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Path Forward: Recommendations From the National Elder Abuse Victim Services Needs Assessment

The U.S. Department of Justice defines elder abuse as "...physical, sexual, or psychological abuse, as well as neglect, abandonment, and financial exploitation of an older person by another person or entity, that occurs in any setting (e.g., home, community, or facility), either in a relationship where there is an expectation of trust and/or when an older person is targeted based on age or disability" (Connolly et al., 2014, p. 3). Elder abuse can have severe consequences for older adults' physical and mental health, finances, and overall well-being (National Institute on Aging, 2020). Elder justice professionals from diverse fields (e.g., legal, medical, financial, and social services) provide a wide array of services to prevent elder abuse and support individuals who have experienced elder abuse. Because older adults are among the fastest-growing populations in the United States, understanding the needs of individuals who have experienced elder abuse and the providers who support them is critical for improving service provision. The U.S. Department of Justice's Elder Justice Initiative supported ICF (an independent research and consulting firm) in conducting the first national needs assessment to answer the following research questions:

1. What services do individuals who have experienced elder abuse access?
2. What are the gaps in services?
3. What are the challenges/barriers to accessing and providing services to individuals who have experienced elder abuse?
4. What capacity-building efforts and resources do elder justice professionals need to better support individuals who have experienced elder abuse?

An advisory board of individuals with expertise in preventing and responding to elder abuse and individuals who have experienced elder abuse provided guidance on study design and instrument development, assistance with recruiting study participants, and feedback on study findings.



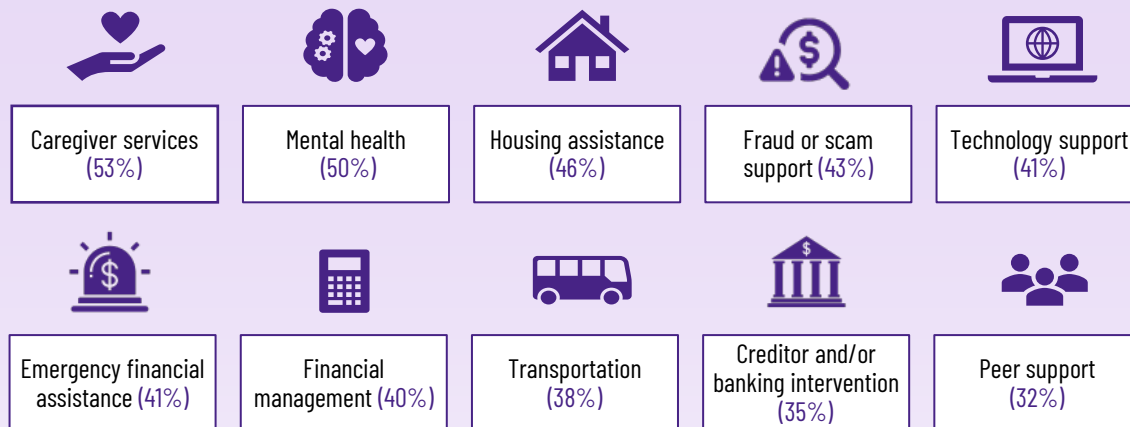
STUDY OVERVIEW

- ✓ Literature review on gaps and barriers to service provision for individuals who have experienced elder abuse
- ✓ National Survey of Elder Justice Professionals ($n = 1,658$)
- ✓ National Survey of Individuals Who Have Experienced Elder Abuse ($n = 125$)
- ✓ Focus groups with elder justice professionals ($n = 156$)
- ✓ Focus groups with individuals who have experienced elder abuse ($n = 57$)

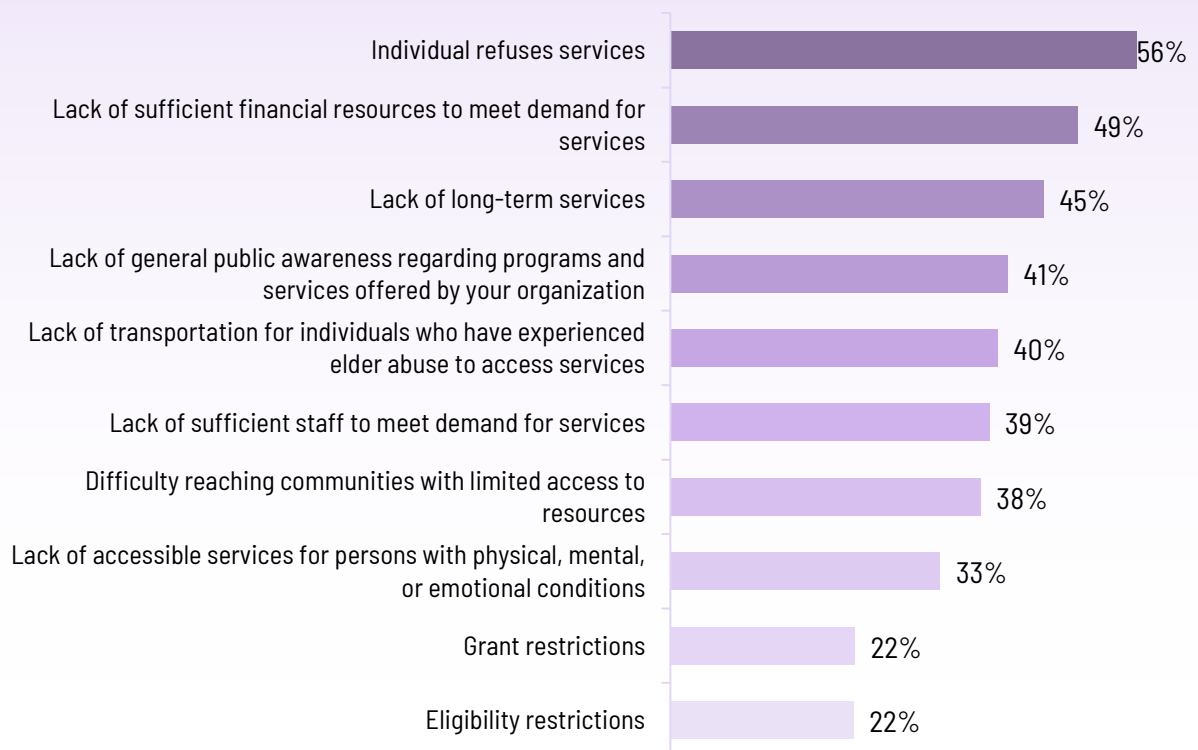
GAPS IN SERVICES AND BARRIERS TO SERVICE PROVISION

Survey and focus group participants identified gaps in services, barriers to providing or accessing services, and recommendations for improving services for individuals who have experienced elder abuse. Below, we present the top ten gaps in services, the top ten barriers to service provision, and the percentage of elder justice professionals that reported each.

TOP TEN GAPS IN SERVICES



TOP TEN BARRIERS TO PROVIDING SERVICES



PATH FORWARD: POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Below is a summary of potential solutions to more comprehensively meet the needs of individuals who have experienced elder abuse. For full study findings, please see the *National Elder Abuse Victim Services Needs Assessment: Final Report*.

AWARENESS OF ELDER ABUSE AND SERVICES



INCREASE AWARENESS OF ELDER ABUSE

Increasing public awareness of elder abuse is critical for providing effective prevention and response. Individuals who experience elder abuse may not be aware that abuse is happening to them or may feel alone in their experience. Family, friends, and community members may not understand the risks and signs of elder abuse or the ways that they can help someone who may be experiencing elder abuse. Many elder justice professionals do not have the resources to conduct outreach or awareness raising.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Conduct research to determine the best ways to raise awareness of elder abuse. Examine the effectiveness of awareness-raising content (*what information to include and how to phrase it*) and delivery methods (*how to disseminate information*). Explore the effectiveness of using specific content and delivery methods with different populations (e.g., older adults, family and friends of older adults, service providers, caregivers).
- Once effective strategies are identified, develop multimedia public awareness campaigns at the national and local levels to share information about preventing, reporting, and responding to elder abuse, as well as seeking help after experiencing elder abuse.
- Provide funding for conducting outreach, raising awareness, and hiring outreach specialists.
- Provide training to increase recognition of the indicators of elder abuse. Examples provided by participants in this study include training:
 - Medical providers to distinguish between signs of elder abuse and medical issues associated with aging.
 - Retail staff to identify individuals experiencing common scams (e.g., purchasing gift cards).
 - Bank staff to recognize the signs of financial fraud and exploitation.
 - Nursing home and assisted living staff to report abuse and neglect by staff members and family members.

INCREASE AWARENESS OF SERVICES FOR ELDER ABUSE

Elder justice professionals and older adults are often unaware of services in their area for individuals who have experienced elder abuse. This makes it difficult for elder justice professionals to provide information/referrals and for individuals who have experienced elder abuse to access services.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Conduct research on strategies that communities can use to efficiently identify, organize, categorize, and disseminate information about services in their area that can help individuals who have experienced elder abuse (i.e., service mapping).
- Based on research findings, develop a toolkit to help communities map available services for elder abuse.
- Produce user-friendly, up-to-date guides that:
 - Outline the services and resources available at the local and state levels (e.g., organization names, current contact information, services provided, eligibility requirements).
 - Include aging services, victim services, and related needs (e.g., licensed nursing homes and assisted living facilities, caregivers, transportation companies, guardians and guardianship services, powers of attorney).
 - Are provided in multiple languages and formats (e.g., online, printed, lists/directories, interactive dashboards).
- Produce a series of step-by-step resources explaining *how* to access services for elder abuse. Each journey is different, but study participants recommended providing online guidance to help them get started in accessing services, understand the full range of services available, and become familiar with the overarching process.

REPORTING



IMPROVE REPORTING MECHANISMS

Individuals who have experienced elder abuse experience barriers to reporting (e.g., being unaware of reporting mechanisms and not being believed when attempting to report). Having to identify appropriate reporting pathways and complete burdensome reporting paperwork (often online) can be challenging for older adults, especially while in crisis. Reporting processes should be simple and accessible to mitigate underreporting.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Conduct research to better understand older adults' reporting patterns across organization types, preferences for reporting, and experiences with reporting elder abuse, including barriers to reporting. For

fraud, this should include an examination of barriers using online reporting platforms across multiple agencies.

- Use research findings to develop resources and public awareness campaigns to provide guidance on how to report elder abuse, what happens after elder abuse is reported, and reduce fear and stigma associated with elder abuse.
- Provide more options for reporting elder abuse to organizations not affiliated with law enforcement or adult protective service agencies. Increase public awareness of these options.
- Streamline and reduce the burden for reporting fraud.
 - Consider removing the requirement to report fraud to multiple federal agencies. Have one agency collect all reports of fraud and disseminate the report to other relevant agencies.
 - Explore the benefits and challenges of submitting one short report of fraud to rapidly initiate the response process. Respond to the short report with resources to explain how to submit a full report, links to paperwork that will be required as part of the reporting process, the next steps in the full response process, and guidance on how to request assistance with the reporting process and victim services.
 - Increase public awareness of the [National Elder Fraud Hotline](#), a free service offered by the U.S. Department of Justice, where trained case managers take reports of fraud against older adults and provide individualized support to callers based on their needs. This support may include completing a Federal Bureau of Investigation Internet Crime Complaint Center form on behalf of the caller in cases of cyber-enabled fraud.
- Train professionals serving older adults on mandated reporting requirements.

SERVICE PROVISION



INCREASE ACCESS TO SERVICES

Many older adults experience challenges accessing in-person services. This may be due to a lack of transportation, physical impairment, or cognitive impairment.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Offer flexible options for attending appointments, including in person at the provider's office, in the client's home, or virtual services.
- Explore options for mobile advocacy units to provide services in different locations (including a recreational vehicle or van).
- Provide transportation to appointments as part of routine service provision.

- Offer co-located services to facilitate wraparound care and easier access to multiple providers in one building or area.
- Ensure accommodation for individuals with physical impairment (e.g., ramps, handrails, braille, large font, closed captioning), especially when providing housing services.

HELP OLDER ADULTS NAVIGATE SERVICES

Understanding and navigating the pathways for accessing services is often challenging, complicated, and overwhelming for individuals who have experienced elder abuse.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Immediately assign a victim advocate and case manager with expertise in serving older adults to help individuals who have experienced elder abuse navigate the multiple systems with which they engage.
- Provide long-term victim advocacy and case management to ensure that older adults remain connected to services and to avoid re-victimization.
- Ensure that navigators provide step-by-step help, including describing and assisting with the process of accessing different types of services; understanding eligibility requirements; gathering documentation required for benefits and services; filling out and submitting paperwork; understanding victim rights, court proceedings, and restitution; and following up on referrals and safety planning.
- Train professionals in the housing needs of older adults. Identify appropriate housing options by assessing the necessary level of care (e.g., remaining in the home vs. nursing home vs. assisted living). Increase options for housing older adults in an environment that best meets their needs, including providing more emergency and transitional housing options and allowing pets to accompany older adults.

INCREASE AFFORDABILITY OF SERVICES

Many older adults exceed the income requirements for free or low-cost services, but the services are too expensive to afford out-of-pocket. Additionally, many needed services are not covered by insurance or other benefits. These eligibility restrictions create an environment where individuals who cannot afford services cannot access them.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Explore options for reducing the cost of housing, caregivers, and legal services for older adults.
 - Adjust the income requirements for free or low-cost services and benefits to match the current market rates for these services.
 - Create new payment options, like vouchers, waivers, subsidies, and flexible funding.
- Explore options for expanding the services payable through insurance and other benefits.

- Streamline and reduce the amount of paperwork needed to apply for and justify financial assistance for services and obtain benefits.
- Provide financial assistance or waivers to pay for documentation required for services (e.g., bank statements).
- Assign benefits specialists to help older adults apply for all the programs they qualify for and complete the required paperwork.
- Reduce the amount of time it takes for individuals who have experienced elder abuse to receive the benefits they need to support themselves.

IMPROVE TRAUMA-INFORMED AND PERSON-CENTERED SERVICES

Older adults who experienced fraud shared that they experienced victim blaming, victim shaming, a lack of compassion, and disbelief when they sought help from law enforcement and other service providers. Elder justice professionals recommended prioritizing their clients' desired outcomes rather than their own.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Provide training on trauma-informed and person-centered care, with a focus on:
 - Understanding barriers older adults face in seeking assistance for elder abuse
 - Avoiding victim blaming and shaming
 - Effectively working with older adults who experience shame and embarrassment associated with elder abuse
- Meaningfully engage older adults in making decisions, developing a service plan, and defining successful outcomes.
- Consider assigning one victim advocate to serve as a primary point of contact, share case details, and provide continuous support for the entire service provision process.
- Avoid asking older adults to repeatedly explain their experiences with elder abuse to providers. Recounting these experiences may cause confusion, fatigue, and refusal to seek further help.

MAKE SEEKING ASSISTANCE FOR ELDER ABUSE MORE COMFORTABLE

Many older adults are reluctant to seek or accept services for elder abuse. Some older adults experience abuse from a loved one and do not want to get their family member in trouble, are afraid of retaliation or losing housing/financial support provided by an abuser, or feel guilt associated with the abuse. Some older adults experience intense shame or embarrassment associated with elder abuse or seeking services, do not want to change their lifestyle (e.g., live in a nursing home), do not recognize their experiences as abuse, or believe that it shows weakness to ask for help.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Provide training to elder justice professionals on:
 - Recognizing the signs of familial or caregiver abuse
 - Safe investigation and screening techniques (e.g., not asking questions when a potential perpetrator is in the room)
 - Safety planning for individuals who will not or cannot leave the home of an abuser
- Address fear associated with the uncertainty of the service provision process by developing a plan for housing, financial management, and meeting daily needs (e.g., assistance with shopping, cooking, cleaning, and bathing), as well as understanding the potential outcomes from accessing victim services.
- Conduct research on safely using restorative justice models for elder abuse (i.e., when a person who committed elder abuse and the person who experienced elder abuse work together to repair harm, meet the victim's needs, and prioritize accountability of the offender). Research implementation and outcomes of restorative justice approaches for elder abuse.
- Reframe discussions of help-seeking to encourage acceptance of services. For example, focus on using non-stigmatizing language and small actions toward accepting help.
- Explore assigning advocates or case managers not affiliated with victim service or criminal justice organizations.

IMPROVE SUPPORT FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT

There is a lack of experts who conduct capacity assessments and screenings and who work with individuals experiencing cognitive impairment. This expertise is critical for providing effective support to individuals who have experienced elder abuse.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Provide training to:
 - Dispel myths and misperceptions about cognitive impairment (e.g., that older adults are "senile" and cannot engage in services) to ensure reports are taken seriously.
 - Provide guidance on how to interact with, question, and support individuals with cognitive impairment.
 - Conduct screenings for cognitive impairment.
 - Recognize and understand what to do when a client's cognitive capacity changes during a case.
- Assign victim advocates and case managers with expertise in working with individuals with cognitive impairment.

EMERGING PRIORITY: FRAUD



EXPAND AND IMPROVE SERVICES FOR OLDER ADULTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED FRAUD

Fraud is an ever-evolving and growing crime that has severe impacts on older adults' finances and overall well-being. There is a wide range of gaps in services for older adults who have experienced fraud and financial exploitation.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Expand the workforce responding to fraud. This may include hiring or partnering with experts like fraud intervention specialists, forensic accountants, and technology specialists, as well as providing training to law enforcement and elder justice professionals (e.g., case managers, victim advocates, adult protective services staff).
- Consider establishing a fraud-specific victim services agency.
- Tailor services to fraud (e.g., safety planning, victim advocacy).
- Enhance elder justice professionals' knowledge of services for fraud and financial exploitation to help provide appropriate information and referrals when clients seek assistance.
- Develop a coordinated response at the federal and local levels to encourage financial institutions, credit card companies, adult protective services, and law enforcement to work together to investigate and respond to reports of fraud and financial exploitation.
- Increase investigations and prosecutions for fraud.
- Conduct outreach focused on fraud prevention tailored to older adults.
- Provide training to:
 - Older adults and staff at financial institutions to prevent older adults from experiencing financial exploitation or fraud
 - Law enforcement about financial fraud and exploitation and associated laws, evidence preservation, and coordination with federal law enforcement and service providers
 - Elder justice professionals on coordinating with financial institutions, providing documentation to law enforcement, recognizing common scams, and understanding the impact of financial fraud and exploitation on mental health
- Develop training and resources to help older adults learn about common scams and increase online safety.
- Conduct research on patterns in fraud victimization and use findings to inform prevention and response.

MULTIDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION



IMPROVE MULTIDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION OF SERVICES

Elder justice professionals in this study reported high levels of collaboration with various organization types; however, less than half of respondents reported being part of a multidisciplinary team to support individuals who have experienced elder abuse.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Provide training and written resources to:
 - Build and sustain multidisciplinary teams (e.g., how to start them, who should lead them, how to formalize partnerships).
 - Conduct coordinated case planning.
 - Coordinate responses to fraud committed against older adults.
 - Address challenges with sharing information while protecting confidentiality.
 - Promote cross-training to enhance understanding of other organizations' services, roles, and responsibilities.
 - Decrease service duplication and increase wraparound care.
- Provide resources for communities to develop referral networks to increase understanding of available services, improve wraparound service provision, facilitate warm handoffs, and reduce the burden on providers and individuals who have experienced elder abuse. Develop protocols for participating in the referral network and sharing information and draft standard operating procedures.
- Encourage elder justice networks or teams to submit their programs to the [Elder Justice Network Locator](#), a tool designed for elder justice professionals across the United States to search for and locate other organizations and foster collaboration.

WORKFORCE



CONDUCT RESEARCH ON THE WORKFORCE SUPPORTING INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED ELDER ABUSE

Participants consistently described the lack of expertise focusing on older adults and specific types of elder abuse, the inability to meet the demand for services, and the challenges associated with the wellness and safety of staff who provide services to individuals who have experienced elder abuse.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Conduct research to:

- Estimate the prevalence of elder abuse in the United States. Having a better understanding of the scope of the problem can shed light on how to expand service delivery for preventing and responding to elder abuse.
- Better understand the characteristics and experiences of the elder justice workforce (e.g., current vs. optimal caseloads, the reasons for and rates of staff turnover). Research can help identify challenges and solutions to improving the response to elder abuse.
- Recognize and prevent vicarious trauma, burnout, and safety risks among elder justice professionals. Use research findings to explore opportunities for standardizing and improving wellness programs and best practices.
- Conduct needs assessments to identify persistent unmet needs within the elder justice workforce and program evaluations to identify successful interventions and opportunities for improving programming for organizations serving older adults. Use these findings to highlight successes in elder abuse cases and develop best practices for the field.
- Explore opportunities to improve data systems and increase response rates to the [National Adult Maltreatment Report System](#), a voluntary data reporting system for adult protective services programs to report organizational data on their programs and case information including reports, investigations, and maltreatment type.

INCREASE EXPERTISE ON SERVICES FOR OLDER ADULTS BROADLY AND ELDER ABUSE, SPECIFICALLY

There are not enough professionals who specialize in providing support to older adults or for elder abuse. Increasing expertise may help improve the quality of service provision.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Explore methods of increasing the number of professionals who specialize in serving older adults. This includes medical and mental health care, legal professionals, individuals who conduct capacity assessments, caregivers, victim advocates, case managers, guardians, peer support, law enforcement officers, and adult protective services staff.
- Increase staff pay in the victim service and aging service fields, training opportunities, professional development, pathways to career growth, and staff wellness and safety.
- Increase partnerships with experts to supplement support to individuals who have experienced elder abuse (e.g., financial managers, fraud and scam intervention, forensic accountants, technology specialists).
- Provide training and technical assistance to increase specialized expertise in responding to elder abuse and supporting older adults. Examples include elder abuse restraining orders, effective prosecution of elder abuse cases, and assistance with estate planning.

- Promote opportunities for individuals who have experienced elder abuse to use their knowledge and experience to support their peers as a service provider or volunteer.

INCREASE FUNDING AND DECREASE FUNDING RESTRICTIONS TO EXPAND SERVICE DELIVERY

Elder justice professionals frequently describe lack of funding, lack of staff, and funding restrictions as barriers to service provision. Many elder justice professionals do not have the resources to meet the demand for services, respond immediately to referrals, provide services beyond normal business hours, or coordinate with service providers to ensure wraparound care. They describe the process of obtaining funding as complicated, time consuming, and unsustainable. Short funding cycles require continuous grant writing, the loss of funding causes service disruption, and grant restrictions limit the types of services and populations providers can serve.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Explore improvements to administering the Victims of Crime Act's Crime Victim Fund.
- Invest in prevention and developing collaborative networks to reduce the burden on individual organizations.
- Explore innovative opportunities for increasing funding to victim services (e.g., applying taxes on gun and ammunition sales to pay for victim services, leveraging restitution).
- Provide funding over a longer period to increase the sustainability of programs and services.
- Reduce restrictions associated with funding to allow providers to offer a wider range of services to a larger number of people.
- Provide training and support to help organizations apply for funding.

LEGISLATION AND POLICIES



CONDUCT RESEARCH ON ELDER ABUSE LEGISLATION AND POLICIES

Legislation and policies differ across states, jurisdictions, and sectors. These differences can confuse law enforcement, legal providers, and elder justice professionals during investigation and prosecution and impact services that can be provided to individuals who experience elder abuse.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Conduct a comprehensive, systematic review and analysis of definitions, policies, and laws in the United States associated with each type of elder abuse. Explore how these definitions, laws, and policies are applied to cases of elder abuse and recommendations for improvement.

- Use research findings to develop training for elder justice professionals and law enforcement to understand the laws in their jurisdiction.

ADDRESS GAPS IN EXISTING LAWS AND POLICIES ASSOCIATED WITH ELDER ABUSE

Study participants discussed several gaps in existing laws and policies and provided recommendations for addressing these gaps.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- **Fraud and Financial Exploitation:** Prevent organizations from sharing personal data to avoid exposure to fraud; develop mechanisms for recovering stolen funds; prevent financial institutions from charging fees (e.g., overdraft fees, interest, and fines) to individuals who have experienced fraud; explore opportunities to more accurately classify funds and assets stolen through fraud to prevent taxation (because they are often considered gifts or capital gains); develop and test protocols for banks and credit card companies to identify and respond to fraud quickly; and prevent fraud from impacting credit ratings.
- **Caregiver Services:** Require licensure for companies employing caregivers for older adults. Require background checks for paid caregivers supporting older adults in personal homes, nursing homes, and assisted living facilities. Enact laws and policies that require investigation and response to allegations of elder abuse in nursing homes and assisted living facilities.
- **Housing:** Create mechanisms for ensuring that affordable and accessible housing for older adults is developed during housing planning; explore incentives and subsidies for building housing for older adults and home modifications to make existing homes more accessible; and explore opportunities for lowering the cost of housing for older adults (e.g., caps on costs for home rentals, nursing homes, and assisted living).
- **Guardianship and Conservatorship:** Require stronger vetting of guardians. Develop policies to require training for potential guardians on what guardianship is and how to become a guardian.

REFERENCES

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