

Elder Abuse: A Guide for Community Care and Protection

Audience Note: This fact sheet is designed for community caregivers, family allies, and tribal program staff to increase awareness, identify signs of abuse, and provide actionable steps to support AI/AN elders.

Elder abuse includes physical, emotional, or sexual harm, as well as neglect and financial exploitation of elders. It is a serious public health concern that impacts physical health, mental well-being, and life opportunities.

ELDERS IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES: STRENGTHS AND PROTECTION

Recent research specifically examining American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) populations highlights that while these communities experience disproportionate rates of violence, they possess unique strengths that serve as a shield against abuse.

Protective Factors

Cultural and community assets are vital in preventing abuse. These include:

- **Community Mindedness:** Strong social ties and a sense of shared responsibility.
- **Cultural Connection:** Participation in tribal ceremonies and the use of tribal languages.
- **Spiritual Engagement:** Reliance on traditional ways and spirituality.
- **Intergenerational Wisdom:** Deep respect for elder wisdom and connection to tribal leaders.

The “Shared Risk” Framework

Research suggests that elder abuse is often interconnected with other forms of violence, such as intimate partner violence or suicide. Addressing one form of violence through a “shared risk and protective factors” framework can help prevent others.⁶

CURRENT STATISTICS & IMPACT

- **Tribal Prevalence:** Approximately **1 in 3 people** aged 60 and older experienced some form of abuse in family settings over the past year.³
- **Health Consequences:** Exposure to violence and abuse is linked to long-term issues, including depression, anxiety, substance use, and chronic diseases.⁶
- **Community Factors:** Community-level risks such as poverty, unstable housing, and limited access to quality education contribute to increased vulnerability.⁶

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Caregiver Support and Training: Teaching specific coping and problem solving skills to families and caregivers is a primary strategy for preventing neglect and emotional abuse.⁶

Promoting Connectedness: Reducing social isolation for elders is one of the most effective ways to lower the risk of exploitation.

Education of Rights: Helping elders understand their financial rights and how to identify “red flags” regarding scams and coercion.

Cultural Specific Programs: New approaches developed by and for specific communities are often more effective than standard models, as they incorporate local traditions and values.⁶

TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY AND LEGAL PROTECTIONS

Elder Protection in Indian Country involves a unique intersection of tribal, federal, and state law.

1. Tribal Law: Many tribes have enacted their own Elder Protection Codes that allow tribal courts to issue protection orders and appoint guardians within their jurisdiction.
2. Federal Law: The Elder Abuse Prevention and Prosecution Act and the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)¹ provide federal frameworks to enhance the investigation and prosecution of elder abuse, including financial scams targeting indigenous communities.⁵
3. Mandatory Reporting (requirements vary by jurisdiction): In many jurisdictions, healthcare providers and social workers are legally required to report suspected abuse to Tribal Law Enforcement and Adult Protection Services (APS).

Signs of Abuse

Caregivers and allies should be alert to:

1. Physical: Unexplained bruises, pressure sores, or broken eyeglasses.

2. Emotional: Unexplained changes in alertness, withdrawal from normal activities, or unusual depression.
3. Financial: Sudden changes in bank accounts, altered wills, or missing personal belongings.
4. Neglect: Poor hygiene, untreated bedsores, or unattended medical needs.

WHAT TO DO

Listen without judgment. Believe the elder. Document concerns. Contact Adult Protection Services, Tribal law enforcement, or a trusted local advocate. Call 911 if there is immediate danger.

In collaboration with the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women. As a tribal coalition, CSVANW does not provide emergency response or direct services. This fact sheet is for education and awareness.

Contact NICOA to learn more:
[NICOA.org](https://www.nicoa.org)

REFERENCES

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³Crowder, J., Burnett, C., Byon, H. D., Laughon, K., Acierno, R., Yan, G., Hinton, I., & Teaster, P. B. (2022). Exploration and Comparison of Contextual Characteristics and Mistreatment Prevalence Among Older American Indian and Alaska Native Respondents: Secondary Analysis of the National Elder Mistreatment Study. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(3-4), 1456-1483.

⁴McGee, L. & Urban, K. (2026). Adult Maltreatment Report 2023.

⁵Native American Elder Justice Initiative (NAEJI). (n.d.). *Tribal Elder Protection Team Toolkit*.

⁶Rollman, J.E., et al. (2024). American Indian and Alaska Native Violence Prevention Efforts: A Systematic Review, 1980 to 2018. *Injury Epidemiology*, 11(1). [PMCID: PMC10949553].

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