

Testimony to the US Senate Special Committee on Aging

Elder Abuse Prevention and the Critical Role of Area Agencies on Aging

Chairman Scott and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today on one of the most pressing yet underreported crises facing our nation's older adults: elder abuse and neglect.

This issue is far more common than many realize. Approximately 1 in 10 Americans over the age of 60 experiences some form of abuse—physical, emotional, financial, or neglect. But what's even more concerning is that for every case reported, 24 more go undetected. That means nearly 5 million older adults may be experiencing abuse each year, and most suffer in silence, a number that will only grow as our population ages.¹

The consequences are devastating. Victims of elder abuse are three times more likely to die prematurely.² Financial exploitation alone costs seniors over \$3 billion a year, often leaving them without the means to purchase food, hygienic supplies, medication, or other basic necessities.³

Area Agencies on Aging: Your Front-Line Defense

This is where your Area Agencies on Aging, or AAAs, play a critical role. Today, 614 AAAs serve older adults in virtually every community nationwide. We were created under the Older Americans Act to support the 85% of Americans age 65 and older who want to age at home, not in institutions. We are on the front lines of elder abuse prevention, providing services like information and referrals, care coordination, caregiver support, and case management. But our greatest strength is the deep trust we've built with the people we serve.

We are embedded in every community—urban and rural. With 10,000 Americans turning 65 each day, and 70% eventually needing long-term care, we bring partners together; law enforcement, healthcare providers, legal aid, and Adult Protective Services—to respond quickly when abuse is suspected.⁴

Real-World Impact: Southwest Florida Stories

Names have been changed to protect client privacy

In Southwest Florida, our Area Agency on Aging demonstrates the critical role we play through the Older Americans Act-funded services which don't just provide statistics, they save lives. Let me share what this looks like:

Just last year, one of our respite specialists, funded through the Older Americans Act, visited 93-year-old Eleanor and found her covered in bruises. Her husband had been striking her with a cane and withholding her Parkinson's medication. Because she was already connected to our agency through OAA-funded case management, we were able to act immediately. We reported the abuse to the Department of Children and Families, she was safely removed from the home, and she received the care and support she needed. Eleanor spent her final months surrounded by compassion and dignity, and ultimately passed peacefully with her family by her side.

We Offer Financial Exploitation Prevention: Through our nutrition programs and senior centers, we have helped older adults like Virginia avoid exploitation by her own son; and supported Grace who was choosing between food and paying her utilities on her Social Security.

¹ National Council on Aging, Inc. (2025). *Get the facts on elder abuse*. Get the Facts on Elder Abuse. <https://www.ncoa.org/article/get-the-facts-on-elder-abuse/>

² Dong X, Simon M, Mendes de Leon C, Fulmer T, Beck T, Hebert L, Dyer C, Paveza G, Evans D. *Elder self-neglect and abuse and mortality risk in a community-dwelling population*. JAMA. 2009 Aug 5;302(5):517-26. doi: 10.1001/jama.2009.1109. PMID: 19654386; PMCID: PMC2965589.

³ *Interagency statement on elder financial exploitation*. NCUA. (2024, December 4). <https://ncua.gov/newsroom/press-release/2024/agencies-issue-statement-elder-financial-exploitation/interagency-statement>

⁴ U.S. Administration for Community Living, 2021 Profile of Older Americans, https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/Profile%20of%20OA/2021%20Profile%20of%20OA/2021ProfileOlderAmericans_508.pdf.

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When 89-year-old Emma lost her life savings to a scammer, our legal service provider funded through the Older Americans Act helped prosecute the perpetrator. At the same time our OAA funded meal programs ensured she stayed connected and nourished, preventing further vulnerability.

We Have an Early Intervention Network: Our trained care specialist and partner agencies respond to high-priority cases within 24 hours. Our Suncoast Region received 11,390 cases in FY 24-25, that's about 13 cases per full-time adult protective investigator per month, cases often involving clients with cognitive impairments who can't consent to help or recognize danger.

The Reality Is: Many clients initially decline our services. We encounter isolated older adults or those with well-meaning caregivers who aren't meeting basic needs. Without OAA-funded programs creating trusted relationships through meals, transportation, and social activities, these cases of abuse would go undetected until it's too late.

Best Practices That Work

Successful elder abuse prevention requires:

- **Multi-Disciplinary Teams:** Bringing together social workers, law enforcement, first responders, healthcare providers, and legal professionals to address the complex nature of elder abuse. In Southwest Florida, we've partnered directly with Adult Protective Services at the Department of Children and Families to collaboratively review complex cases every month and determine how we can best serve older adults together.
- **Specialized Training:** Ensuring all senior care specialist understand the unique dynamics of elder abuse, including the shame and fear that often prevent reporting
- **Victim-Centered Approach:** Respecting older adults' autonomy while ensuring safety, recognizing that victims may be reluctant to accept help. Let's meet them where they are.
- **Community Awareness:** Educating the public, businesses, family members and service providers, to recognize warning signs
- **Ongoing Federal and State-Funded Long-Term Care Services:** To support increasingly frail elders and overburdened caregivers.

The Support AAAs Need

While Area Agencies on Aging are well-positioned to combat elder abuse, we need adequate resources to expand our life-saving work. To strengthen these efforts nationwide, I respectfully recommend:

- **Pass the OAA Reauthorization This Fall:** Congress must finish reauthorizing the Older Americans Act this fall to provide the stability and framework our aging network needs to serve America's growing older adult population.
- **Increase federal funding under the Older Americans Act** for elder abuse prevention and response.
- **Support ongoing training** for aging network professionals so they can detect abuse and intervene early.
- **Promote cross-sector collaboration**, especially between AAAs, Adult Protective Services, law enforcement, and health systems.
- **Invest in public awareness** so more Americans recognize the signs of abuse and take action

The Urgency of Action

Elder abuse is not just a family problem—it's a public health crisis requiring a coordinated response. Let's consider the math: home-based OAA services cost a fraction of institutional care, yet without adequate funding, we're pushing vulnerable seniors toward Medicaid-funded nursing homes that cost 6-8 times more.

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A recent study of over 64,000 clients proves this point: home health care saved an average of \$6,433 per patient annually while reducing hospital readmissions by 18% and deaths by 20%.⁵ For vulnerable seniors facing abuse or neglect, the OAA home-based interventions aren't just cost-effective, they're life-saving.

Seniors today live longer, often with no nearby family support. They want independence, but they're prime targets for abuse. When a contractor quotes roof repairs or a scammer calls about fake investments, isolated seniors have few trusted advisors to turn to—except us.

Projections suggest elder abuse cases will rise dramatically as our population ages, potentially reaching 320 million victims by 2050.⁶ Every day we delay action; more older adults suffer in silence. The financial cost to our healthcare system, the loss of productive community members, and the moral imperative to protect our most vulnerable citizens demand immediate attention.

Area Agencies on Aging are ready to lead this fight, but we cannot do it alone. We need your partnership, your resources, and your commitment to ensuring that every older American can age with dignity and safety. Most importantly, we need Congress to complete the OAA reauthorization this fall; our aging network cannot afford further delays as America's demographic transformation accelerates.

In closing, like Virginia, who trusted us enough to share concerns about her son's financial pressure and abuse, or the out-of-state daughter who called frantically about her malnourished 90-year-old abused mother—OAA programs create the trusted relationships that prevent tragedy and preserve dignity.

The older adults in our communities built the America we know today. They deserve to live their remaining years free from abuse, exploitation, and neglect. Area Agencies on Aging are uniquely positioned to make this vision a reality, but only with your continued support.

I want to conclude by thanking Chairman Scott and Ranking Member Gillibrand for your leadership as cosponsors of the reintroduced Older Americans Act reauthorization bill. Your bipartisan commitment to this vital legislation demonstrates the urgency of supporting our nation's older adults.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions you may have about our work and how we can strengthen the safety net for America's older adults.

⁵ Xiao, R., Miller, J. A., Zafirau, W. J., Gorodeski, E. Z., & Young, J. B. (2018). Impact of Home Health Care on Health Care Resource Utilization Following Hospital Discharge: A Cohort Study. *The American journal of medicine*, 131(4), 395–407.e35. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2017.11.010>

⁶ World Health Organization. (2024, June 15). *Abuse of older people*. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/abuse-of-older-people>