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Final Research Report

Pathways to Safety: An Examination of Federal and State-Level Barriers and Facilitators to Elder Abuse Reporting and Response

Federal Award Number: 2020-75-CX-0003

Project Title: Pathways to Safety: An Examination of Federal and State-Level Barriers and Facilitators to Elder Abuse Reporting and Response

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Summary of the Project

As few as one in twenty-four cases of elder abuse are reported to Adult Protective Services (APS). This means that many older adults who experience mistreatment are not receiving justice nor the social or legal services they need, and perpetrators are not held accountable. Mandated reporters are critical to identifying and resolving cases, but there is little information about what policy and decision-makers should be doing to address a significant barrier to reporting: the lack of feedback that reporters receive about their reports and the essential role they can play in addressing elder abuse. With limited evidence on best practices, state leaders and local agencies have little guidance on how to improve their approaches to providing this important feedback. This study aims to fill gaps in current knowledge and facilitate improved communication between APS and reporters of elder abuse. By doing so, this study addresses the National Institute of Justice's (NIJ) program-specific priority two, which aims to better understand "Elder abuse reporting pathways, facilitators, barriers, and outcomes" and aligns with four of the high priority research questions identified by the APS Research Agenda, an initiative by the Administration for Community Living (ACL).

It is imperative that mandated reporters correctly identify elder abuse or circumstances with increased likelihood of abuse, but existing research points to several barriers to reporting.¹⁻⁵ These include misperceptions about how APS functions, cumbersome reporting procedures, and the inability to recognize potential warning signs of abuse as the current approaches rely upon the skilled eye and judgment of the reporter. Some reporters are also not aware of the appropriate process for reporting or for referrals to services and they may feel that mandatory reporting laws conflict with privacy and confidentiality.

One significant barrier that has been reported in the literature and through Education Development Center's (EDC) work is that mandated reporters do not receive feedback on the report made, and therefore are unaware of, the outcomes of their reporting actions.^{1,2,4} Specifically, reporters lack any feedback about their success rate in identifying abuse, and do not receive information about the types of interventions APS caseworkers recommend for short- and long-term support and increased safety for victims. Absent any indication they are fulfilling their responsibility correctly, reporters are still expected to continue in this role, as the entire mandated reporting structure would collapse if reporters gradually stopped. Yet, this lack of reciprocal communication is a risk to the APS reporting system. Indeed, previous studies have found that providers' attitudes toward their role in elder mistreatment detection and their subsequent reporting behaviors are impacted by the type of feedback they receive: receiving positive feedback about how their reporting changed a patient's situation reinforces the importance of their role, and increases future reporting behaviors, while negative or lack of feedback can discourage providers and prevent them from reporting again.^{1,2} In addition, uncertainty by APS about the legality and ethics of sharing information back to reporters prevents effective and clear communication.⁶ Fortunately, EDC's experience working with reporters and APS suggests there is a mutual desire to improve relationships and communication mechanisms.⁷

To provide robust contemporaneous support to victims, more needs to be done to deploy and encourage the professionals and citizens listed in state reporting statutes as mandated reporters. While many mandated reporter laws include penalties for licensed professionals who fail to report, it is quite different to punish lack of reporting than foster increased reporting. It is

anticipated that the quality of assistance to people who are abused will improve if the professionals who are alerted to mistreatment are sincerely invested in improving the person's life and health. Legions of mandated reporters committed to assisting by reporting are far different from reporters who report because of fear of punishment. Feedback to mandated reporters, therefore, may foster significant advancement in supporting victims of abuse.

To involve mandated reporters in a more robust way, and as ongoing support, the first step is to provide reporters with feedback about their current efforts. To address the significant barriers in the elder abuse reporting pathway described above, additional research is critically needed to better understand what states can do to establish effective feedback loops between APS and mandated reporters. As is the case for other aspects of the adult protection system, individual states establish their own policies related to reporter feedback, and there is a dearth of research on how these align and differ across states and how they influence reporting. Filling this critical gap will have important implications for improving reporting and response pathways by improving reporters' understanding of their own role and the role of APS, and encouraging collaboration between the two to support efforts to mitigate and prevent elder abuse. Reporters who know they make a difference are powerful allies in detection, victim support, and prevention of abuse.

Major Goals and Objectives

The purpose of this project is to describe the complex issues related to communication between APS and reporters of elder mistreatment and develop recommendations for improving APS-reporter communication. Over the study period, we accomplished three main objectives: 1. Conduct an environmental scan of policies and practices across states, 2. Conduct an in-depth

case study of policy changes made in the state of Massachusetts, and 3. Develop recommendations for improving communication between APS and reporters based on findings from objectives 1 and 2.

Research Questions

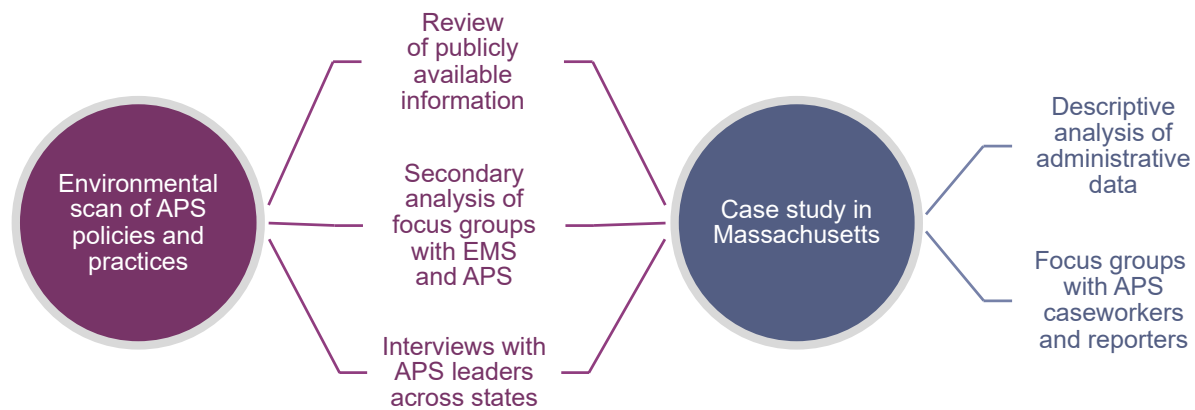
This project addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the legal, ethical, and practical barriers and facilitators to establishing feedback loops about reported cases of potential elder abuse?
 - a. How do states align and differ in their strategies to address key points on the reporting and response pathway?
 - b. What are the federal and state regulations that determine the types of information states can share with reporters?
 - c. What ethical and moral concerns need to be considered in the interpretation of state regulations?
 - d. How do states communicate with other entities that may assist in prevention efforts?
2. How are regulations interpreted and put into practice at the state and local levels in Massachusetts?
 - a. Do APS staff and mandated reporters perceive recent changes to APS policy as effective?
 - b. What strategies for communication and types of information are most valuable to reporters? How do these differ by type of reporter?
 - c. Aside from reporting suspicions to APS, what strategies are used to mitigate or prevent abuse? How can these be improved?

Research Design, Methods, and Analytical and Data Analysis Techniques

This study uses a mixed-methods approach and relies on both primary and secondary data sources (see Figure 1). We began with an environmental scan of policies and practices related to APS and reporter communication across the United States. This involved reviewing publicly available information, conducting a secondary analysis of data from focus groups with Emergency Medical Services providers and APS staff in Texas and Massachusetts, and conducting interviews (N=32) with state APS leaders (N=44). Secondly, we conducted a more in-depth case study in Massachusetts to assess APS caseworkers' and reporters' perceptions of 2017 policy changes that address this issue. The case study included a review of administrative data to describe trends in reporting before, during, and following policy changes as well as comprehensive interviews and focus groups (N=10) with APS agency staff (N=16) and mandated reporters (N=14).

Figure 1: Research Design and Methods



Expected Applicability of the Research

The project seeks to influence policy decisions and practices related to elder mistreatment reporting and response and, in turn, improve reporter perceptions of APS, increase quantity and quality of reports, and increase subsequent services and justice outcomes for elder victims of abuse, neglect, or exploitation. The findings and recommendations presented here are intended to guide APS agencies and offices interested in improving communication with reporters to advocate for and enact improvements to policy and practice.

Participants and Other Collaborating Organizations

Project Staff and Roles

- Kristin Lees Haggerty, Principal Investigator, EDC
- Rebecca Stoeckle, Advisor, EDC
- Kathy Greenlee, Technical Advisor, ADvancing States
- Olanike Ojelabi, Research Associate, EDC
- Randi Campetti, Research Assistant, EDC

Other Partner Organizations

Several organizations contributed to this project by providing access to existing resources and data, assisting with participant recruitment, and reviewing and advising on preliminary findings during the study period. These include:

- The Administration for Community Living (ACL) and the Adult Protective Services Technical Assistance Resource Center (APS TARC)
- The National Adult Protective Services Association (NAPSA)
- The Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs (EOEA)

- The National Collaboratory to Address Elder Mistreatment
- The Elder Abuse Institute of Maine

Other Collaborators or Contacts Involved

The Expert Advisory Board members include:

- Robert Blancato, National Coordinator, Elder Justice Coalition; President, Matz, Blancato and Associates
- Alice Bonner, Senior Advisor for Aging, Institute for Healthcare Improvement; Adjunct Faculty and Director of Strategic Partnerships for CAPABLE Program, Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing
- Akiles Ceron, APS Program Director, San Francisco Human Services Agency
- Bree Cunningham, APS Director, Massachusetts EOEAA
- Hilary Dalin, Director of the Office of Elder Justice and Adult Protective Services, ACL
- Lori Delagrammatikas, Retired Director Emeritus, NAPSA
- Brian Henry, APS Program Administrator, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services
- Alison Hirschel, Director and Managing Attorney, Michigan Elder Justice Initiative
- Marian Liu, Assistant Professor, Purdue University
- Martha Roherty, Executive Director, ADvancing States
- Jennifer Spoeri, Executive Director, NAPSA
- Mary Twomey, Elder Justice Consultant
- Karl Urban, Senior Research Manager, APS TARC
- Stephanie Whittier Eliason, Elder Rights Team Lead, ACL

Changes in Approach from Original Design

During the course of the project, we made three adjustments to our approach:

1. **Addition of a secondary analysis of existing qualitative data to the environmental scan.** Following feedback from the project's NIJ Scientific Advisor and the Expert Advisory Board, we expanded the scope of the environmental scan to include a secondary analysis of data from focus groups with Emergency Medical Services providers previously conducted by EDC to better define the types of information reporters are interested in receiving from APS.
2. **Extension of the project timeline with a no-cost extension** to accommodate delays in project start-up, COVID-19-related participant recruitment challenges, and the PI's maternity leave.
3. **Addition of focused workshops with APS staff and leaders in four states** (Kansas, Oklahoma, Washington, and Utah) to refine recommendations for improving communication from APS to reporters.

Outcomes

Activities and Accomplishments

Table 1 below presents specific activities and accomplishments made during the project period *01/01/2021-06/30/2023*.

Table 1: Major Project Activities and Accomplishments

Activities	Accomplishments
1. Project start-up (January 2021 – March 2021)	
1.1 Completed hiring and onboarding staff and budget modification requests to accommodate award conditions	Hired a research associate for the project. Completed budget modifications requesting partial release of funds prior to Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for subsequent research activities.
1.2 Finalized Expert Advisory Board membership	Expert Technical Advisor Kathy Greenlee and PI Kristin Lees Haggerty recruited members for the Expert Advisory Board who represented diverse perspectives and geographic locations, and held expertise in relevant areas.
2. Objective 1. Conduct an environmental scan of legal, ethical, and practical barriers and facilitators to sharing information between Adult Protective Services (APS) and reporters (April 2021 – September 2022)	
2.1 Developed strategies for gathering publicly available information on federal and state regulations and guidelines for APS practice	Conducted a web-based scan of state websites to assess policies related to reporter feedback. Developed a database with data on each of 52 states and territories by searching for specific terms and carefully reviewing APS agency websites, APS Technical Assistance Resource Center reports (APS TARC), and the Elder Abuse Guide for Law Enforcement (EAGLE).
2.2 Recruited and conducted interviews with APS leaders across the United States to assess perspectives on APS policies and practice	Recruited participants with help from the National Adult Protective Services Association (NAPSA). Developed interview protocol and conducted 32 interviews with 44 APS leaders in 24 states/territories.
2.3 Analyzed interview data and presented preliminary findings and themes at academic conference for feedback	Generated initial codes, collated codes into themes, and presented early findings at the Gerontological Society of America 2021 Annual Scientific Meeting (see Appendix A).

Activities	Accomplishments
<p>2.4 Conducted a secondary analysis of focus group data previously collected by EDC to inform the development of an online learning course for Emergency Medical Services (EMS) providers on identifying and reporting suspected elder mistreatment</p>	<p>Inspired by our conversation with NIJ Scientist Dr. Yunsoo Park, and with NIJ’s approval, conducted a secondary analysis of focus groups with 23 EMS providers and 14 APS staff members in Texas and Massachusetts to better understand the types of feedback that reporters are interested in receiving from APS. Presented findings from the secondary analysis at the 2022 USC Judith D. Tamkin International Symposium on Elder Abuse (see Appendix B).</p>
<p>3. Objective 2: Conduct a case study in Massachusetts to examine perceptions of recently enacted policy changes to improve communication between reporters and APS (May 2022 – March 2023)</p>	
<p>3.1 Submitted a request to Massachusetts Executive of Office of Elder Affairs (EOEA) for de-identified administrative data for 2016, 2017, and 2018.</p>	<p>Conducted descriptive analyses to generate graphs and charts illustrating reporting volume over three years. The data revealed patterns that help to contextualize and supplement the qualitative findings.</p>
<p>3.2 Recruited diverse APS staff and categories of mandated reporters in Massachusetts for interviews or focus groups to assess perspectives about the 2017 policy changes in the state.</p>	<p>Conducted interviews and focus groups with 16 APS staff members with experience ranging from <1 to 20 years, and 14 mandated reporters—including social service providers, health care providers, and law enforcement—with experience ranging from 5 to 35 years. Presented early findings from this data at the 2022 NAPSA Annual Conference.</p>
<p>3.3 Hosted virtual Expert Advisory Board meeting to review results from Objective 1</p>	<p>Hosted a two-hour virtual meeting with the Expert Advisory Board to review key findings from the environmental scan. Board members were very engaged and provided constructive feedback to guide our analysis, interpretation, and writing.</p>
<p>4. Objective 3: Develop and disseminate recommendations, communications products, and publications (January 2023 – June 2023)</p>	
<p>4.1 Prototyped a set of pragmatic recommendations for overcoming barriers and improving communication between APS and reporters</p>	<p>Refined emerging themes from objectives 1 and 2 and developed draft recommendations. Presented draft recommendations at the 2023 On Aging Conference hosted by the American Society on Aging.</p>

Activities	Accomplishments
<p>4.2 Workshopped recommendations with APS staff and leaders in Kansas, Oklahoma, Washington, and Utah.</p>	<p>With NIJ’s approval for a no-cost extension, workshopped draft recommendation with over 70 APS staff and leaders. Conducted one virtual and three in-person workshops between April and May 2023. APS staff and leaders provided insightful and constructive feedback during the workshops that helped to improve the relevance and feasibility of the recommendations (see Appendix C for APS workshop guide, agenda and materials).</p>
<p>4.3 Convened Expert Advisory Board to review study results, and finalized recommendations and dissemination plans</p>	<p>Hosted a hybrid Expert Advisory Board convening, with most participating in-person at EDC’s Washington, DC office. Presented cumulative results of the study. Board members expressed great enthusiasm about the relevance and importance of the work, provided feedback to help finalize the recommendations, and provided suggestions for dissemination of key findings and recommendations.</p>
<p>4.4 Developed plan to disseminate communications products and publications</p>	<p>Will present the finalized recommendations and cumulative results of the study at NAPSA’s annual conference in August 2023. We drafted a manuscript and this research report which will be submitted for publication in peer-reviewed journals. Additional dissemination plans targeted at scholars, APS programs, and policymakers (see Appendix D for dissemination plan).</p>

Results and Findings

Objective 1: Environmental Scan

We conducted an environmental scan which included two phases: 1) a systematic search of publicly available information and 2) semi-structured interviews with state APS leaders.

[Phase 1: Review of Publicly Available Information](#)

We developed a database of APS policy and practices for 52 states/territories by collating data from several sources including individual APS program websites; two APS TARC evaluation

reports on APS policies, practices, and their outcomes;^{8,9} and state-specific laws for mandated reporting from the Elder Abuse Guide for Law Enforcement (EAGLE) (<https://eagle.usc.edu/state-specific-laws/>). The database includes 52 categories of information in four domains: 1) administrative structure (e.g., agency name, location, intake structure etc.), 2) reporting and intake policy and practices (e.g., mandatory reporting type, reporting methods, eligibility for APS services, etc.), 3) investigation policy and practices (e.g., maximum response time, investigation completion time, services provided, etc.), and 4) feedback policy and practices (e.g., who receives feedback, when it is provided, type of information provided, etc.). Because findings related to the first three categories have been reported elsewhere,⁹ here we are focusing on the fourth category: feedback policy and practices.

Phase 2: Interviews with State APS Leaders

Between November 2021 and March 2022, we conducted 32 virtual interviews with 44 APS leaders in 23 states with varied agency administration structures (state- or county-level) and intake approaches (centralized, local, or both). The interview protocol was developed with guidance from an Expert Advisory Board, which included experts in elder mistreatment research, APS structure and function, and national elder justice policy. Participants were purposively sampled and recruited by the project team in collaboration NAPSAs, and each interview included between one and seven participants (with an average of two participants per interview). Participants were asked to share their perspectives on APS policies and practices related to reporting and investigation, the types of feedback they provide to reporters, barriers to providing feedback, and possible ways to enhance the feedback process between APS and reporters.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio recorded, transcribed, and cleaned of any identifiable information. An initial coding scheme was developed based on the interview guide and research questions, and coding was completed using Dedoose Qualitative Analysis Software. Three project staff members (Kristin Lees Haggerty, Olanike Ojelabi, and Randi Campetti) independently applied the coding scheme to the same transcript to assess agreement and make necessary modifications to the coding scheme. The coding scheme was then applied to each remaining transcript by a single coder and checked by a separate secondary coder. Coding disagreements were discussed, and final codes applied. In line with Braun and Clark's¹⁰ approach to thematic analysis, coded data were analyzed and grouped into broader themes and sub-themes.

[Environmental Scan Results](#)

Our review of publicly available information provides evidence of the ways in which states differ in their approaches to APS. Like other aspects of APS structure and practice, we found that the information states provide to the public about feedback policy and processes vary. Most state websites (28 of 52) do not have information about whether, when, or how reporters can expect APS to communicate with them after they submit a report. Eleven of 52 states' websites suggest that APS will provide some feedback to individual reporters and 15 out of 52 states' websites provide publicly available aggregate data about APS reports. However, through interviews with APS leaders, we identified an additional 14 states that provide some feedback to individual reporters on the reports made, and an additional 10 states that provide some aggregate data accessible to the public on the reports made.

These findings suggest that state websites do not consistently display information on whether, when, or how reporters can expect to receive feedback from APS, nor on the types of feedback APS provides. In compiling the data we collected from state websites with the data from interviews with APS leaders, however, we gained significant knowledge about the content of and processes for providing feedback. Feedback that is provided to individual reporters can be grouped into two broad categories: *procedural* feedback and *substantive* feedback:

- **Procedural feedback** refers to information provided to reporters about the reporting *process*. APS may deliver this type of information via letter, phone call, or email, and its purpose is often to notify the reporter that their report was received, is under review, or has been accepted or not accepted for investigation. Twenty of the 24 states identified as providing some feedback to reporters provide procedural feedback.
- **Substantive feedback** includes more descriptive information about why a case was accepted or not accepted for investigation, the outcome of the investigation, and/or the types of services implemented. Only 7 of the 24 states identified as providing some feedback to reporters described providing substantive feedback.

In addition to the review of publicly available information from APS program websites and the APS TARC reports, we conducted a secondary analysis of a series of focus groups conducted with Emergency Medical Services (EMS) providers and APS staff members in 2019. The purpose of this secondary analysis was to identify specific types of information reporters expect or would like to receive from APS. The goals of the original focus group conversations were to identify the barriers and facilitators EMS providers face in identifying, reporting, and responding to elder mistreatment, as well as the barriers APS faces in providing information to reporters. We

reviewed transcript data from six focus groups with 23 EMS providers and 14 APS staff members in Texas and Massachusetts. Each 90-minute focus group was held in-person and audio recorded. Findings from the secondary analysis reveal key issues of concern for EMS providers and APS staff (Table 2).

Table 2: Key Issues of Concern for EMS and APS

Key Issues Raised by EMS	Key Priorities Raised by APS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• APS should provide feedback on reports made• Feedback should clarify the reporting process• Feedback should clarify reporters' expectations of APS actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clients have the right to self-determination• Reporting is mandated; it should not depend on whether or not APS provides feedback• A mutual understanding of APS's role and the reporting process is needed

In general, reporters want to understand the outcomes of their reporting actions, such as if their report improved care for the client, and if the report made was appropriate. Some reporters consider their reporting experiences to be “frustrating” and “a black hole.” Contrary to a common perception among APS of what reporters want to know, professional reporters—such as EMS providers—do not want to know case details; rather, they want “positive reinforcement” from their reporting actions and want to know that “someone followed up and the [client] is now safe.” On the other hand, APS agencies’ first priority is to protect the rights of older adults. This can hinder their ability to share information, including procedural feedback.

Triangulating the three sources of data obtained from a search of publicly available information, qualitative interviews with state APS leaders, and the secondary analysis revealed three overarching themes that affect whether, when, and how information is shared with reporters: 1)

the risks and benefits APS perceives of providing information, 2) the reporter type and relationship to the client, and 3) progression along the report-response pathway.

Theme 1: Perceived Risks and Benefits among APS to Providing Information

Findings from interviews show that APS leaders are aware that reporters want to receive feedback, and they recognize several benefits to providing this feedback. One benefit they described is the reduction in the number of calls and emails they receive from reporters requesting additional information. Furthermore, providing information back to reporters presents opportunities for APS to educate reporters on what to expect next, strengthen relationships with reporters, and help with improving the quality of future reports. One APS leader reflected on the reporter's perspective:

“Let's say I'm new as a paraprofessional and I'm learning. This gives me a resource in my toolbox that says, ‘Okay, what is the vulnerability? And how could I help make a report stronger for the hotline?’ If it gets screened out, and it tells me it's due specifically to eligibility, I might be able to go back now and get some more information just on eligibility, and then call back in another report once I have that privileged information.”

APS staff also described important risks to providing information back to reporters. Participants consistently voiced their obligation to prioritize the client's privacy and to abide by confidentiality laws. In addition to privacy and confidentiality from a legal sense, participants noted an ethical obligation to the client, and expressed concern about breaking the client's trust of APS. Participants stated a critical need to determine why a reporter wants more information; in some cases, a reporter may have malicious intent or complicated circumstances whereby

providing information to the reporter will harm, rather than help, the client. As one participant said:

“Our job is to help these vulnerable adults. And so if sharing that information out to the reporter is not beneficial to the vulnerable adult, I just don't understand why we would do that. And I also think it's very important that we consider the negative things that could happen over the positive, good feeling that it could give a reporter by making a report. Because, like I said, it can destroy families and relationships if information is shared out. And also, we have some very conniving people in the world...And they will call for the purpose of collecting information so that they can do something that's not appropriate with it.”

Finally, participants noted that limited resources can prevent them from being able to provide individual feedback to all reporters.

Theme 2: Reporter Type and Relationship to the Client

Another major theme from the interviews with APS leaders revealed that regardless of official policy, in practice, supervisors and caseworkers tend to practice discretion in whether, when, how, and with whom they communicate about individual cases. The analyses showed that the type of reporter (professional vs. non-professional) and quality of the relationship between the reporter and the client (brief involvement vs. ongoing involvement) are important factors in determining whether, when, and how information is shared. Reporters who are regularly involved in the care of the client, and for whom sharing information will aid the provision of services or benefit the client in formal or informal ways, are more likely to receive feedback on their report compared to reporters who are never or only occasionally involved in the care of the

client or whose involvement in the case is unlikely to be of benefit to the client. Additionally, decisions about whether to provide feedback to a reporter with ongoing involvement with the client are likely to vary depending on whether the reporter is reporting in a professional or non-professional capacity. One participant described the complexity of the decision-making this way:

“We get a fair number of referrals where it’s pretty clear that the referrer is using the system to try to harm the person they’re alleging the neglect for. So it’s tricky, and I’m very cautious about disclosing without really knowing who’s an ally. But I would probably defer to the judgment of the investigator. So once the case is open and the investigator gets to know the person, my feeling is if you think that – if having a conversation with the referrer would be helpful to the case, then I would be open to that.”

In many states, but not all, professional/non-professional status maps neatly to mandated/non-mandated reporter status. Reporters with a professional relationship to the reporter are more likely to be aware of and bound by privacy and confidentiality requirements similar to APS, and less likely to request information out of malicious intent compared to a non-professional reporter, such as a maligned neighbor or family member.

Theme 3: Progression Along the Report-Response Pathway

The final theme that emerged from both the publicly available data and interview data relates to when in the report-to-response pathway information is provided from APS to reporters. Our analyses indicate that the types of information shared relate to three key points in the pathway: 1) intake, 2) investigation, and 3) case closure.

Intake begins when a report is submitted and ends when the report is either screened in or screened out for investigation. This is the point in the reporting process when feedback to reporters is most likely to occur. Several states reported communicating with reporters at intake. The information shared with reporters at intake is largely procedural and typically includes acknowledgement that the report was received, a report identification number, and/or contact information for the assigned caseworker. In a few states, APS provides reporters with more substantive information, often when the case is screened out. For example, APS may send a letter informing the reporter of the reason the case has been screened out, and where the case has been referred, if applicable. One participant described how providing feedback at the start of the process was largely advantageous:

“I think it's beneficial [to provide feedback] in the beginning because at least they know that we received it...So if they have questions, I think it's like something like, oh, I have a confirmation number, you know, like they receive this...And I do think in the cases where it's appropriate to speak to the reporting party— say it's the daughter and the client is very confused—and so we are working with the reporting party in that instance because the client needs that type of assistance to [lessen] their confusion.”

After a case is screened in, it moves to **investigation**. APS caseworkers assigned to the case may or may not be required to contact the reporter at this stage, however many states indicate that they do contact the reporter to validate the report, and receive additional information to assist the investigation. Communication with reporters at this point focuses on whether there is any updated information the reporter can provide. In some instances, reporters may be considered a collateral contact in the investigation. In these situations, they may have access to more

information than reporters who are not considered collateral contacts. One agency has this process in place:

“So during the investigation, if the box is checked ‘yes’ or they say ‘yes, we would like to be contacted,’ we will contact them. And typically, that’s one of the first things we do before the investigator even sees the vulnerable adult. Because what they’re doing is confirming those report allegations. Once they confirm the report allegations – because sometimes the hotline gets it a little backwards...so it’s kind of a caveat.”

Few states provide feedback to reporters at **case closure**. Those that do typically send a letter by mail to notify the reporter of the results of the investigation or case outcome (e.g., case was substantiated, unsubstantiated, or inconclusive). In some instances, the case closure letter may describe the services offered to the client, or recommendations for services that would be beneficial. This notification may or may not be required by statute. One participant noted:

“I think it would be nice to be able to tell people the outcome...Without providing any details, it brings them closure on our end rather than not having the ability to know or know when it was closed or if it’s still ongoing, or that whole piece where we can’t disclose anything. It would be nice to at least let them know this is we’re done with this piece...and bring closure to it.”

At each point in the process (intake, investigation, case closure), there is variation within and among agencies in the methods used to communicate information (e.g., automated email, letters by mail, or phone call), the type of information shared (e.g., procedural or substantive feedback), the person or staff member responsible for sharing the information (e.g., intake staff or local office staff, screener or investigator), the consistency of sharing the information with reporters

(e.g., standardized or case-by-case basis), and whether or not they are required by their statute to share information with reporters.

Objective 2: Massachusetts Case Study

Following the cross-state environmental scan of APS policies and practices, we assessed APS-reporter feedback in a single state—Massachusetts—to measure APS caseworkers’ and reporters’ perceptions of recent policy changes aimed, in part, at improving APS-reporter communication. These changes included implementing a centralized intake line and web-based reporting system, and adding a requirement that APS agencies provide letters to mandated reporters indicating the status of reported cases. This case study included descriptive analysis of administrative data from 2016, 2017, and 2018 collected by the Massachusetts EOE and thematic analysis of focus groups and interviews with APS staff and mandated reporters in Massachusetts. Administrative data captured the periods before, during, and after the implementation of the policy changes. We recruited APS staff from diverse roles (screeners, caseworkers, supervisors, and directors) and with a range of experience (<1 to 20 years in the field). We recruited mandated reporters from different professional backgrounds (social service providers, law enforcement, and assisted living managers), and with a range of experience (5 to 35 years in the field).

[Administrative Data](#)

Findings from descriptive analysis of the administrative data illustrate an increase in the total reporting volume between 2016 and 2018. The largest total increase occurred in 2018, one year after the implementation of the policy changes (see Figure 2). These data also show differing patterns in reporting volume for mandated and non-mandated reporters. Reporting volume for

non-mandated reporters progressively increased through 2016 and 2017, and significantly in 2018, but reporting volume for mandated reporters actually decreased between 2017 and 2018. We hypothesize that the change to a centralized hotline may have initially increased reporting among non-mandated reporters more than mandated reporters because mandated reporters were likely to be more familiar with the previous process of directly contacting their local APS agency. They also may have built relationships with local agency staff over time, which could have affected their reporting patterns.

Telephone calls to APS remained the most popular means of reporting elder mistreatment. As expected, the online reporting system introduced as part of the policy changes in 2017 was used in 2018, but reporters continued to make reports using all possible formats, including fax, walk-in, and email (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: Reporting Volume 2016, 2017, 2018

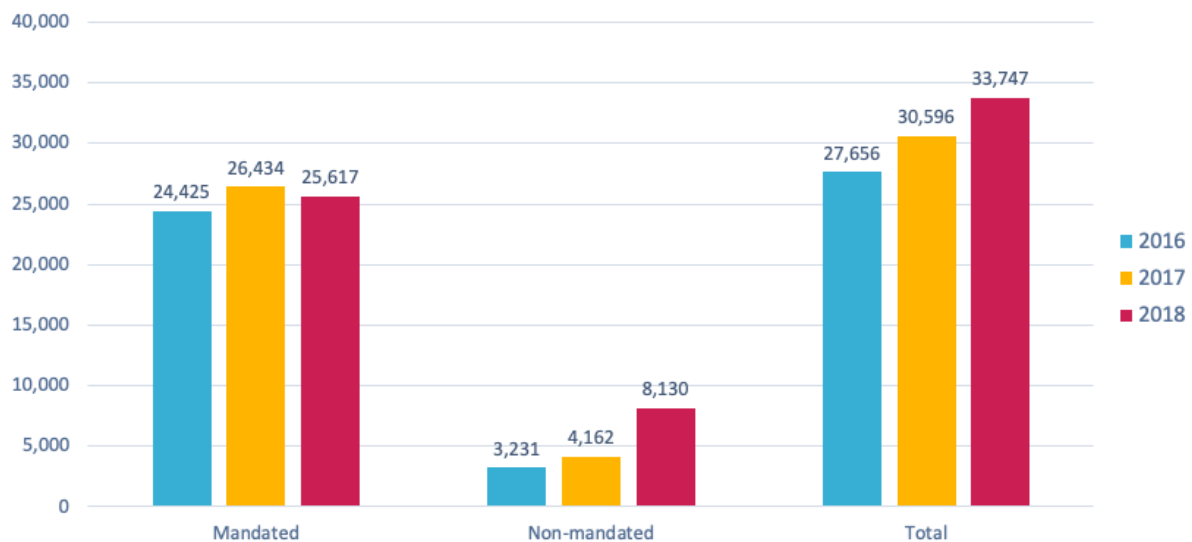


Figure 3: Reporting Methods 2016, 2017, 2018

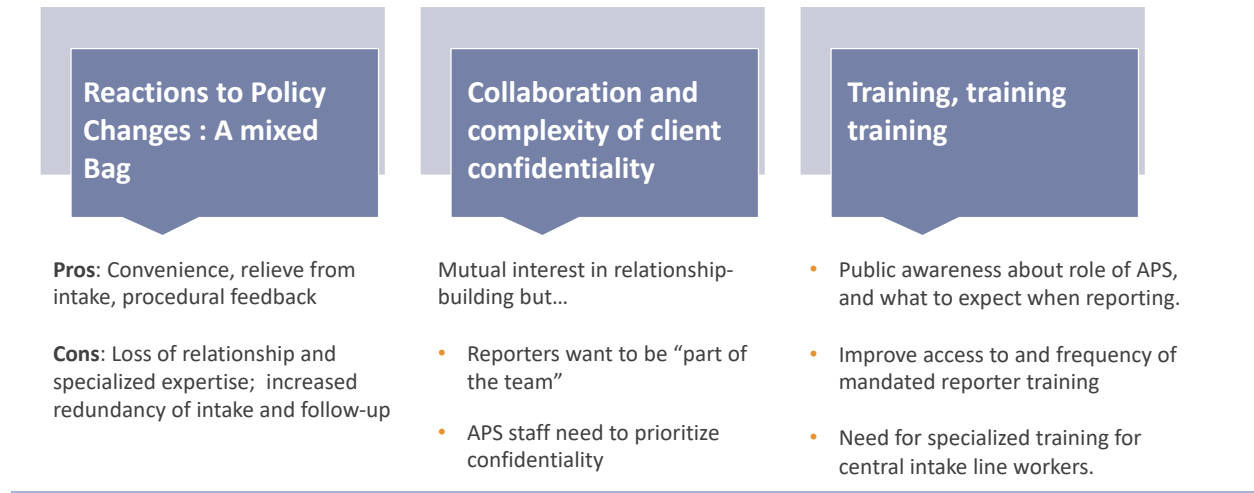


Findings from the administrative data analysis provide helpful contextual information about reporting volume and methods, and inform the analysis of the qualitative data collected through focus groups and interviews with APS staff and mandated reporters.

Focus Groups and Interviews

Interviews and focus groups with 16 APS staff members and 14 mandated reporters revealed three key themes 1) reactions to policy change are mixed, 2) collaboration is complex due to client confidentiality, and 3) training for intake workers, APS staff, and mandated reporters is crucial (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Themes from Focus Groups and Interviews with APS and Mandated Reporters in Massachusetts



Theme 1: Reactions to Policy Change: A Mixed Bag

APS workers and mandated reporters have mixed reactions to the series of policy changes related to communication between APS and reporters. The central intake line and the web intake were generally seen as convenient for reporters. Reporters have a single phone number to call in reports, or they can file reports online at any time of day. Local APS agencies are relieved from managing intake, allowing them to devote more time to other tasks. One APS caseworker describes how the changes directly affected their tasks:

“...in the old days when we were on call, we would sometimes get 12 reports in the span of an on-call shift from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. And so that becomes like your whole day; now you're just typing up reports and dealing with it all day and freeing that time up to like do visits and do collateral.”

Despite this positive feedback, reporters and APS staff also reported that the introduction of the central intake line and the web intake has led to a decrease in the quality of the relationship between mandated reporters and local APS contacts, as well as redundant work between intake and local follow-up. Reporters described feeling that it was more difficult to establish and maintain a personal relationship with APS, and that they would have to give the same information multiple times—once to the centralized intake worker and again to the screening staff member at the local agency during a follow-up call.

APS and reporters alike described a lack of specialized elder mistreatment-specific expertise among the centralized intake workers, and technical difficulty with the web intake system. Reporters expressed that, previously, they felt that they could call and talk to someone about their observations, and receive input on whether or not they should file a report. They feel that this is no longer possible because the centralized intake workers do not have the same level of expertise as local staff. An APS caseworker describes their frustration:

“...there are all kinds of technical issues [with web intake] but the way the form is structured I think is even confusing...we [APS workers] don't get a lot of information. It makes it harder for the screener, which makes it harder for the caseworker because then they're going out kind of blind. Like just the whole process from start to finish is much more difficult.”

Letters to mandated reporters were well received by reporters. They described the letter as helpful in keeping a record of their reporting, and found the procedural information contained in the letter useful. However, reporters felt the letter was insufficient, and would like for it to provide substantive information that would help to improve their care of the client. Some

reporters could not recall ever having received such a letter. This may be due to irregularities in practice within the state. One APS caseworker describes this variation:

“Every agency is structured very differently. The population they serve is very different. Size is very different. And I mean, there are certain things that should be consistent because they are like set in our regulations. But in general, there's, I think, very little consistency across the state.”

Both APS staff and mandated reporters acknowledged the need to improve relationships, and both groups stated that their first priority is to improve the safety of the client. Currently, some agencies have a more effective relationship with mandated reporters compared to others.

Reporters value direct relationships with local APS staff, which is harder to establish with a centralized intake system.

Theme 2: Collaboration and the Complexity of Client Confidentiality

The data show that there is a strong mutual interest between APS staff and mandated reporters in having an effective working relationship, acknowledgment that there is room for improvement, and desire to work together to achieve better communication. However, the two groups described differing views about how to best collaborate. For example, some mandated reporters described wanting to be “part of the team” working alongside APS, receiving regular updates from APS and having access to more information than APS may be comfortable or able to provide.

APS staff described the desire to be so involved in the work as infeasible and cited confidentiality laws as barriers to sharing information with reporters. The issue of confidentiality is complex: while it is important to protect client privacy there are circumstances when

information sharing is critical to the investigation or solution. In Massachusetts, regulations do allow sharing information in certain circumstances depending on the risk to client and the stage of the investigation.

APS staff and reporters described the importance of having a direct contact with one another and building a trusting relationship. APS staff need to be able to speak with reporters to gather more information for the investigation and develop an effective service plan. Reporters described the importance of having direct contact with local staff to ask questions and provide updates. One reporter describes how critical their relationship with an APS caseworkers is:

“You know, [name of APS caseworker], the one who I'm dealing with now, she knows me. We've been on so many cases. If she sees my name, she's going to call me and be like, ‘What's going on?’ You know, I think that's just part of what made it nice when we met in person. I'm not just a name on a form. They know who I am, you know. And then when you get to meet each other, you know, you know, you know how each other works. So you know how to you can problem solve together, how to address it with our strengths.”

Theme 3: Training, Training, Training

The topic of training was raised repeatedly by both APS staff and mandated reporters.

Participants suggested training for the general public on the prevalence and signs of elder mistreatment and the role of APS, training for mandated reporters on their role in addressing elder mistreatment and how it differs from and aligns with the goals of APS, and training for APS staff to improve intake and investigation processes. For instance, mandated reporters in law enforcement noted differences in how law enforcement and APS perceive and approach

investigations, and expressed a desire to reconcile these differences. In another example, both APS staff and reporters suggested training for the central intake unit staff to better equip them to provide feedback on reports and relay appropriate expectations during the initial intake.

According to one APS caseworker:

“I personally feel like the hotline needs some better training around just kind of assessing risk and being able to communicate that more clearly to us when they type up reports.”

Another caseworker noted:

“The central intake [unit] is siloed from the rest of us. Like, they just don't have anything to do with the rest of the process. And when they call to escalate a report, they have no idea what information we need to understand why this is such a high risk. Like, I don't understand. You're not communicating to me what the current risk is that's requiring an immediate response.”

Recommendation Development: Decision-Making Model for APS on Providing Feedback to Reporters

The findings from the environmental scan and Massachusetts case study point to key factors that influence whether, when, how, and with whom APS shares information. These include state laws and policies, as well as case-by-case evaluation by APS of whether it is safe, appropriate, and beneficial to provide information to the reporter. A key finding from this research was that, in addition to state policies, caseworker discretion plays a significant role in whether and how information about individual cases is shared with different types of reporters. In making these decisions, the potential benefits to the client and to the APS process are weighed against the potential risks to the client and to the APS agency.

Potential *benefits* to clients and APS include:

- Opportunities to acknowledge reports made and strengthen relationships between APS and reporters
- Access to additional information that can aid in the investigation, improve service acceptance, and improve case outcomes
- Opportunities to educate reporters on criteria for case acceptance, actions APS can and cannot take, and the overall reporting process, which can help strengthen future reports
- Fewer call-backs from reporters, leading to increased staff time and resources to devote to serving clients

Potential *risks* to clients and APS include:

- Breaches of confidentiality laws and clients' privacy
- Backlash from clients or involved individuals to APS about information shared
- Clients' loss of trust in APS
- Strains on staff time and already limited resources

Two key factors tend to influence whether, what type of, and how information is shared:

1. The **type of reporter** (professional vs. non-professional). In some states, this aligns with mandated and non-mandated status.
2. The **quality of the relationship between the reporter and the client**. A reporter may only be briefly involved with the client, or they may have an ongoing relationship with the client in ways that can assist the investigation and/or help improve client safety.

In assessing the risks of providing information to reporters, professionals are typically considered to pose a lower risk than non-professionals. Professionals, such as health care providers, social workers, and first responders, are more likely to adhere to confidentiality and privacy requirements similar to those of APS. Because non-professionals, such as family members and neighbors, are not required to adhere to privacy and confidentiality guidelines, there is a higher risk that they will use the information from APS in counterproductive or even malicious ways.

Reporters who have an ongoing relationship with the client are closely involved in client's care. Their connection to the client is often a valuable resource for APS during investigation, and these reporters can help APS build trust with the client, improving service acceptance. Therefore, the potential benefits to the client and APS of providing information to reporters with an ongoing relationship with the client are stronger compared to the potential benefits of providing information to reporters who have only had brief involvement with the client.

Based on our research, we have identified four broad categories of reporters:

- **Non-professionals with brief involvement** are the least likely to receive any feedback from APS (substantive or procedural). This group can include neighbors, friends, and the general public. They may be mandated or non-mandated reporters, depending on the state's statute, but importantly, they are only briefly involved. The risks associated with providing feedback to this group of reporters are higher and the benefits are weaker compared to other groups of reporters.

“The general population... may or may not have interaction with us again in the future.”

– APS staff member

- **Professionals with brief involvement** may receive procedural feedback but are unlikely to receive substantive feedback from APS. This group can include physicians, first responders, and other service providers, and are often mandated reporters. Though professionals, they are only briefly involved. Although the risks of sharing information with this group of reporters are lower compared to non-professionals with brief involvement, the direct benefits to the client are minimal. Importantly, however, this group of reporters plays a crucial role in elder mistreatment surveillance, and there are benefits to providing some level of feedback to reinforce this role.

“...when it's someone who doesn't have that ongoing contact with the client...then they may not be contacted back. And that's where a lot of the confusion and the assumptions that APS isn't doing anything can occur.”

– APS staff member

- **Non-professionals with ongoing involvement** are likely to receive feedback from APS, particularly during the investigation phase. These reporters are often family and friends who are continuously involved in the care of the client. Because of their long-term involvement, there are likely some benefits to sharing information with them during the investigation. The benefits of providing feedback to this group of reporters are stronger than compared to professionals and non-professionals who are only briefly involved. However, the associated risks are higher compared to involved professionals because

non-professionals generally do not have to comply with confidentiality laws or regulations.

“...if it's a reporter who is really a family member that is involved in that care, we're going to probably have ongoing communication with them... They're going to know what's going on.”

– APS staff member

- **Professionals with ongoing involvement** are the most likely to receive feedback from APS. This group can include primary care providers, social workers, and other service providers, and are often mandated reporters. Because of their profession and their ongoing relationship with client, the benefits of providing feedback to this group of reporters are stronger and the risks are lower compared to other groups of reporters.

“...If the individual is a professional there is a specific code of ethics they have to follow...they understand the ins and outs of confidentiality and are bound by certain rules... In those circumstances, I really feel like it would be beneficial.”

– APS staff member

The simple two-by-two table (Figure 5) below offers a decision-making model that can help APS agencies determine when they should or should not provide feedback to reporters. The model illustrates how the type of reporter and the quality of their relationship with the client align with risks and benefits to sharing information with reporters. Overall, APS is more likely to share

substantive feedback with reporters when the perceived risk to client and APS is low and the perceived benefits are strong.

Figure 5: Decision-Making Model for APS on Providing Feedback to Reporters



Recommendation Development: Workshops with APS Staff

To further the development and applicability of the recommendations, the project team facilitated workshops with four states: Kansas, Oklahoma, Utah, and Washington. These states were selected and invited to participate in the workshops based on the level of interest expressed by the APS leaders who participated in the Objective 1 interviews. We intentionally selected states that were not represented on the project’s Expert Advisory Board or highlighted in the case study (i.e., Massachusetts).

APS leaders from the selected states participated in an initial planning meeting, during which the project team described the purpose of and expectations for the workshops. APS leaders were

asked whether they would prefer in-person or virtual workshops. Three of the four states (Kansas, Oklahoma, and Utah) opted to hold the workshop in-person, and Washington chose the virtual option. Workshops consisted of APS staff at all agency levels, representing different regions of the state, and encompassing a wide range of experience.

During the workshops, the project team presented research findings and draft recommendations for improving communication between APS and reporters and asked participants to share reactions and feedback. The bulk of the meeting was dedicated to discussions on identifying current practices and priorities with potential for change. Participants broke into small groups and were tasked with completing a worksheet that outlined the type of feedback they currently provide to reporters at each stage of the reporting process. They were also asked to identify what they considered to be top priorities for change, and factors that would facilitate or hinder their ability to make these changes. Participants were highly engaged in these activities and generated many actionable approaches to improving communication practices. Key themes that emerged from the four workshops include the following:

1. **The decision-making model helped APS staff recognize that reporters have diverse roles and are not a monolithic group.** Some reporters are part of the larger surveillance system of professional and public reporting to APS; others are closely involved in the client's life and can be helpful in the longer term. In all workshops, after the differences in reporter types were presented and discussed, it became clear to participants that APS could improve its level of responsiveness, especially in terms of providing consistent procedural feedback.

2. **There is a need for standardization of the feedback process and the type of information shared.** Resources such as a decision-making tool or checklist would help APS make consistent decisions about when and to whom to provide feedback.
3. **The complexity of state confidentiality laws** was brought up in two contexts. State confidentiality laws serve as a shield to protect clients' privacy and limit the type of information APS shares, particularly with reporters with only short-term involvement. However, state confidentiality laws do not prohibit the sharing of procedural information. In the case of reporters with ongoing involvement, clients participating in service planning can consent to APS sharing substantive information with the reporter. In addition, APS staff in several states described ways in which they use the questioning process to both gather information and indirectly suggest information without compromising client confidentiality.
4. **Participants in the Kansas workshop described using the intake process to set reporter expectations and begin their subsequent work from a position of strength.** They ask questions that require reporters to reflect on the positive aspects of the client's life. For example, APS might ask about the client's strengths, what is going well in the client's life, how much family support the client has, what successes the reporter has had thus far in keeping the client safe, and what the reporter would like to see happen.
5. **Technology can be used more effectively to advance and sustain APS messaging to reporters and the public without increasing the burden on staff.** For example, automated text or email messaging can be used to share updates with reporters, and a voice recording that callers hear while on hold can deliver relevant information about APS and what to expect after reporting. Participants in the Oklahoma workshop were

enthusiastic about using technology to improve communication and reduce the burden of repeated call-backs and emails from reporters. In fact, Oklahoma has since begun to explore strategies for implementing some of the ideas generated in this workshop.

6. **In the Washington workshop, participants expressed a greater need for public and community partner education.** Many of the reports they receive pertain to situations where APS cannot take any action other than to refer the client to another community program. Increased training and communication could decrease the number of inappropriate reports they receive, reducing staff burden and enabling clients to access services more quickly. Washington participants also voiced their desire to improve communication at case closure. The decision-making model helped APS staff in considering whether, in certain situations, they could provide a “blend” of both procedural and substantive feedback at closure. For example, APS could convey not just that the case has been closed, but also that the reporter’s concerns were valid.
7. **Utah workshop participants raised a new issue: the confidentiality of the reporter’s identity.** APS must assume all reporters wish to remain anonymous. However, involving a reporter in service planning while ensuring that their identity is not revealed to the client presents a significant challenge. Participants have found ways to navigate this challenge, such as asking the reporter for permission to release their identity and explaining how it will help facilitate services for the client, or asking the client to name the person they would like to involve in service planning.
8. **Raising public awareness about the prevalence of elder mistreatment and the role of APS is a critical step in addressing common misperceptions about APS and clients’ rights.** Participants frequently mentioned that APS is often confused with Child

Protective Services. Some reporters mistakenly believe that APS can forcibly remove an adult from their home or impose upon them services they do not want. Keeping the community informed about the signs and symptoms of elder mistreatment, when and how to make a report to APS, the types of services APS can and cannot provide, and what to expect after making a report will reduce misconceptions about APS and lead to better reporting and greater protection of vulnerable adults.

Recommendation Development: Strategies for Communicating with Reporters

As our study highlighted, determining when and how to provide feedback is a complex process. To help APS address this challenge, we developed a set of recommendations that outline the various points in the process where clients and APS are most likely to benefit from provision of feedback to reporters, and the appropriate type of feedback (procedural, substantive, or both) that is most effective in these contexts.

These recommendations are organized by the specific stage in the reporting process in which they should be implemented (intake and screening, case investigation, or case closure), the type of feedback APS should provide (procedural, substantive, a combination of both, or case-by-case determination), and the type of reporter who should receive the feedback (non-professionals with brief involvement, non-professionals with ongoing involvement, professionals with brief involvement, or professionals with ongoing involvement). Each recommendation describes the goals for sharing the feedback, the information to include in the feedback, and examples for how APS can implement the recommended strategy.

Intake and Screening

At intake and screening, feedback to all types of reporters should be procedural. The reporter should be informed about whether the report they made was appropriate for APS and whether it was screened in for investigation or screened out. Automating feedback to reporters is recommended so that feedback can be provided consistently without added burden to intake staff. See Table 3 below.

Table 3: Recommendation at Intake: Procedural Feedback to All Reporters

RECOMMENDATION: Procedural Feedback to All Reporters
<p>Goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To acknowledge the report was received• To convey to reporter that they have fulfilled an important role by reporting their concerns
<p>Feedback:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Notification that the report was received• Generic information about what typically occurs during the screening process, why a case may be screened in or out, and what the reporter can expect next• Contact information for the local agency or specific person who can provide updated information about the case and answer questions
<p>Implementation Example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• APS calls or sends a letter, automated text message, or email to the reporter to thank them for the report and their concern, and informs them that the case was screened in or out (if possible), and whether APS needs additional information to determine eligibility• APS records a voice message for the intake line that reporters will hear when they call the agency. The message conveys relevant information about APS and what to expect after reporting.• For screened out reports, APS calls or sends a letter, automated text message, or email to the reporter to thank them for the report and their concern. The message may cite the state code that establishes APS authority to initiate an investigation; inform the reporter that the report does not meet validity criteria, but that they can contact APS with concerns or for more information; and refers the reporter to a different service, if applicable.

Case Investigation

Recommendations for the type of feedback to provide during investigation vary by type of reporter and their relationship with the client. See Tables 4-6 below.

Table 4: Recommendation at Case Investigation: Procedural Feedback to Reporters with Brief Involvement

RECOMMENDATION: Procedural Feedback to Reporters with Brief Involvement
<p>Goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To inform the reporter that the report they made is actively being investigated• To inform the reporter of what they can reasonably expect from APS
<p>Feedback:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Notification that the report is under investigation• Generic information about what typically occurs during the investigation, examples of what APS can and cannot do, and what the reporter can expect next• Contact information for the local agency or specific person who can provide updated information about the case and answer questions
<p>Implementation Example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• APS calls or sends a letter, automated text message, or email to the reporter to thank them for the report and to inform them that the case has been opened for investigation and assigned to a specific caseworker, and what they can expect to happen next.

Table 5: Recommendation at Case Investigation: Case-by-Case Determination of Feedback to Non-Professional Reporters with Ongoing Involvement

RECOMMENDATION: Case-by-Case Determination of Feedback to Reporters Who Are Non-Professionals with Ongoing Involvement
<p>Goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To inform reporter that the report they made is actively being investigated• To ensure that APS obtains all relevant information for the investigation to determine appropriate action
<p>Feedback:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Must be determined on a case-by-case basis to avoid providing substantive feedback that could be used inappropriately or maliciously• Substantive information should only be shared when the investigator is confident that the potential benefits of providing information outweigh the potential risks
<p>Implementation Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• APS approaches the reporter cautiously, and asks questions that both allow the reporter to feel acknowledged and understood, as well as assist in APS's determination of the level of safety and utility of sharing further information• New APS staff members undergo training on circumstances under which they should or should not share feedback with a reporter, and how to recognize signs that a reporter may have ill intent.• APS supervisors are available to provide guidance and support to caseworkers as they work through difficult cases.• APS leverages the expertise of professionals on a Multidisciplinary Team to assist them through navigation of a complicated case.• The agency's legal team assesses the specific circumstances and advises APS on whether or not to share information with the reporter.• APS asks the client if there is someone they would like APS to contact and involve in the case.

Table 6: Recommendation at Case Investigation: Substantive Feedback to Professionals with Ongoing Involvement

RECOMMENDATION: Substantive Feedback to Reporters Who Are Professionals with Ongoing Involvement
<p>Goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To inform reporter that the report they made is actively being investigated• To establish an open line of communication with the reporter• To ensure that APS obtains all relevant information for the investigation to determine appropriate action• To provide guidance to reporter on how they can help the client stay safe
<p>Feedback:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Typically provided via phone• Notification that the report is under investigation• Periodic notifications on the progress of the investigation• Guidance on how the reporter can best help the client and aid in the investigation
<p>Implementation Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• APS calls the reporter to inform them that the case is under investigation and to seek additional information, clarification, or updates on the client or allegations.• Investigator chooses to share their direct contact information with the reporter to maintain an open line of communication.• APS works collaboratively with the reporter to identify and/or implement appropriate services for the client.• APS asks the client if there is someone they would like APS to contact and involve in the case.

Case Closure

Recommendations for the type of feedback to provide at case closure vary by type of reporter and their relationship with the client. See Tables 7-9 below.

Table 7: Recommendation at Case Closure: Procedural Feedback to Reporters with Brief Involvement

RECOMMENDATION: Procedural Feedback to Reporters with Brief Involvement

Goals:

- To inform reporter that APS is no longer actively working on the case
- To advise the reporter to continue to look for signs of mistreatment and report any new concerns to APS

Feedback:

- Notification that the case has been closed
- Generic information about how and why cases are closed, including examples of what APS can and cannot do, and what the reporter can expect next
- Contact information for the local agency or specific person who can answer questions

Implementation Example:

- APS calls or sends a letter, automated text message, or email to the reporter to thank them for the report and their concern, and informs them that the case has been closed.

Table 8: Recommendation at Case Closure: Case-by-Case Determination of Feedback to Non-Professionals with Ongoing Involvement

RECOMMENDATION: Case-by-Case Determination of Feedback to Reporters Who Are Non-Professionals with Ongoing Involvement
Goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To inform reporter that APS is no longer actively working on the case
Feedback: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Must be determined on a case-by-case basis to avoid providing substantive feedback that could be used inappropriately or maliciously• Substantive information should only be shared when the investigator is confident that the potential benefits of providing information outweigh the potential risks
Implementation Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The agency’s legal team assesses the specific circumstances and advises APS on whether or not to share information with the reporter.• APS asks the client if there is someone they should contact to help with service planning

Table 9: Recommendation at Case Closure: Substantive Feedback to Professionals with Ongoing Involvement

RECOMMENDATION: Substantive Feedback to Reporters Who Are Professionals with Ongoing Involvement
Goal: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To inform reporter that APS is no longer actively working on the case• To inform reporter of the outcome of the case• To provide guidance to reporter on how they can help the client stay safe
Feedback: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Notification of the outcome of the case (substantiated, unsubstantiated, inconclusive)• List of services offered to or accepted by client• Guidance on how the reporter can help to keep the client safe
Implementation Example: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• APS calls or sends a letter, automated text message, or email to the reporter to inform them of the outcome of the case (substantiated, unsubstantiated, inconclusive).• APS works collaboratively with the reporter to ensure appropriate services are in place for the client.

Limitations

With limited evidence on best practices for APS-reporter communication, state leaders and local agencies have little guidance on how to improve their approaches to providing feedback to reporters on reports made. This study helps to fill this gap by providing insight into the barriers and facilitators to providing feedback to reporters, and it produced a set of pragmatic recommendations that states can apply in their efforts to improve feedback policy and practice.

However, this research is not without limitations. We were only able to recruit leaders from 23 of 52 states/territories to participate in interviews as part of the environmental scan. This was due,

in part, to competing demands during the COVID-19 pandemic. For similar reasons, although we successfully recruited a wide variety of reporters to participate in focus groups for the Massachusetts case study, we were unable to engage reporters from financial institutions to learn their unique perspectives. Additional limitations of this work include susceptibility to biases commonly associated with qualitative research—the potential for selection bias and social desirability biases.

Additional research is needed to continue to advance communication between APS and reporters. For instance, this research did not address feedback specific to the types of mistreatment allegations (e.g., physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, financial exploitation, and self-neglect). For next steps, it would be valuable for researchers to investigate how providing feedback might affect outcomes related to APS services, reporting counts, and client outcomes.

Artifacts

Products

1. Lees Haggerty, K., Ojelabi, O., Campetti, R., & Greenlee, K. (In progress.) *Adult Protective Services – Reporter feedback: An environmental scan of state policy and practice.*
2. Lees Haggerty, K., Ojelabi, O., Campetti, R., & Greenlee, K. (2023, August). *Reimagining feedback practices and policies: Recommendations for improving communication between APS and reporters.* [Presentation]. 2023 Annual National Adult Protective Services Association Conference. Boston, MA.

3. Lees Haggerty, K., Ojelabi, O., Campetti, R., & Greenlee, K. (2023, March 29). *Who wants to know? Recommendations for improving APS-reporter communication*. [Presentation]. *On Aging 2023*. Atlanta, GA.
4. Ojelabi, O., Campetti, R., Greenlee, K., & Lees Haggerty, K. (2022, August 31). *APS-reporter communication: Understanding barriers and facilitators to improving practice*. [Presentation]. 2022 Annual National Adult Protective Services Association Conference. Grand Rapids, MI.
5. Ojelabi, O., Campetti, R., Greenlee, K., & Lees Haggerty, K. (2022, February 24). *APS-reporter feedback practices: Examining (mis)communication between APS and reporters*. [Poster presentation]. *USC Judith D. Tamkin International Symposium on Elder Abuse*. Pasadena, CA.
6. Ojelabi, O., Campetti, R., Greenlee, K., & Lees Haggerty, K. (2021, November 10). *Closing the loop: An environmental scan of APS-reporter feedback policies and practices*. [Poster presentation]. Gerontological Society of America 2021 Annual Scientific Meeting. Online. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8682234/>

Data Sets

We generated three primary data sets from this study.

First, we developed a data collection and a record abstraction tool to collate information from individual state APS program websites and other sources, including EAGLE¹¹ and the APS TARC evaluation reports.^{8,9} We collected data across 52 states/territories, including Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico. The dataset contains four main domains: 1) administrative structure, 2) reporting and intake policy and practice, 3) investigation policy and practice, and 4) feedback

policy and practice. Using an iterative process, we built 52 categories of information for the domains (see Appendix E).

Next, we generated data from interviews with APS leaders. We conducted 32 semi-structured interviews with 44 APS agency leaders in 23 states/territories. We developed an interview protocol with guidance from academic and practitioner experts in APS and elder mistreatment, and solicited the help of NAPSA to recruit participants for interviews. Each interview lasted for approximately 45 minutes and was audio recorded and transcribed. We analyzed the data for key findings and themes using the qualitative analysis software Dedoose.

Lastly, we generated data from 10 focus groups and interviews with 14 mandated reporters and 16 local APS staff members in Massachusetts representing three APS agencies. Mandated reporters included health care professionals (e.g., physicians, nurses, home health, and EMS providers), social service providers (e.g., social workers, care managers), law enforcement, and assisted living managers. The interviews and focus groups each lasted for approximately 60 minutes, and were audio recorded and transcribed. We analyzed the data for key findings and themes using Dedoose.

Dissemination Activities

During the study period, we presented key findings and themes in different settings to a wide variety of audiences in the field of elder mistreatment. The project team delivered presentations at:

- The Gerontological Society of America 2021 Annual Scientific Meeting (see Appendix A)

- The 2022 USC Judith D. Tamkin Symposium on Elder Abuse (see Appendix B)
- The 2022 Annual NAPSA Conference
- The American Society on Aging's annual conference On Aging 2023

In addition, we hosted a series of meetings, including:

- A virtual convening of the project's Expert Advisory Board to review findings from the environmental scan
- A meeting with the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs to review early findings from the case study
- One virtual and three in-person workshops with over 70 APS staff and leaders in Washington, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Utah to workshop the recommendations
- An hybrid convening with the Expert Advisory Board in Washington, D.C. to finalize the recommendations

These meetings were instrumental in gathering valuable feedback to improve our work.

Additional dissemination activities are planned, including presenting at the 2023 Annual NAPSA conference (see Appendix F).

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Appendix A: Poster Presented at the Gerontological Society of America 2021 Annual Scientific Meeting



Older Americans Resource Surveys on neglect, Elder Abuse, Elder Financial Abuse, and Elder Self-neglect



Introduction

Abuse, neglect, and exploitation of older adults are prevalent and underreported in the U.S. Though an estimated 1 in 10 older adults will experience some form of abuse¹, fewer than 5% of cases are reported to authorities.²

Existing research points to several barriers to reporting, including a lack of communication from Adult Protective Services (APS) to reporters after they make a report, which can disincentivize future reporting.

This study examines current APS feedback policies and practices across the U.S. Early results presented in this poster help fill an important gap in the understanding of feedback loops between APS and reporters.

Purpose

Overview: This poster presents findings from the first of three objectives of a two-year study, funded by the National Institute of Justice.

Objective: The first objective is to conduct an environmental scan of publicly available information on the legal, ethical, and practical barriers and facilitators to communication between APS and reporters.

Methodology: We reviewed federal and state policies related to APS and reporters, including APS-Technical Assistance Resource Center reports and APS program websites. We collected data on four main domains (Administrative Structure, Reporting and Intake, Investigation, and Feedback) across 52 states and jurisdictions, including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

Policies and Practices of APS Agencies

APS policies and practices—including administrative structure and reporting, intake, and investigative procedures—vary widely across states and jurisdictions. For example:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>Administrative Structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 71% are state agencies • 25% are county agencies • 4% are other or a combination of both state and local agencies | <p>Intake Structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 54% have a centralized state-level intake system • 23% have a local intake system • 23% have a combination of state- and local-level systems |
|--|---|

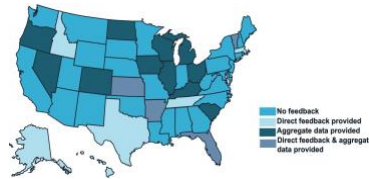
Investigation

- 65% respond to reports within 3 to 10 days
- 36% complete investigation in 60 or more days
- 29% complete investigation within 20 to 30 days
- 17% have no completion time policy

Data from APS-TARC Evaluation Report, 2019

To our knowledge, prior to this study, there was no existing research on APS feedback practices.

Most APS Agencies Do Not Currently Provide Feedback



Direct Feedback to Reporters

Who gets feedback?		What type of feedback?	
All Reporters	Mandated Reporters Only	Procedural Feedback	Substantive Feedback
AZ FL HI ID KS MA* TX	AR TN VT	FL ID KS TN TX	AZ AR HI MA VT

*Feedback is provided to non-mandated reporters upon request

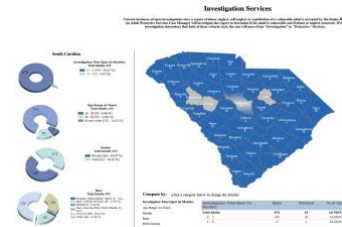
Procedural feedback is feedback to reporter on the process of receiving, screening, or investigating a report (e.g., notification that report made was received, screened out, or screened in for investigation).

Substantive feedback is feedback to reporters beyond the process of receiving, screening, or investigating a report (e.g., feedback on the outcome of the investigation).

Aggregate APS Data

- Aggregate APS data may serve as an alternative to direct feedback to reporters due to confidentiality issues.
- However, aggregate data are often contained in annual reports and not always readily accessible to reporters.
- Some agencies make aggregate data more accessible on their website through scoreboards/dashboards (e.g., South Carolina, Arizona).

Snapshot: South Carolina's Aggregate APS Data Dashboard



Source: APS website, South Carolina

Next steps

- Interview APS leaders across the U.S. to supplement these findings.
- Conduct a case study in MA and develop a set of recommendations based on the results of all our research activities and through consultation with expert advisors.

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Appendix B: Poster Presented at the 2022 USC Judith D. Tamkin International Symposium on Elder Abuse

APS-Reporter Feedback Practices: Examining (Mis)communication between APS and Reporters

Olanike Ojelabi¹, Randi Campetti¹, Kathy Greenlee², Kristin Lees Haggerty¹

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2022 USC Judith D. Tamkin International Symposium on Elder Abuse

NIJ Grant No: 2020-75-CX-0003; RRF Grant No: 2019-040

Introduction

1 in 10
older adults in the
U.S. experience
abuse or neglect.¹

Elder abuse are highly under-reported in the U.S. Only 1 out of 24 cases are reported to authorities including Adult Protective Services (APS)²

Lack of
communication
between APS and
reporters is a key
barrier to
reporting.³

Preliminary results from an environmental scan of APS policies and practices indicate:

- Most APS agencies do not provide feedback to reporters.
- Only 10 states have publicly available information on how they communicate with reporters.⁴

This study examines APS staff and reporters' perspectives on what is (or is not) communicated to reporters. The results help us to better understand APS-reporter communication and will inform our recommendations for strategies to improve this communication.

Purpose

Overview: This poster presents findings from a secondary analysis of data from focus groups conducted with emergency medical services (EMS) providers and APS staff in two states.

Methodology: We conducted secondary analyses of six focus group discussions with EMS providers and APS staff members in 2019. Focus groups were conducted in person, audio-recorded, and lasted 90 minutes. Data was analyzed using open coding, and an inductive analytical approach recommended by grounded theory.⁵

State	EMS providers	APS staff
Texas	8	7
Massachusetts	15	7
Total (n = 37)	23	14

Findings and Discussion

Key Issues Raised by EMS

Clarify the reporting process

"There's a gap in understanding of how the process works together. What will happen from here? If there are things [APS] can't do, will I be told?"

Provide feedback on the report made

"We can't just go to people's houses. We need some feedback, positive reinforcement. We go there again and again, and nothing changes. Why are we doing this?"

Clarify expectations of APS

"Set expectations for us – here's what you should expect as far as feedback. You may not be able to get the full follow-through that you want."

Key Issues Raised by APS

Importance of older adult's right to self-determination

Lack of feedback shouldn't stop reporting

Need to establish mutual understanding

"EMS [staff] may see that they continue to get the same report and they feel that nothing has happened and its really because they don't understand that part of the right to self-determination, so they get a little discouraged... just like they have to go out there, we do too. That shouldn't stop them from making a report."

Conclusions

APS staff and reporters are committed to providing the best care for their clients.

- Reporters want to understand the outcomes of their reporting actions, such as if their report improved care for the older adults, and if the report made was appropriate.
- APS agencies' priority is to protect the rights of older adults, which may hinder their ability to share information.
- Some states do provide feedback including at the end of an investigation. It is important to understand how this is possible, and the ways it can be replicated in other agencies.

Next steps

- Interview APS leaders across the U.S.
- Conduct a case study in Massachusetts.
- Develop a set of recommendations from our research findings and through consultation with expert advisors.

References

1. Acierno R, Hernandez MA, Amstader AB, et al. Prevalence and correlates of emotional, physical, sexual, and financial abuse and potential neglect in the United States: the National Elder Mistreatment Study. *Am J Public Health* 2010;100(2):292-297.
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This study is part of a larger research project funded by the National Institute of Justice and draws on data collected for complementary projects led by Education Development Center with funding from RRF Foundation for Aging.

Appendix C: Guide for Conducting APS Workshops

Preparation and Logistics:

1. Platform: In-person is preferable

Workshops were held in-person with three states and virtually with one state. Each workshop was beneficial, but the in-person format proved to be more generative.

2. Participants: Invite diverse group of staff

It is important to invite staff with expertise in each area of process, from intake to case closure Supervisors should be included, as well as frontline staff from across the state. It is also important to consider demographic diversity. The workshops we conducted were limited by a lack of racial diversity. In hindsight, it would have been beneficial to allocate time during the preparation phase to reflect on each participant list, consider who was missing, and make sincere efforts to include these individuals or groups.

3. Length: 2-3 hours

The workshop should allow enough time for participants to introduce themselves and participate in an “icebreaker” activity. This can help to set a positive tone for the meeting and encourage open communication among all participants.

4. Agenda

Develop a structured agenda that includes time for a brief presentation to establish the framework for the meeting but devotes most of the time to small and large group work and discussion.

Workshop Format:

1. Present current research and acknowledge documented concerns, risks, and benefits of providing information to reporters (see Appendix 1).
2. Summarize current state policy on sharing information with reporters but give participants permission to think outside of current confidentiality laws.
3. Brainstorm current practices and priorities that have the potential for change. For instance, question the day-to-day practices of the agency and the ways in which they vary depending on the location or role of the APS staff. Jointly identify strategies that staff use to share information with different types of reporters at each stage of the reporting process and how the process can be improved.
4. Small group discussions may be more engaging for participants. These can be done through breakout groups, preferably with mixed categories of staff. It may be helpful to have a worksheet to guide participants as they think through the types of information they provide to reporters during the reporting process (see Appendix 2).

Determine Top Priorities for Change:

1. What types of information would you like to share that you are not currently?
2. Why are you currently unable to share this information?
3. What policy, practice, or workflow needs to be changed or implemented to facilitate this change?
4. What factors make it possible for you to implement this change?
5. What barriers need to be overcome to implement this change?

ADULT PROTECTIVE SERVICES AGENCY WORKSHOP

Location

AGENDA

Date

TIME	AGENDA ITEM
1:30 – 1:50 PM (20 minutes)	Welcome and Introductions <i>Facilitators:</i>
1:50 – 2:10 PM (20 minutes)	Background and Framing, Methods, and Overarching Themes <i>Presenters:</i>
2:10 – 2:15 PM (5 minutes)	Law, Exceptions, and Client Consent <i>Presenter:</i>
2:15 – 2:35 PM (20 minutes)	Feedback Model & Draft Recommendations <i>Presenter:</i>
2:35 – 2:50 PM (15 minutes)	BREAK
2:50 – 2:55 PM (5 minutes)	Breakout Group Preparation <i>Presenter:</i>
2:55 – 3:35 PM (40 minutes)	Breakout Groups: Implementation, Opportunities, and Challenges
3:35 – 4:15 PM (40 minutes)	Breakout Group Reports and Discussion <i>Facilitator:</i>
4:15 – 4:25 PM (10 minutes)	Next Steps and Closing Remarks <i>Presenter:</i>

Appendix 1: Perceived Risks and Benefits of APS Providing Feedback to Reporters

Risks

- Backlash for APS
- Client loss of trust in APS
- Detrimental to older adult's privacy
- Breach of confidentiality laws
- Strains staff and already limited resources

Benefits

- Acknowledges report made
- Reduces unnecessary callback
- Educate reporters, strengthens future reports
- Access additional information to improve case outcomes
- Strengthens relationship between APS and reporters

Appendix 2: APS Workshop Worksheet

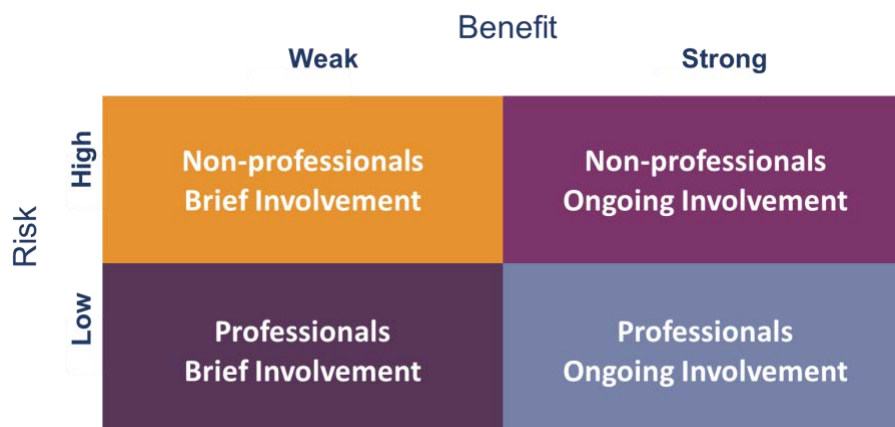
Recommendations for Improving Communication Between APS and Reporters: Workgroup Activity

- For each stage of the report-response process, please indicate which group of reporters, professionals vs. non-professionals, receive procedural feedback (i.e., updates about the process) and which receive substantive feedback (i.e., more specific information about the investigation, services provided, and/or case outcome).

STAGE	PROCEDURAL FEEDBACK	SUBSTANTIVE FEEDBACK
INTAKE / SCREENING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professionals, ongoing relationship Professionals, brief relationship Non-professionals, ongoing relationship Non-professionals, brief relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professionals, ongoing relationship Professionals, brief relationship Non-professionals, ongoing relationship Non-professionals, brief relationship
INVESTIGATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professionals, ongoing relationship Professionals, brief relationship Non-professionals, ongoing relationship Non-professionals, brief relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professionals, ongoing relationship Professionals, brief relationship Non-professionals, ongoing relationship Non-professionals, brief relationship
CLOSURE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professionals, ongoing relationship Professionals, brief relationship Non-professionals, ongoing relationship Non-professionals, brief relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professionals, ongoing relationship Professionals, brief relationship Non-professionals, ongoing relationship Non-professionals, brief relationship

Next, using the information you provided above, circle the quadrant in the model below that you think is **most** in need of improvement. Some guiding questions:

- With which types of reporters would it be useful to exchange more information?
- What kinds of information would you like to be able to share with these reporters that you are not currently?



3. Finally, please take a few minutes to brainstorm with your group the priorities for change to improve communication, potential challenges, and opportunities for implementing change in your state.

Priority What policy, practice, or workflow needs to be changed or implemented?	Challenges to Implementation What barriers would you need to overcome to operationalize changes to communication?	Opportunities for Implementation What factors make it possible for you to operationalize changes to communication?

Appendix D: Dissemination Plan

Channel	Format	Contact person
NAPSA - Research to practice	Webinar	Marian Liu
ADvancing States	Webinar	Martha Roherty & Kathy Greenlee
APS - TARC	Recommendations	Karl Urban
Research participants	Recommendations	EDC
APS workshop participants	Recommendations	EDC
Academic journals	Manuscripts	EDC
NIJ	Final Research Report	EDC
NAPSA Annual Conference	Workshop	EDC

Appendix E: Four Domains of APS Policies and Practices

	Domain 1 Administrative Structure	Domain 2 Reporting and Intake Policy and Practice	Domain 3 Investigation Policy and Practice	Domain 4 Feedback Policy and Practice
Categories of Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Name of agency Agency website Agency location Geographical structure Intake structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mandatory reporting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Universal reporting Financial institutions Social service and/or medical personnel Details of mandated reporters Mandated reporting legal Statute(s) Eligibility for APS services Eligibility for APS services details Maltreatment definition Maltreatment details (types of maltreatment) Reporting methods Verbal reporting Reporting hotline Online reporting Reporting form/website When should a report be made? Is reporting form available in another language (e.g., Spanish)? Does website have information on what mandated reporters will be asked during reporting? Details of what mandated reporters will be asked during reporting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigation Outside of Agency's Jurisdiction Investigation Within Agency's Jurisdiction Standardized tools used for investigation. Standard of Evidence Emergency Protective Orders Ratio of Reports to APS Investigator Service provided. Review time (Maximum response time) Timeframe (Investigation completion time) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does agency provide feedback to reporters? Who gets feedback on the report they made? When is feedback provided to reporters? What type of feedback is provided to reporters? Does agency provide information about a maltreatment case to other individuals beside the reporter? Which individuals beside the reporter get information about a maltreatment case? Does agency provide publicly available aggregate data? What information about elder maltreatment cases is shared? What information about elder maltreatment cases is not shared? Confidentiality Feedback format

		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can mandated reporters elect to remain anonymous?• Does website have information on the protection/confidentiality of mandated reporters?• Does website have information on what happens if a mandated reporter doesn't report (penalty)?• Does website have information on what to expect after a report is made?• Details of what to expect after a report is made.• Is there cross reporting between mandated reporters/APS and other agencies?• Cross reporting details• Does website have information on mandated reporter training?• Reporter training details/website		
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