there's hope. And I want law enforcement to take this seriously."

Former Orange County Commissioner Homer Hartage, who is running again for the post, knew Pate through a group of recreational bicyclists, though he had no hint of what was happening in her home. He has since launched a nonprofit called the Parent Abuse Action Coalition to raise the profile of the issue.

"I've got three boys -- and my wife and I have raised four other kids -- so we've seen kids acting out," Hartage said. "Parent abuse is different. It's continuous and ongoing for the purpose of changing the parent-child control mechanisms within the family. Eventually the child becomes in charge of the house, and there's nothing the parent can do."

According to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 1,645 parents in Orange, Osceola, Seminole and Lake counties were victimized by their children -- physically or sexually -- in 2012, the latest statistics available.

But authorities think the problem is vastly under-reported.

"If you look at what we have done with adult-vs.-adult domestic violence -- our awareness and response have been increasing over the past couple of decades," said Thompson, D-Orlando. "This issue needs to have a similar course. We're just now beginning to address it."

Her proposed law, and its companion bill in the Florida House, would define parent abuse, set up criminal penalties, allow for alternative sentencing and require those who suspect it to report it to the state Department of Children and Families abuse hotline.

"When my sister tried to tell other people, they would judge her," said Flowers, who worked with her sister at Lockheed Martin Corp. "They would tell her, you know, 'No child of mine would get away with that' -- that type of thing. So she just wouldn't talk about it anymore."

The response of law enforcement was limited, too, Flowers said. When Everett Pate was younger than 18, his mother was legally responsible to care for him. After he turned 18, she did seek and win a restraining order, but when she found out her son was living in an abandoned truck, she didn't renew it.

"That was her only child, and the father was not in his life," Flowers said. "So she still had that soft spot for him."

Everett Pate is now in the Orange County Jail, awaiting trial.

Experts said parental abuse is most common by teen sons toward single mothers. But other scenarios occur, too.

"In parental abuse, the first thing I want to know is what is going on in that family," said Eugene Hyman, a retired judge for the Superior Court of California who helped with the wording of the legislation. "Were the parents abusing the teen? Did the teen witness the father abusing the mother? Are there mental-health or substance-abuse issues involved? The intervention needs to be tailored to that situation."

But some are worried a new law will only serve to criminalize problems between parents and children without establishing the treatment programs needed.

"It [parent abuse] is a huge problem, and we're not doing anything about it," said Carol Wick, CEO of Orange County's Harbor House, a domestic-violence shelter and prevention organization. "But if we're going to put into place a law that will identify more of these cases, let's first put into place the treatment and resources and counseling to deal with them."