



**Elder Justice Coordinating Council  
Remarks of Kez Wold, Associate Commissioner  
Texas Adult Protective Services  
November 15, 2022**

Good morning Chairwoman Barkoff and members of the Elder Justice Coordinating Council. My name is Kez Wold and I have the pleasure to serve as the Associate Commissioner of Adult Protective Services, which is part of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. Texas APS investigates allegations of abuse, neglect, and exploitation in cases involving adults in our state who reside in the community and are over the age of 65 or living with a disability. Our 550 caseworkers spread across 254 counties complete over 80 thousand investigations each fiscal year. On behalf of everyone at Texas APS, thank you for inviting me to speak today to share the impact that the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2021 (CRRSA) and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021 have had on our APS program.

While the Texas APS program is well-resourced and has long enjoyed the support of the Texas Legislature, longer-term planning is often challenging due to the biennial nature of our budget cycle. So, in early 2021, when we learned about the federal funds we were about to receive from ACL, our leadership team decided to use these funds to make strategic investments. The flexibility provided by these federal funds has been a very important feature from our perspective as it has allowed us to tailor our spending in areas that will allow us to become an even better program. I would like to highlight three out of several areas where we have made significant investments.

***Exploitation Units***

Financial exploitation of persons over 65 is a growing problem in Texas and one that is expected to worsen as this segment of the overall population increases. From Fiscal Year 2013 through Fiscal Year 2020, exploitation allegations among this age group increased 29%. In certain urban areas of the state, the increases have been even more dramatic, increasing as much as 40% in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area, and a whopping 66% in Houston.

In anticipation of the rapid increase of this segment of the population during the current decade, APS had piloted an exploitation unit in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area, beginning in 2018. Over the past several years, this unit has made significant progress. First, referrals to the Tarrant County District Attorney's Office, and later to Tarrant County law enforcement (Financial Crimes Division), have increased 63% in three years. These referrals include both APS exploitation cases as well as scams and thefts of which APS is made aware but does not investigate.

Building off the success and lessons learned from this initial pilot unit, Texas used ARPA funds to create three exploitation units and located them in the Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex, Houston, as well as San Antonio and the lower Rio Grande Valley. Something we learned with our initial pilot is that not all caseworkers feel comfortable working financial exploitation cases. These cases tend to be very complex, require advanced analytical and investigative skills, and involve working closely with law enforcement and the judiciary. In addition to the improved client outcomes attributed to more thorough investigations conducted by specialized staff, by building these units with APS Specialist V positions, an extra benefit has been the creation of a career path for staff interested in specializing.

Finally, the creation of these exploitation units has strengthened our working relationships with key partners in these jurisdictions. While law enforcement and the judiciary are obvious partners without whom we could not do this work, we have also strengthened our working relationship with local offices of the Social Security Administration. In San Antonio, we recently worked on an investigation that involved the Secret Service and their Cyber Fraud Task Force.

### ***Training Redesign***

The next area where we have invested our grant funds is our new caseworker training program. The last time Texas APS made major changes to its training program was in 2004. While we have identified a need to make changes for some time, we just didn't have the capacity to embark on such a major project.

Using ARPA funds, Texas hired a highly skilled project manager to oversee this work. While our program has the experience and knowledge to lend to such an effort, managing such a large project takes time and by creating a temporary project manager position, we have been able to advance this project at twice its expected speed.

The reason we wanted to address new caseworker training is quite simple. In the past three fiscal years, turnover rates among our APS Specialist I

positions have increased, from 33% in Fiscal Year 2020 to 57.8% in Fiscal Year 2022. To spend months training a new caseworker, only to have them leave once they are in the field is a disservice to our clients and our tenured staff, and it is a cost to the system that we cannot afford.

While we know that training alone will not completely resolve new caseworker turnover, we do expect it to have an impact. In our current training model, there is a lot of time spent in the classroom as well as completing web-based trainings. In our redesign, we are moving to a competency-focused field-based model. What that means is that new caseworkers will be trained on the building blocks of casework. This approach allows us to better identify the strengths of new caseworkers and to address any areas in need of improvement. It will also mean new caseworkers who are not able to successfully fulfill the requirements of the position will be identified earlier and may be separated from employment sooner in the process. While this could increase turnover to start, the long-term benefit for new caseworkers graduating from this redesigned training program, is that they will be fully capable of handling the work and serving our clients because they will have had months of practice under very close supervision.

By making the redesigned training program field-based, new caseworkers will build their skills in the field, serving real clients. In doing so, they will be able to help relieve some of the workload of their colleagues. To make sure these new caseworkers are learning what they need to know as they interact with clients, Texas APS is in the process of creating grant-funded training supervisor positions. These new positions will also offer a career path to existing staff who are looking for a new challenge and who want to help develop the next generation of caseworkers. These training supervisor positions are central to the new model and we are excited by what this new training model will mean for our clients and our workforce. Our launch date for the new training model is September 1, 2023.

### ***Partnerships***

Texas APS recognizes that to be effective, it needs the support of both the public and its partners. The public needs to be aware of and recognize the signs of abuse, neglect, and exploitation and how to help vulnerable neighbors, friends, and family members. And, to best serve our communities, APS needs its partners to share and coordinate valuable resources required by our mutual clients.

ARPA grant funding offered Texas the unique ability to contract with a public relations firm to conduct research into community, partner, and our own staff's perceptions of APS. Building on this research, APS is working with this

firm to design and implement a roadmap to engage critical partners, raise public awareness in a targeted way to promote neighbors helping neighbors and to call APS when needed, and overall build a positive perception of APS and its support of vulnerable Texans.

Our roadmap will lead to an occasion that we're greatly looking forward to – our 40<sup>th</sup> Annual APS Conference, scheduled the week of October 9, 2023 – which will kick off a year of engagement and awareness activities culminating with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passage of Title XX legislation.

### ***Conclusion***

Finally, I want to reiterate that the unprecedented opportunity provided by this funding represents a genuine chance to change and improve our APS programs. There are multiple projects underway in Texas that we could not have undertaken without the grant funding or that would have stalled without having the temporary staff to move them forward.

Thank you again for the invitation to speak today and share some of the work going on in Texas. It's a very exciting time to be part of APS and the efforts underway across the country will only propel our programs forward in ways we could not imagine a few years ago.