

# Health Professionals' Roles and Relationships with Other Agencies



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## KEYWORDS

- Interdisciplinary teams • Elder abuse prevention • Elder abuse intervention
- Health professionals

## KEY POINTS

- This article describes the social service and law enforcement agencies that are integral to elder abuse work (eg, Adult Protective Services).
- Terms frequently used by social workers, law enforcement, and other nonmedical professionals who work in the elder abuse response system are defined.
- Roles for health professionals within interdisciplinary teams are described.

## INTRODUCTION

Health care professionals' participation in addressing elder abuse is critical. Many opportunities exist to improve the lives of individuals and communities affected by elder abuse. Many, if not most, cases of elder abuse evaluation involve an assessment of the victim's physical, cognitive, functional, and psychological well-being. Without timely and sufficient medical expertise, many victims will not receive the attention they deserve.

It is estimated that 10% of older Americans experience some type of abuse,<sup>1</sup> and it is likely that most health care professionals in clinical care encounter elder abuse victims. Health care professionals are generally aware of their legal mandate to report suspected elder abuse to the proper authorities. Nevertheless, fewer than 1% of all

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abuse reports to Adult Protective Services come from physicians.<sup>2</sup> Reporting suspected abuse, while vitally important, is only one of several actions that physicians and other health professionals can take in addressing elder abuse. As the elder justice field has evolved, the opportunity for health professionals to assist elder abuse victims has expanded.

However, health professionals' full participation in elder justice efforts requires familiarity with the current system that serves elder abuse victims. Such awareness includes an understanding of the various agencies that work together to ensure safety and to pursue justice for the victims of abuse. In addition, knowledge regarding the differences in professional culture and even vocabulary is helpful in interdisciplinary endeavors.

This article describes the social service and law enforcement agencies that are integral to elder abuse work. In addition, terms frequently used by social workers, law enforcement, and other nonmedical professionals who work in the elder abuse response system are defined. The goal of this article is to inform the reader and to inspire health professionals to take increased action on behalf of elder abuse victims.

## **RESPONDING TO ELDER ABUSE: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH IS CRUCIAL**

Originally used successfully in child abuse cases, interdisciplinary teams (IDTs) are groups of professionals from diverse disciplines who come together, usually monthly, to provide comprehensive assessment and consultation in elder abuse cases.<sup>3</sup> Experience shows that a coordinated interdisciplinary approach that includes social workers, law enforcement, medical professionals, mental health professionals, attorneys, and others yields the best outcomes for the victims of abuse by providing additional resources (eg, psychological evaluations, physician review of medications).<sup>4</sup> The teams review cases of suspected or known elder abuse, neglect, and self-neglect referred to them by team members. The IDT's goals are to provide advice, resources, and new perspectives to the agencies working on the cases.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to better outcomes for the victims, professionals working on elder abuse cases within an IDT also relate better outcomes. For example, in one study, 97% of those who referred cases to an elder abuse IDT indicated that the team was helpful in confirming abuse, documenting impaired capacity, reviewing medications and medical conditions, facilitating the conservatorship process, persuading the client or family to take action, and supporting the need for law enforcement involvement.<sup>6</sup>

Professional disciplines that are typically represented on elder abuse teams include Adult Protective Services (APS), the Long-Term Care Ombudsman, the civil and criminal justice systems, health and social services, and mental health. Optimally, other agencies or individuals who may also be able to participate as members or as consultants include:

- Animal care and control
- Area agency on aging
- Community care licensing
- Seniors legal aid
- Disability services

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