

A National Overview of Elder Abuse Through the Lens of Adult Protective Services (APS)

Georgia J. Anetzberger, PhD, ACSW

Earliest recognition of elder abuse as a problem led to the development of APS in the 1960s.

“One of our major problems in this field of protective care has been that our goals have not been clear, nor generally acceptable; nor the problem clearly defined, nor its extent and complexity known; nor have there been norms or standards upon which to base program objectives.”

...Mildred Barry at the
1960 Arden House
Conference on Aging

The beginning history of APS was characterized by:

- discussions
- demonstrations
- disappointments

“It does no good to speak of ‘shorter lives but merrier ones’ or of a ‘good death’...we should, however, question our present prescriptions and strategies of treatment. Is our dosage too strong, our intervention too overwhelming, our takeover too final?”

...Margaret Blenkner, Martin Bloom, & Margaret Nielson (1971) Social Casework 52(8), 483-499.

What was our understanding of
elder abuse and APS then?

What is elder abuse?

- Then: “mentally impaired aged living at large in the community whose [condition] renders them [unable to]...protect themselves from exploitation and want”

...Margaret Blenkner (1974)

Final Report: Protective Services for
Older People

How big is the problem?

- Then: “between 7 and 10 percent of the urban population over sixty years of age may come under this rubric”

...Margaret Blenkner, Martin
Bloom, & Margaret Nielson (1971)
Social Casework 52(8), 483-499.

What is APS?

- Then: “a system of preventive, supportive and surrogate services for the elderly living in the community to enable them to maintain independent living and avoid abuse and exploitation”

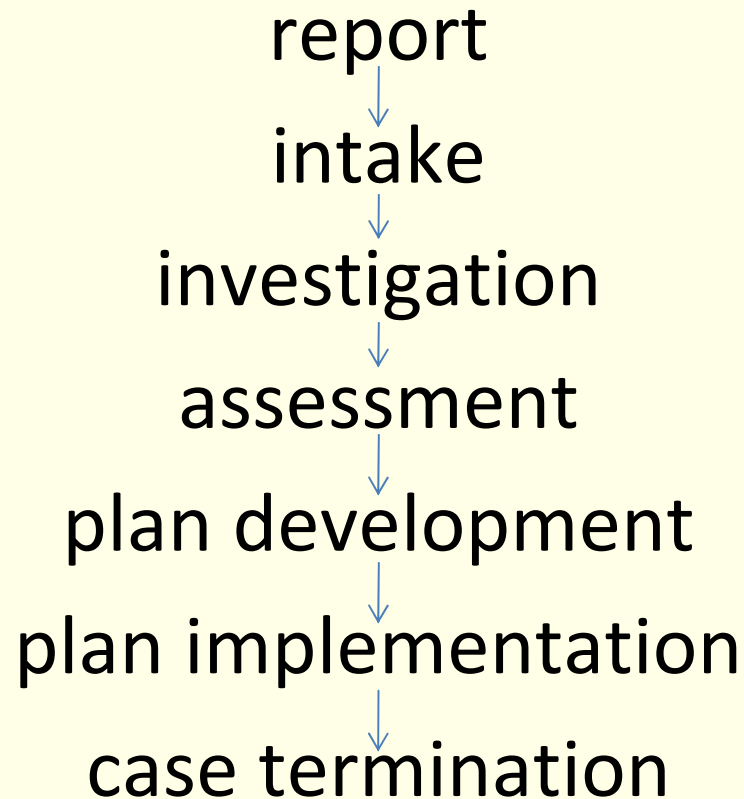
...Geneva Mathiasen (1973)

For me, APS began with Esther...

What are the basic functions of APS?

- receive and investigate reports
- assess risk status and service needs
- arrange and coordinate or offer services to prevent or treat harm
- seek legal intervention, if indicated

What are the steps in the APS process?



What challenges confront APS at
each step?

Report:

- lack of public and professional awareness
- bad faith reporting
- case dumping

Intake:

- clamor “to do something, not matter what”
- urgency of some situations
- inadequate information on which to base decisions

Investigation:

- worker safety concerns
- gaining entry
- case communication considerations

Assessment:

- questionable mental status of some adults
- overwhelming nature of complex situations
- difficulty of walking away from situations of human deterioration and risk

Plan development:

- few concrete resources
- intrusive legal interventions
- service refusal

Plan implementation:

- relying on others to help
- dealing with the perpetrator
- doing “too much or too little”

Case termination:

- premature case closure
- keeping the case open too long
- inadequate follow-up

What are the unique challenges in applying the ethical principles of APS practice?

- freedom over safety
- self-determination
- participation in decision-making
- least restrictive alternatives
- primacy of the adult
- confidentiality
- benefit of doubt
- do no harm
- avoidance of blame
- maintenance of family

What special challenges do high profile cases bring?

- intense public scrutiny
- media exposure
- pressure for speedy remedies
- involvement of elected officials
- legal and other issues from the family
- attention diverted away from other cases

Where are we now in understanding
elder abuse and APS?

What is elder abuse?

- Now: Elder mistreatment is “(a) interventional actions that cause harm or create a serious risk of harm, whether or not intended to a vulnerable elder by a caregiver or other person who stands in a trust relationship to the elder, or (b) failure of a caregiver to satisfy the elder’s basic needs or protect the elder from harm”

...National Research Council (2003)

Elder Mistreatment: Abuse Neglect, and
Exploitation in an Aging America

How big is the problem?

- Now: “estimates of the frequency of elder abuse range from 2% to 10% based on various [samples, definitions and research methods]”

...Mark Lachs & Karl Pillemer (2004),
The Lancet 364, 1192-1263.

What is APS?

- Now: “the constellation of interventions used to promote safety and well-being for older persons (and other vulnerable adults) whose health or circumstances subject them to harm or threat of harm”

...Georgia Anetzberger (2002)

How far has APS come nearly 50 years after Mildred Barry's comments?

- vague problem definition in law/research
- lack of national prevalence data
- public skepticism about APS
- lack of a federally enforced APS model or universally applied practice standards
- inadequate APS funding in most states
- questionable APS effectiveness
- frequent isolation of APS workers

Esther often comes to mind...

“...we must beware of the dangers which lie in our most generous wishes. Some paradox of our nature leads us, when we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion.”

...L. Trilling (1953) The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society and the concluding statement in Final Report--Protective Services for Older People: Findings from The Benjamin Rose Institute Study (1974)