

Working Together to Effectively Address Abuse in Later Life

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The Benefits of Working Together

Abuse in later life cases are often tremendously complicated, making collaboration between agencies and systems vital. When an older adult experiences abuse, it often impacts many aspects of their lives. As a result, they may turn to familiar supports such as their community center, medical practitioner, faith community, or bank. They may also reach out to known community services like a domestic violence or sexual assault agency, law enforcement, or legal aid. Each of these entities, and many more, play an important role in promoting victim safety and wellbeing.

Some benefits of working together include:

- Gaining a more complete picture of survivors' needs by hearing from professionals with various perspectives;
- Creating a more complete list of options for victims by raising awareness among professionals of remedies and services that are available or highlighting gaps in available services;
- Understanding and designing holistic interventions and supports that value older survivors' culture, life experiences, and challenges outside of the abuse;
- Leveraging additional resources; and
- Reducing the duplication of services.



Engaging Community Partners

An effective collaborative response includes engaging key partners who hold integral roles in the older survivor's life and in addressing abuse in later life. Some of these partners include, but are not limited to, professionals and volunteers who work in organizations that specialize in: adult protective services (APS), aging services, civil justice systems, civil law, criminal justice systems, criminal justice systems-based advocacy, culturally-specific services, disability rights, domestic violence, faith, finances, health care, long-term care, mental health, sexual assault, and social services.



Key Partners

Adult Protective Services (APS) programs investigate claims of abuse and provide protective and social services to abused, neglected, or exploited older and/or vulnerable or at-risk adults. APS programs are typically administered by state or county human services or aging agencies. In almost all states, a broad array of professionals, including doctors, nurses, law enforcement officers, social workers, and aging and disabilities services providers are mandated to report any suspicion of vulnerable adult abuse, neglect, or exploitation to APS. Check your local and state statutes regarding mandatory reporting, as this varies by jurisdiction.

The aging services network includes professionals and volunteers who lend ongoing support and services to older adults. These services may include, but are not limited to: transportation assistance, in-home care, nutrition services, and health, prevention, and wellness programs. Because these individuals often work with older adults on a daily or weekly basis, they may witness injuries or hear descriptions or allegations of abuse, neglect, exploitation, or fear.

The civil justice system may also play a crucial role in responding to cases of abuse in later life. Civil remedies such as protection orders, wills, guardianships, and powers of attorney may help victims and potential victims.

Civil attorneys and other civil legal system professionals possess knowledge and understanding of legal remedies and non-litigation resources available to support older survivors. Civil attorneys can assist older clients with crucial safeguards such as long-term care planning, advance directives, estate planning, protection orders, and other civil litigation intended to prevent or recover from abuse and/or exploitation.

**When a Crime
Has Been Committed**

Although many states do not have criminal elder abuse statutes, several forms of abuse against older adults are crimes. Assault, battery, homicide, stalking, harassment, sexual assault, violation of a restraining/protective order, theft, forgery, and disorderly conduct are examples of crimes that can be charged in some elder abuse cases. In addition, many states have laws allowing for enhanced penalties upon conviction for crimes involving victims who are older or cognitively or physically disabled.

Criminal justice system professionals investigate, prosecute, and adjudicate cases of abuse in later life where the conduct may be criminal to hold offenders accountable. With an awareness of available legal remedies and resources, professionals such as law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, probation and parole officers, and victim-witness advocates are critical partners in developing effective intervention strategies to end abuse of older adults, hold perpetrators accountable, and prevent further harm.

Culturally-specific programs are designed for, designed by, and led by the community they intend to serve. They offer trauma-informed services and supports that honor the history, experiences, and unique challenges faced by individuals from marginalized communities. Some older victims

may be reluctant to contact law enforcement, social services, or mainstream domestic violence or sexual assault (DV/SA) advocacy programs. These victims may, however, reach out for assistance from culturally-specific organizations and programs that advocate for the communities with which they identify.

Disability rights organizations work to secure and advance the rights of people with disabilities. They address civil rights violations, abuse and neglect, institutionalization, crime victimization, and discrimination. There are [federally-mandated disability rights organizations—Protection and Advocacy \(P&A\) Systems and Client Assistance Programs \(CAP\)](#)—in every state and U.S. territory as well as one serving tribal communities in the four corners region of the U.S..



Domestic violence and sexual assault advocacy programs are community-based and criminal justice systems-based programs that may offer individual and peer counseling, support groups, emergency and transitional housing, economic and legal advocacy, and medical and court accompaniment to older victims.

- **Community-based advocates** work in independent, usually non-profit organizations and provide comprehensive, confidential services to victims, regardless of whether they choose to report the crime and participate in the criminal justice process. Community-based advocates provide supportive services to victims and survivors which may include help lines, crisis intervention and support, safety planning, case management, legal advocacy (assisting with filing orders of protection, explaining legal proceedings, and accompanying survivors to court and legal meetings), medical advocacy (accompanying survivors to medical appointments), and making referrals to legal and housing services and other social services. Some victim advocacy programs operate emergency shelters or

transitional housing programs. Community-based advocates may work in domestic violence, sexual assault, or elder abuse programs, and in faith-based victim assistance programs, or other advocacy organizations.

- **Criminal justice systems-based advocates** (also called victim assistants, victim/witness advocates, etc.) support victims through the criminal justice system by providing information, education, and notification about what is occurring with their case, and ensure that their rights are upheld. Systems-based advocates may work in prosecutor's offices, law enforcement agencies, courts, prisons, community corrections (probation and parole), state attorneys general offices, and victim compensation programs. Systems-based advocates have limited confidentiality. Part of their role is to ensure that the victim understands what communications can and cannot remain confidential.

Faith leaders and faith-based organizations are important because faith holds a central place in the lives of many older adults. Faith can be a critical resource, a pillar of identity, and community, and an essential element in decision-

making and healing. Spiritual leaders are trusted supports and faith communities may often be the first place victims and family members turn for help.

Financial advisors and institutions have a vital role in elder abuse detection and prevention, especially when it comes to financial exploitation. Many older adults have checking or savings accounts and they often rely on face-to-face transactions with tellers as their primary form of banking. Financial institutions are also uniquely suited to detect and act when an older adult's assets have been targeted or victimized, and are mandated to report suspected elder financial exploitation under many states' laws. More information is available through the [Consumer Financial Protection Bureau](#).



Health care and mental health providers can be essential in identifying elder abuse. As older victims may often be isolated, an illness or medical event may be one of the few occasions where they may come into contact with someone who could intervene. Additionally, the trust that patients often have in their health care or mental health provider may inspire some older victims to confide about the abuse. Health care social workers can be important resources in safety planning and supporting older survivors.

Long-Term Care Ombudsmen are advocates for residents of nursing homes, board and care homes, and assisted living facilities. Under the federal Older Americans Act, every state is required to have an Ombudsman Program that addresses or investigates individuals' complaints and advocates for improvements in the long-term care system.

Social services are government-funded health and social services and programs that benefit the community. They can be a hub for referrals to a number of services for older adults—nutrition, case management, legal assistance, caregiver support, wellness focused classes, programs to reduce social isolation, and transportation—which are particularly important if they do

not wish to pursue formal channels in addressing their abuse. Some examples of social services include aging and disability resource centers, programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Home Energy Assistance, and departments such as Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which offers resources and support for housing, rental assistance, and rent relief.

Working Together: Developing a Coordinated Community Response (CCR)

Professionals from various agencies and organizations may work together formally or informally on abuse in later life case consultations or specific projects. In some communities, multidisciplinary teams, task forces, or groups have been formed that meet regularly to address abuse in later life. Examples of multidisciplinary teams include: a Multidisciplinary Case Review Team (M-team), a domestic violence Coordinated Community Response (CCR), or a Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) with a focus on abuse in later life, an Elder Abuse Fatality Review Team (EA-FRT), or a Financial Abuse Specialist Team (FAST).

Abuse in Later Life Coordinated Community Response (ALL-CCR) teams include professionals and community partners from various disciplines who share a broad vision of their community's responsibility for enhancing services and safety for older victims and creating systems change. ALL-CCRs identify current systems' responses and service gaps and coordinate members' efforts in order to create a seamless response to the needs of victims of abuse in later life.

Effective collaboration can result in older survivors experiencing accessible, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed services and resources. True collaboration means you enhance each other's work, you make each other stronger, and ultimately, the survivor is fully supported. For more information on ALL-CCRs, please contact NCALL at ncall@ncall.us.

Collaboration Strategies

- **Meet as a team to identify gaps in available services and service barriers for survivors**
- **Take the time to understand each other's organizational limitations, culture, traditions, beliefs, and protocols, to improve interagency referrals**
- **Explore interagency information-sharing practices and communication pathways, which promote trust and transparency between organizations**
- **Form sub-committees to work on specific challenges or issues**

To learn more about abuse in later life, please visit www.ncall.us.

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