

AU student to present paper on elder abuse to Congressional leaders

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Deanna Kowal, a senior sociology major at Alfred University, has had her research paper, "Assessing Risk for Rural Elder Abuse: Analyzing Cases Reported to a Local Office for the Aging," selected for presentation to Congressional leaders at the Council for Undergraduate Research's annual "Posters on the Hill" event to be held in Washington, DC, April 19. Kowal will travel to Washington with her advisor, Dr. Karen Porter, professor of sociology. The problem of elderly abuse is a significant one, Kowal said, with estimates placing the number of those affected at half a million a year, yet "research documenting the risk factors for physical, emotional and/or financial abuse among older Americans is limited. The problems may be worse in rural counties "due to such factors as limited access to social and medical services and lack of transportation." Using data collected by an Office for the Aging in a rural New York county, Kowal found there were 119 cases reported between January 2000 and June 2004. The victims ranged in age from 61 to 99. "Our finding suggest that these elderly clients suffered different forms of abuse," Kowal wrote. "The most frequent form reported was financial abuse (38 percent), followed by emotional abuse (19 percent), and physical abuse (11 percent)," she wrote. "Over one-third of the clients were found to experience more than one form." Abuse was not limited to those who were poor and/or living alone, she found, although "poverty and isolation are important predictors for abuse and neglect." "The greatest risk," Kowal concluded, "may be lack of information and awareness on the part of family members, service providers and the elderly themselves." Kowal said the project underscored for her the importance of conducting such research "especially in areas such as elder abuse that are largely under-researched and unrecognized." The experience, she said, gave her "knowledge and an understanding of the way research is done, the role it plays in the research community and society in general," and that background, she believes, "will be useful in many ways for the rest of my life." Additionally, "I have become more aware of a problem that is affecting many people and am more knowledgeable about elder abuse as a whole." Kowal is also a research assistant with Alfred University's Rural Justice Institute. A graduate of Parish Hill High School, Kowal is a daughter of Denise Campagnano of Hampton, CT, and Michael Kowal of Lewisburg, WV. After graduation, Kowal would like to complete an internship with a not-for-profit agency for a year, and then enter graduate school to continue her education and research.