

Testimony Before the Pennsylvania Senate Aging and Youth Committee

Presented by:

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Introduction

Chairman Langerholc, Minority Chair Collett, Vice Chair Ward, and distinguished members of the Senate Aging and Youth Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the Pennsylvania Department of Aging's oversight of the Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) and concerns about spotlight articles.

My name is JR Reed, and I serve as Executive Director of the Lehigh County Office of Aging and Adult Services. I am the past Pennsylvania Association of Area Agencies on Aging (P4A) Board President. P4A has a Protective Services Committee that works on best practices, collaboration with PDA around policy and training. I served in the past as the chair of this committee. I have worked in aging services for over 26 years, including extensive experience supervising and providing protective services to older adults.

Background and Context

In 2018, the Office of the State Inspector General (OSIG) issued a report outlining significant deficiencies in the Department of Aging's monitoring and oversight of the AAAs' delivery of Older Adult Protective Services (OAPS). The findings underscored challenges in performance accountability, data collection, and overall system consistency.

Following the release of that report, I was asked to testify before a joint hearing of the Senate and House Aging Committees in 2019 to discuss these findings and propose solutions. At that time, the Area Agency on Aging network was actively attempting to work with the Department to identify improvements in training, documentation, and oversight. Unfortunately, under the prior administration, progress was limited despite repeated efforts from P4A to collaborate and offer recommendations.

At the hearing in April 2019, PA Department of Aging (PDA) testified at the beginning of the hearing and then left before any other stake holder testified. This gave an appearance of not wanting outside feedback at that time.

The P4A Board sent a formal letter to Secretary Torres outlining several system improvement recommendations, including more comprehensive training but the network received no plan or actionable response.

That lack of engagement allowed many of the weaknesses OSIG identified to persist—and some of the recent Spotlight PA reporting reflects those historical challenges rather than the progress made under the current administration.

Progress Under the Current Administration

Since 2023, the Department of Aging has taken a notably different approach—one grounded in collaboration, measurable accountability, and modernization. Among the key improvements:

- **Implementation of the CAPE Monitoring System:**
The new Comprehensive Aging Performance Evaluation (CAPE) process has modernized the Department’s oversight approach by focusing on objectivity, data-driven analysis, and consistency across the Commonwealth. My agency recently underwent the CAPE review. PDA reviewed a full year of records—more than 150 cases—marking the most comprehensive review I have experienced in my 26 years in the field.

The CAPE process now evaluates both compliance and quality, focusing on trends, documentation accuracy, timeliness, and outcomes. This shift toward a more objective evaluation represents a meaningful improvement over the more subjective systems of the past.
- **Annual Regulatory Review:**
PDA has committed to revisiting its Protective Services regulations yearly to ensure that policies remain current and responsive to emerging challenges.
- **Transparency and Public Reporting:**
For the first time, AAA performance data are publicly posted on PDA’s website, allowing legislators, the media, and the public to evaluate local system performance directly.
- **Technical Assistance:**
The Department has restructured its internal divisions, separating monitoring from technical assistance to ensure both accountability and support for counties.
- **Modernizing Case Management Documentation System:**
PDA is replacing a 25-year-old documentation system, a long-standing P4A recommendation that will enable more accurate, real-time data collection.
- **Fatality Review Process:**
PDA has introduced a new multidisciplinary fatality review processes to ensure that lessons from complex cases inform statewide quality improvement.

- **Training Efforts:**

PDA has put together a multidisciplinary training committee to revamp all training which includes protective services.

Response to Recent Media Coverage

Recent Spotlight PA articles have portrayed Pennsylvania’s elder protection network as unaccountable, opaque, and underperforming. While the press plays an important role in holding public agencies to account, many of these reports present outdated or incomplete narratives that overlook the measurable progress achieved since 2023.

For example:

- Claims that PDA “shields data” (Oct. 2025) fail to acknowledge that confidentiality laws restrict public disclosure of individual case information.
- Assertions that the CAPE system “masks failures” (June 2025) ignore that CAPE has expanded the number of case reviews and replaced subjective scoring with consistent, measurable indicators.
- Reports alleging that oversight has been weakened rely heavily on interviews with former employees whose tenure coincided with the very OSIG findings of mismanagement they now criticize.
- The implication that deaths among open cases are evidence of neglect omits context—most such deaths are not abuse-related, and pandemic-era mortality trends heavily influenced those figures.

It is also important to recognize that many of the individuals now criticizing the system held positions of oversight authority during the period when the OSIG identified major deficiencies. Their claims appear to deflect accountability for the shortcomings that occurred under their watch.

Balancing Protection and Autonomy

Protective service work requires daily judgment calls that weigh safety against individual autonomy. With the enactment of Act 61 (Guardianship Reform), the Commonwealth reaffirmed that personal liberty and the least restrictive alternative must guide guardianship decisions.

However, this also means that some older adults remain in higher-risk situations by choice. Our goal is not to eliminate all risk, but to ensure that when danger arises, our system responds swiftly, consistently, and respectfully—preserving both dignity and safety.

Revisiting the Older Adult Protective Services Act

The Older Adult Protective Services Act (OAPSA) has not undergone major revision since the 1990s. Pennsylvania's older adult population—and the nature of exploitation—has changed dramatically since then.

Key areas in need of legislative attention include:

- **Financial Exploitation:** Online banking, cryptocurrency, and digital scams were not contemplated in the original statute, yet financial exploitation now constitutes the highest type of reports. The PA Attorney General testified at a hearing that it is estimated 2 billion dollars are year is stolen from PA Older Americans.
 - **Access to Records:** Delays in obtaining medical and financial documentation remain major barriers to timely case resolution. Statutory updates could grant limited immunity to institutions that cooperate in good faith with investigations.
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Systemic Challenges and Funding Realities

While oversight has improved, the protective services system continues to face a severe resource imbalance. Reports of abuse, neglect, and exploitation have risen dramatically—projected to grow another 45% within the next five years—yet funding has increased by only 2.5% over the past 15 years, until the most recent budget that provided a 3.7% increase. I want to sincerely thank you for that increase—it is a meaningful step forward.

However, I would be remiss if I did not point out the scale of growth we are experiencing in both our older adult population and the demand for Protective Services. In Lehigh County alone, our Protective Services expenditures have grown from \$569,063 in FY 2016–17 to \$1,783,150 in FY 2024–25. During that same period, our staffing has increased from 5.45 full-time equivalents to 15.28—nearly tripling—to keep pace with escalating caseloads and complexity.

This persistent underfunding results in high caseloads, staff turnover, and slower response times—issues that can become the very shortcomings highlighted in the media. Without sustained and proportional investment, even the strongest systems and most dedicated professionals will struggle to meet the rising needs of older Pennsylvanians.

Conclusion

The Area Agencies on Aging share the Legislature's commitment to protecting older Pennsylvanians from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The current Department leadership has demonstrated an unprecedented willingness to collaborate, modernize oversight, and strengthen accountability.

The Spotlight PA articles underscore the need for vigilance and transparency—but they do not tell the full story. The reality is that Pennsylvania’s protective services system is stronger, more data-driven, and more accountable today than it has been for some time.

To sustain this progress, we urge the General Assembly to:

- Modernize the Older Adult Protective Services Act,
- Increase funding to PA Department of Aging and Area Agency on Aging’s,
- And continue supporting data-driven oversight that values both transparency and fairness.

In addition, there must be focused, coordinated efforts to prevent older adults from being abused, neglected, or financially exploited. Prevention must become a core pillar of our protective services work. Because of how enormous the task is there needs to be assistance from other departments and the legislature for the following items:

- Financial scam prevention and education should be a statewide priority—ensuring that older adults, caregivers, and families understand how to recognize and report fraud before harm occurs.
- Caregiver education and support are equally essential; caregivers are often the first line of defense in preventing abuse or neglect but need ongoing guidance, respite, and community-based supports.
- Finally, the direct care workforce crisis must be addressed. The home care and personal assistance professionals who support older adults daily are underpaid, overworked, and in short supply. Strengthening this workforce is fundamental to maintaining the safety, stability, and well-being of Pennsylvania’s aging population.

By focusing not only on accountability and oversight but also on prevention, education, and workforce development, we can ensure a system that protects older adults before harm occurs—and honors their dignity at every stage of care.

Thank you for your time and commitment to Pennsylvania’s older adults. I welcome your questions.
