

**Fairfax County Department of Family Services in Addressing Diversity, Equity, and  
Inclusion Issues within the Older Adult Population**

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## **Fairfax County Department of Family Services in Addressing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Issues within the Older Adult Population**

The Adult and Aging division within Fairfax County Department of Family Services (DFS) provides services to the county's population of older adults and adults with disabilities. Older adults make up a vulnerable population, as they are subject to experience challenges related to diversity, equity and inclusion. Older individuals may also have intersecting social statuses that impact the way in which they receive services and experience society. In Fairfax County, there are many cohorts within the older adult population because it is such a diverse county. The Asian American population is the second largest racial group within Fairfax County, and many older adults of this racial status experience unique cultural barriers to services. Additionally, there are many older adults of low-income status in Fairfax County, despite its ranking as one of the wealthiest counties in Virginia. Older adults are susceptible to financial abuse and exploitation, and it is especially harmful to older adults with a limited income status, which unfortunately does not deter scammers from committing such acts. Such issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion can be addressed by the change agents within the Department of Family Services on a micro, mezzo, and macro level.

### **Asian American Older Adults**

In Fairfax County, the Asian American population is currently the largest minority group, which continues to grow more rapidly than the other racial groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Asian Americans within the older adult population make up a large portion of the community, yet their needs are not being addressed by the services that have been designed by and created for the dominant culture. Some factors that contribute to challenges with accessing services for this group include language barriers and cultural differences (Choi, 2001). Many supportive

services that older adults need are created to meet the needs of the dominant culture; for example, activities and educational services within adult day centers may not meet the language needs of the older Asian Americans within the program who do not speak English. Another example is meal services, which may supply dishes that are common among the dominant white culture rather than providing dishes that are traditional to the client's culture (Hong Lee, 2004). Furthermore, caregivers of Asian American older adults may be less likely to seek outside services due to their values of family obligation, privacy, and self-sufficiency (Choi, 2001).

The micro approach that could be utilized to address these issues would be to utilize interpreters, which is a service that Fairfax County DFS provides. Additionally, the Long Term Care unit is working to meet the culture and language needs of the clients by increasing the use of more personalized care options. This is being done by expanding and improving the adult foster care program by prioritizing factors such as language, the provider's ability to supply the client's preferred meals and make necessary accommodations, and both the provider and client's lifestyle and habits that would be impactful to their housemate. The unit is also working to expand the list of providers and recruit diverse individuals in order to place clients of various cultures with someone who could speak their language, offer a sense of familiarity and comfort, and share the same values.

The mezzo approach would be to establish more culturally specific adult day centers throughout the county, such as the Korean Central Presbyterian Church in Centreville. This would be helpful because Fairfax County is large, and it is difficult for clients to receive transportation to service locations that are further away in the county. Another mezzo solution is to mandate staff training within the department's adult services division that will increase cultural competence for delivering services to the Asian American older adult population. The

agency mandates diversity, equity, and inclusion training such as the implementation of the ADDRESSING model; however, workers would benefit from more specified diversity training because the area that is being served is so diverse (“The Addressing Model,” n.d.).

A macro solution for this issue is to initiate and/or advocate for policies that mandate language accommodations and diverse menu options in licensed facilities and agencies that supplement meals. This is more dignified for clients of minority cultural statuses, as it is supported by the social work value of treating all people with dignity and worth. It should not be a privilege for some to be served the food that they enjoy and are familiar with while those of diverse cultures experience an additional loss, as they can no longer enjoy the food that may be reminiscent for them and offer comfort (NASW, 2021).

### **Financial Exploitation**

In 2022, financial abuse and exploitation made up for 12 percent of reports made to Virginia Adult Protective Services, ranking third beneath self-neglect and neglect (“Adult Protective Services Annual Report,” 2022). Financial abuse and exploitation of the elderly is defined as the illicit use and/or misuse of an older adult's money or assets (“Elder abuse and elder financial exploitation statutes,” 2023). Examples of this occurring include internet scams, caregivers withholding money, and property theft (“Elder abuse and elder financial exploitation statutes,” 2023). Elder financial exploitation has contributing factors such as older adult loneliness and barriers to education.

Social workers are equipped with the knowledge and resources to address older adult needs when experiencing or seeking to prevent financial exploitation. Within Fairfax County DFS, social workers can address the issue on a micro level by responding to and assisting adults when they are scammed/exploited by connecting them with Adult Protective Services. The

department's practice is supported by empowerment theory, as they help older adults better manage finances, educate clients about various types of scams, and empower them to report the crime when it occurs (“What is Social Empowerment,” 2023).

The mezzo solution is to establish and promote education within the county’s assisted living facilities and independent living communities about financial exploitation, how to identify potential occurrences, and strategies to address the issue. The macro solution that social workers can take part in is continuing to advocate for policies such as the Virginia Senior Safe Act, which allows banks to act when suspecting financial exploitation with more protection against accusations of sharing private information (Hogan & Leslie, 2024). Advocating for policies that pose harsher punishments on those who financially abuse and exploit elderly adults may act as a hindrance as well. Social workers at Fairfax County DFS also take part in SHAPE Future of Aging initiative which aims to address an array of issues faced by the older adult population county wide (“SHAPE,” 2023). One of those issues is financial exploitation, which they plan to address by planning financial seminars at older adult communities and advertise information and seminars at locations where older adults are known to congregate and where low cost technology is offered (“SHAPE,” 2023).

The department’s efforts to address diversity and inclusion issues that are experienced by Asian American older adults may lead this client population to feel more comfortable with utilizing services. By being more aware of diversity and providing culturally sensitive services, it is lessening the impact of the major changes that older adults experience as they decline. Social workers within the department can also take initiative to address the needs of adults at risk of or experiencing financial exploitation and abuse. The department is guided by social work values including the dignity and worth of all, social justice, and service, which guide the workers as

they support the agency mission by honoring and serving every client and working to understand the entirety of the individual and their unique set of needs.

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