



Triad Program Perspectives on Preventing and Addressing Elder Abuse in Rural Communities

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Key Findings

- Challenges to preventing and addressing elder abuse included themes related to education and awareness, outreach and engagement, limited resources and services, reporting issues, isolation, stigma, and systemic barriers.
- Criteria for successful interventions from rural Triads (multi-sectoral community-based partnerships that address elder abuse) include the integration of elder abuse programming, community collaboration, older adult engagement, and elder abuse infrastructure.

Purpose

Elder abuse is a widespread issue and rural communities face unique risks to preventing, identifying, and addressing it. This brief shares results from key informant interviews with representatives of rural Triads, multi-sectoral community-based partnerships that address elder abuse, to illuminate rural-specific dimensions of this issue.

Background and Policy Context

Elder abuse is a complex and challenging problem experienced by approximately 1 in 10 U.S. older adults.¹ The CDC defines elder abuse as “an intentional act or failure to act that causes or creates a risk of harm,” to someone aged 60 or older.² Elder abuse encompasses physical, emotional/psychological, sexual, and financial abuse, as well as neglect and self-neglect.^{2,3}

Elder abuse in rural communities is a research topic of growing interest internationally,⁴⁻⁶ but U.S.-based research on the subject remains limited. There is some evidence that older adults living in rural and remote areas are at greater risk for abuse than their urban-dwelling counterparts.⁷ Some unique characteristics of rural America, including less densely populated communities, more geographic isolation, and scarcer resources may conceal abuse, thereby inhibiting prevention and intervention. Rural older adults also tend to have less education and fewer financial resources, and are in poorer health than their urban counterparts, possibly creating barriers to leaving abusive situations.⁸

Addressing the needs of older adults in rural communities requires dedicated and collaborative attention from leaders and organizations across sectors.⁹ Previous research has pointed to multidisciplinary teams, in which multiple agencies collaborate to respond to elder abuse, as the best strategy for addressing elder abuse in rural areas.³ Triads are one such example, functioning as community-driven partnerships between law enforcement, older adults, and community organizations (such as Area Agencies on Aging and other social service-related groups), with the goal of reducing both crime and the fear of crime among older adults.¹⁰ First conceived in 1988 in Louisiana and since established in 47 states,¹⁰ Triads are coalitions made up of law

enforcement, older adult volunteers, aging services, concerned community members, and local social services organizations. Triads aim to educate and empower older adults to protect themselves against crime, fraud, and other forms of mistreatment.¹¹ Triads host educational events on topics including elder abuse, neglect, scam prevention, vandalism prevention, and burglary prevention, as well as other safety-related programming such as home safety inspections, older adult driving courses, and more.¹¹

Through their community-focused work with older adults, individuals active in rural Triads are knowledgeable about the problem of elder abuse in rural communities, and have valuable insights about what is needed to better address this important public health concern. This brief summarizes the findings of interviews held with rural Triad leaders, adding critical information to what is known about rural elder abuse prevention and intervention.

Approach

We interviewed representatives from eight Triads based in rural U.S. communities. In order to identify active rural Triads, we accessed the publicly available Triad Database (last updated 09/27/2022) found on the National Sheriff's Association website.¹² From this database, we developed a list of 245 Triads headquartered in rural places using the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy's list of defined rural areas via the Am I Rural?¹³ tool from the Rural Health Information Hub. We removed from consideration all rural Triads without a listed contact (33). Next, we scoured the Internet for recent activity (i.e., within the past 12 months) by the remaining rural Triads (e.g., website, Facebook activity, local news stories), and removed all that lacked recent activity, resulting in a final list of 85 active rural Triads across the country. We reached out to 65 active rural Triads via email, refraining from reaching out to the additional 20 Triads in Virginia after obtaining interviews from 3 (of 51) active rural Triads in that state. Representatives from eight rural Triads responded and completed interviews.

Members of the research team conducted interviews via Zoom with nine total representatives from eight Triad-affiliated organizations in January and February 2024. Respondents included six aging services special-

ists (working with county or community programs), three law enforcement officers, and one older adult volunteer. Responding Triads were based in rural communities in the Midwest, Northeast, and Southern regions of the U.S., with represented states as follows: Maine (1), Michigan (1), New York (2), Virginia (3), and Wisconsin (1).

Interviews were guided by a structured set of questions developed by the research team; questions concerned organizational information, challenges to preventing and addressing elder abuse in respondents' rural areas, and resources both available and needed in their respective communities. Responses were coded by three research team members using inductive coding to arrive at themes. Each interview was coded by all three researchers, and themes were arrived at via consensus across the team.

Results

Respondents described the structure of their local Triads and the types of programming offered to older adults in their rural communities. A common characteristic of all the Triads interviewed was the involvement of a broad coalition of organizations and individuals, including county aging services, Area Agencies on Aging, law enforcement, senior centers, health services, and older adult volunteers. The level of involvement of law enforcement in rural Triads varied widely; some Triads are primarily led by local law enforcement officials (such as community service officers), while others report that law enforcement is present at meetings and events but is not integral to Triad planning or operations. Additionally, several respondents noted a marked drop-off in participation from community members or coalition partners due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most respondents said that their Triads hold monthly or quarterly meetings in community spaces, such as libraries, senior centers, and churches. These meetings typically feature rotating educational topics, with fraud/scam prevention and emergency preparedness being the most frequently mentioned during interviews. Other educational topics include identifying and reporting elder abuse as well as general health and wellness topics like physical activity and nutrition. Additionally, multiple Triads we spoke with host larger events annually or semi-annually. These events are

either focused on health and safety (e.g., resource fairs) or are purely social activities (e.g., older adult appreciation luncheons). (11.6%) and older adults with at least some college were least likely to report food insecurity (3.6%, $p < 0.001$).

Triad representatives were asked if there are specific types of abuse (e.g., financial, physical, emotional, self-neglect) that are particularly difficult to prevent or address in their rural areas. Many shared insights into the most common types of elder abuse they encounter. Two responses were consistent across Triads: financial abuse or fraud, and self-neglect. Participants described how older adults in their rural communities experienced various scams, including romance scams, scams involving fictitious threats and other scare tactics, false hope scenarios such as lottery and sweepstakes scams, as well as more general financial abuse by those with access to older adults' finances. One respondent noted several times that, *"Nobody expects that their children are going to take advantage of them, and we've seen some pretty significant cases of that. But in general, I just think the financial exploitation going on and the significance of it... You know,*

people giving away hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars in these scam situations where there really is no recourse, because they're happening internationally. You know, there's no way to track those entities. So those are really the most difficult cases to really have an adequate response to" (law enforcement officer).

Challenges to Preventing Elder Abuse

Respondents from rural Triads identified several key challenges to preventing elder abuse in their communities. We identified six themes among their responses that are associated with these challenges. Table 1 describes each theme and provides illustrative quotes.

The first major challenge was a lack of **education and awareness** of elder abuse in rural communities. Many respondents expressed concerns that older adults and other rural community members have a limited understanding of elder abuse behaviors and symptoms, as well as what steps to take to prevent abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Similarly, representatives described

Table 1. Descriptions and Quotes Illustrating Themes for Challenges to Preventing Elder Abuse

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quotes
Education and Awareness	Community members are not educated on the signs and symptoms of elder abuse	"There's that stereotype that, you know, elder abuse just has to be physical and leaving a bruise. But it's just so much more than that." (aging services specialist) "I think, getting a word out about Triad and about education around safety and educating people about elder abuse can be hard." (aging services specialist)
Outreach and Engagement	Rural older adults are not often engaged in efforts related to prevention and could benefit from additional outreach from partners focused on prevention	"The biggest barrier is, how do you reach the people you're not reaching, who probably are some of the most vulnerable people in the community, you know... your homebound folks, your folks who are socially isolated, lonely. And then, you know, you put Covid on top of that. That just exacerbated all of that, and continues to be a real barrier, because there are still lots and lots of older adults who don't feel comfortable coming back out into the community. And if you can't get people at the table it's a real, real challenge." (law enforcement officer)
Isolation	Older adults in rural communities can be isolated or lack community cohesion, making elder abuse prevention more challenging	"There seems to be sort of this disconnect going on. And this isolation. And I think that even was before Covid you know, there just doesn't seem to feel like there's that sense of community right now, and I think that's not just in our county, but throughout the state, and even the country. So, I think, you know, that's a barrier. It's just a lack of where people can turn if they feel like they're experiencing that." (aging services specialist)

Table 1 Continued. Descriptions and Quotes Illustrating Themes for Challenges to Preventing Elder Abuse

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quotes
Resources and Services	Resource issues, such as with funding and staffing, do not allow for robust prevention efforts and may hinder quality of life for staff working with older adults	“I think a barrier is always, you know, unfortunately, resources. So even if we reach out to people, there's not always adequate funding to provide them with the services that they need to be [in] a different position. Staffing is always an issue. I think in a rural community, you know, that's hard. I think if you're in a more urban community, honestly, which I've never worked in, but you're gonna have a more consistent level of need. Those reports are just gonna come in on an ongoing basis. I think in a rural community we really see some fluctuation. And you can't make a good story with that. So, to add more staff, you really would need to be at that high level.” (law enforcement officer)
Technology	Difficulties with access to the internet and technological literacy can inhibit access to information and increase fraud risk	<p>“But there are some senior communities without wi-fi yet.... There are a lot of things we have to do that you wouldn't have to do in the city just to reach out and connect with the citizen base.” (older adult Triad volunteer)</p> <p>“So, the technology is consistently evolving and improving. And that's just hard to teach and share with older folks who just quite frankly aren't used to that technology. So as far as the scams and the financial struggle that they have, quite frankly, I don't think it's going to get any easier because of the technology.” (law enforcement officer)</p>
Elder Abuse Stigma & Risk	Challenges related to risks attributed to older adults and stigma associated with being more susceptible to abuse	<p>“Unfortunately, if you don't have good caretakers, that can go south in a hurry, and they can definitely be abused for their prescriptions and their money and their checkbooks or, because all older people have checkbooks and old school type of stuff and savings accounts where they use under the bed for their savings account, you know, a lot of money in those things, leave them so vulnerable.” (aging services specialist)</p> <p>“Preventing elder abuse from family member to family member is especially hard because it's like within the family dynamic, so we don't see it. We don't know about it, so I think like breaking the stigma, too, can be tough.” (aging services specialist)</p>

concerns around **outreach and engagement** to both older adults and those who work with older adults, which limits their ability to prevent elder abuse proactively. **Isolation** among many rural older adults was also noted as a challenge. Triad partners described struggling to reach older adults who lack access to services or transportation, or identified isolation as an independent risk factor for elder abuse. Another challenge included a lack of **resources and services**, which included concerns around inadequate staffing and funding for rural aging services. **Technological barriers**, such as limited Internet access or the capacity to utilize emerging technologies, were also described as significant challenges to preventing elder abuse. Finally, **stigma and risks** associated with aging were noted, including characteristics that may make some older adults targets for abuse, such as possessing prescription medications or experiencing cognitive decline.

Challenges to Addressing Elder Abuse

Participants provided their perspectives on the biggest challenges for addressing elder abuse in their communities, resulting in five themes (Table 2). **System challenges** were most frequently mentioned, focusing on issues related to the legal system (such as the high cost of legal resources or the limited ability for law enforcement to intervene in abuse cases) as well as the general difficulty of addressing elder abuse due to organizational silos and the time needed to resolve abuse. A theme related to **reporting inability or hesitation** was also highlighted, including reasons that individuals are unwilling or hesitant to report elder abuse, such as embarrassment or fear of repercussions, as well as the inability to report due to access barriers. This applied to both individuals who may have experienced abuse, as well as to those around them. A similar barrier was an **unclear reporting process**, which can make

Table 2. Descriptions and Quotes Illustrating Themes for Challenges to Addressing Elder Abuse

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quotes
System Challenges	Problems within and related to the systems dedicated to addressing elder abuse (e.g., legal, law enforcement, adult protection)	<p>“People think they need to hire like an elder lawyer, and [to] even talk to a lawyer is really expensive. So legal resources can be hard to come across for people who don't have resources to pay for it.” (aging services specialist)</p> <p>“I don't think there's lot of general knowledge in our area [such as] that the police department actually has fraud investigation, and that they can actually investigate some of these things.” (aging services specialist)</p>
Reporting Inability or Hesitation	Individuals who experience or witness elder abuse may be unwilling to report it due to embarrassment, fear of repercussions, or other barriers	<p>“I think that because of the nature of their age, that they're less likely to report and they're less likely because they might be ashamed or embarrassed, or feel like it's their fault.” (law enforcement officer)</p> <p>“People don't know when to step in either. Fear that there will be repercussions if they report elder abuse if it's like a parent or a neighbor. I think it's ageism, obviously, is like the biggest one; people just assume seniors, are just vulnerable, like things like this happen to seniors, and that's not the case. It's just harder to identify.” (aging services specialist)</p>
Unclear Reporting Processes	The reporting process for elder abuse is often not clear to those who may witness it	<p>“There's no real clear processes in place as to how to report or how to, you know, get the word out, like publicly about elder fraud and stuff.” (aging services specialist)</p> <p>“People also don't know where to go, and they don't know what is neglect. What's self-neglect, what's appropriate to report as elder abuse.” (aging services specialist)</p>
Resource Challenges	Rural communities often do not have enough funding for staff, including those dedicated to addressing elder abuse	<p>“Our local adult protective services, like a lot of people I'm sure, are understaffed. So, the processes in place, and the people in place to report those and to handle those or to go for help, is strained and limited.” (aging services specialist)</p> <p>“Transportation is expensive, but offering transportation to programs from their home, you know, door to door would be ideal, like reliable, safe transportation. We don't have a bus system in [community name], so it would have to be like a ride-share situation, or bringing it to them and doing in multiple places. Like if they can drive, but they just don't want to drive that far.” (aging services specialist)</p>
Isolation	Rural older adults often have fewer neighbors present to witness or identify elder abuse compared to older adults living in urban areas	<p>“People are less likely to identify elder abuse in themselves, or you know, if you don't have any neighbors walking by and seeing the state of the house, they're less likely to report it. So just like proximity to other people, and the isolation that comes with that is unique to our area.” (aging services specialist)</p>

addressing elder abuse more challenging. Two other themes included **resource challenges** for addressing elder abuse (mainly funding to staff organizations addressing abuse) and **isolation** (fewer neighbors in rural areas to see abuse).

Interventions for Elder Abuse in Rural Communities

When asked what was working well for preventing,

identifying, and addressing elder abuse in their rural communities, rural Triad representatives discussed intervention criteria that fit into four themes (Table 3).

Direct **elder abuse programming** was frequently described as a success factor, encompassing various forms such as regular meetings with educational lectures, annual health and safety resources fairs for older adults, and “wellness calls” programs where volunteers visit homebound individuals. One Triad representative

noted,
“From the Triad standpoint, I think we concentrate on safety in the home, security, making appropriate referrals, providing

social interactions and times for them to have some things to do so they don't become a shut-in” (law enforcement officer).

Table 3. Descriptions and Quotes Illustrating Themes for Interventions for Elder Abuse

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quotes
Elder Abuse Programming	Communities find success in providing programming related to elder abuse	<p>“We have two larger gatherings throughout the year. We do a fall conference and ADRC [Aging and Disability Resource Center] has been a huge help with, you know, bringing in great resources for that work. Just it's more of an informational, and then a spring event, which we call our ‘Safe Night Out.’ We do a spaghetti dinner with bingo and prizes, and [at] both of those events we get a good turnout.” (law enforcement officer)</p> <p>“So, we're really trying to make sure that we're tapping in and helping that pocket of people and just bringing information to them. So, it will be much like what the senior safety showcase that we did in October, but this one but on a smaller scale. And that will be held in April, and then we're going to host another larger one in a larger community in October around fall prevention month... We are involved a lot with the elder abuse campaign in May. Just really just getting out there and just creating some awareness not only for our seniors, but current caregivers, all their loved ones. And potential caregivers that are coming up through.” (aging services specialist)</p>
Community Collaboration	Partnerships among community organizations improves capacity to respond to elder abuse issues	<p>“Really, it's a bunch of different combined efforts, in hopes that, you know, everybody that needs to see the information will... Right, it's a bunch of little efforts trying to chip away at a big problem.” (aging services specialist)</p> <p>“I don't know that we have as many resources or services, but I think that we have great partnerships. You know the folks here on our end, the service end, whether it be law enforcement or the senior centers or the libraries. We have, I think, really good relationships with people who are interested and willing to partner. I definitely think that's a strength.” (law enforcement officer)</p>
Elder Abuse Infrastructure	Existing community infrastructure (e.g., law enforcement, Triad, state prioritization) supports prevention of and intervention in elder abuse	<p>“It's a real privilege and honor to be in a rural community and to have the impact on individuals that we do. You know, [Triad Leader] in her role gets to know older adults in our community. And I think the more time that she's here and spends, you just get to know your people, especially because we really have been partnering because we think [the] Triad is so important.” (law enforcement officer)</p> <p>“I think the fact like with our Triad group being together for so long... I think that's a bit of a testament to, you know, we keep pumping out that information, people know about us.” (law enforcement officer)</p>
Older Adult Engagement	Engagement of older adults in communities amplifies the ability to prevent and address elder abuse	<p>“Our seniors are very interested in... sharing with their neighbors about it, and we definitely look out for one another... they're very, like, loud volunteers, and they're very big advocates for preventing elder abuse, and word of mouth is like the best way to get this information across.” (aging services specialist)</p> <p>“We tend to have a pretty savvy group. We have a lot of civic organizations... Super active, so it's that social piece that I keep coming back to. It's, you know, keeping yourself mentally sharp, it's keeping those relationships, being engaged.” (law enforcement officer)</p>

Community collaboration between local organizations was another key theme, highlighting the strength of rural Triads in leveraging relationships within smaller communities to prevent and address elder abuse. Effective **elder abuse infrastructure** also contributed to successful interventions; several respondents pointed to long-standing Triads, prioritization of elder abuse response by law enforcement, and support from state or county agencies (e.g., state Attorney General or Adult Protective Services) as examples of systems and supports that are working well in their rural communities. Finally, **older adult engagement** in interventions was noted as a key contributor to success, particularly in conducting outreach, engaging in community activities, and volunteering with Triads.

Resources to Enhance Elder Abuse Prevention and Intervention Efforts

When asked what would make it easier to prevent, identify, and address elder abuse in their rural communities, Triad representatives' responses mostly focused on a variety of resources that would be helpful, but no specific themes emerged. Increased financial resources, for both organizations working specifically on issues of elder abuse as well as for their communities more generally, were mentioned as ways to improve prevention and intervention efforts. One respondent noted, *"More money would be great for our local Triad. I think we could do bigger things... that would require money, but that would generate more energy around community participation"* (aging services specialist).

Other suggestions went beyond financial needs, emphasizing diverse ways to approach the issue of elder abuse prevention and intervention. *"Just getting the word out," one respondent asserted, "like I said, community policing has gone by the wayside, but we're revitalizing that, so I think that because we're going to have like four people out in the community, and I think that will be a huge help especially to our aging population. I think we're doing a pretty good job in our area"* (law enforcement officer). This and other opportunities for improving elder abuse response included improving rural infrastructure, addressing labor-related issues (such as through increasing wages for long-term care staff), and

resolving systemic barriers within law enforcement and other county or state agencies that work to prevent, identify, and address elder abuse, particularly in rural communities.

Discussion and Implications

Triad leaders in rural parts of the U.S. – including aging services specialists, law enforcement officials, and community volunteers – described numerous challenges to preventing and addressing elder abuse in rural communities, such as limited resources, isolation among older adults, and a lack of community awareness about abuse prevention and intervention. Despite these challenges, they highlighted several strengths of their rural communities and resources that could enhance their responses to elder abuse. Unique strengths of rural areas can include close-knit relationships, facilitating the multi-sectoral collaborations needed to address the complex issue of elder abuse. Conversely, rural areas often have lower population density and greater geographic isolation, potentially making it more difficult to prevent, identify, and address elder abuse. Specific resource needs varied, though most respondents identified resources that could be partially or fully addressed through monetary investment, such as by bolstering staffing levels or funding transportation programs.

The themes identified for barriers to both preventing and addressing elder abuse are distinct but connected, and reflect the overarching message from Triads that more resources are needed to prevent and address elder abuse in rural communities. There is evidence to suggest that by improving the availability of resources, education, and awareness of elder abuse (as suggested by interviewees), improvements could be made to address several barriers they identified including those related to technology, reporting hesitation, and the unclear processes for reporting regardless of geography.^{14,15} Isolation of some rural older adults, often noted as a risk factor for elder abuse,^{16,17} could be addressed through improvements in transportation options, broadband access, initiatives to improve technology literacy and cyberscam awareness, and investments in in-home support services.¹⁸ Despite challenges with access to health care services in many rural areas, enhancing elder abuse screening in health care systems could be beneficial, as isolated rural older adults may interact with the health

care system, including primary care or emergency medical services (EMS), more frequently than other entities.^{19,20}

Initiatives to prevent and address elder abuse should take advantage of the primary strength of rural communities: the collaborative aspect of rural communities found in partnerships, community engagement, and programming – all mentioned in what was working well for Triads in rural areas. Funding for Triads, inter-governmental collaboration (e.g., local public health, adult protective services/social services, law enforcement etc.), and partnerships with other community organizations, such as banks and other businesses, can help communities band together to create relationships aimed at preventing older adults from experiencing elder abuse, or at least being able to identify it and address it as swiftly as possible. Breaking silos between agencies and building engagement opportunities with older adults and those who support them can be another strategy to create a collaborative system ready to tackle these challenges.²¹

Finally, there are larger, more systemic issues that could be addressed through policies at the local, state, or federal level that would improve prevention and intervention of elder abuse. Rural systems responsible for addressing elder abuse could create clearer, more accessible elder abuse reporting processes. By utilizing a “no wrong door” approach,²² social service and law enforcement agencies can provide coordinated assistance with reporting procedures and help abuse reporters get to the right entity as easily as possible. Legal assistance to pursue perpetrators of abuse can be costly, and the expansion of free or low-cost legal assistance for older adults and their families would help to reduce this barrier. Additionally, exploring the use of advocates for older adults in rural communities to address some of these issues could be another potential step to providing support as well as assistance with addressing elder abuse. While the federal government provides funding to track elder abuse and some initiatives aimed at preventing elder abuse, there is little specifically devoted to addressing this problem in rural communities.²³ To establish best practices for rural communities, more research is needed investigating effective, rural-specific prevention and intervention initiatives for elder abuse.

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