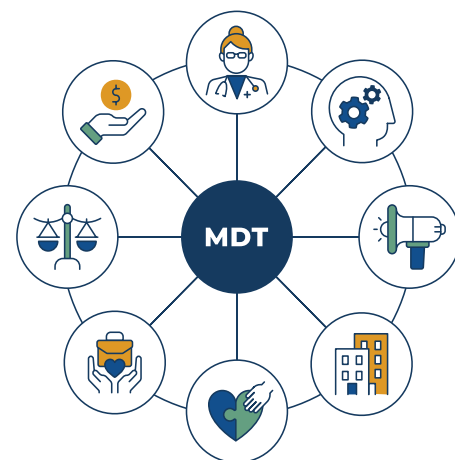


Forensic Accountants and Multidisciplinary Teams



Elder mistreatment is a multifactorial and nuanced phenomenon, often involving intersecting medical, legal, social, financial, and familial issues. Given the complexity of cases, response and redress often require the expertise of inter-sectorial professionals. Elder abuse multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) are an evidence-based intervention designed to enable collaborative case discussion, coordination, and resolution among professionals who might otherwise operate in silos. Through regular meetings and shared insights, participating MDT members recommend options for relief to promote victim safety, mitigate ongoing harm, and prevent reoccurrence.



MDTs vary in size, scope, process, and composition. Types of MDTs include Financial Abuse Specialist Teams, Elder Death Review Teams, enhanced MDTs (E-MDTs), and forensic centers. Core members vary based upon community needs and available resources. MDTs often include adult protective service (APS) caseworkers, long-term care ombudsmen, victim advocates, law enforcement agencies, geriatricians, psychologists, mental health professionals, civil attorneys, and prosecutors. Over the past ten years, the increasing integration of forensic accounting services and tools by teams nationwide has enhanced the investigation and resolution of cases involving elder financial exploitation.

Elder Financial Exploitation

Elder financial exploitation (EFE) is one of the fastest growing and most prevalent forms of elder mistreatment nationwide. It is estimated that between 5% and 11% of older adults experience EFE each year.¹

An estimated \$28.3 billion is stolen from older adults each year.



Of that, 72% is attributable to exploitation by known others, such as friends, family, and caregivers, and 28% perpetrated by strangers.

In 2023, over 101,000 victims aged 60 and over reported financial fraud



to the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center, resulting in **over \$3.4 billion in losses, a 14% escalation in complaints** from prior year reports.²

Only \$7.8 billion of the stolen funds are reported to



authorities.³

Defined as the misappropriation or misuse of an older person's money, property, or assets for another person's use or benefit,⁴ EFE consists of both elder financial abuse and elder financial fraud and scams. Elder financial abuse is committed by a trusted other, or someone known to the older person, such as a family member or surrogate decision-maker. Frauds and scams are typically perpetrated by strangers. Financial abuse may co-occur with other forms of mistreatment, compounding residual harms.⁵

EFE monetary losses can be significant, resulting in medical and mental health impairments, eviction, poverty, and homelessness. Economic costs may also be accompanied by emotional and psychological injury, especially when the harms are perpetrated by family members or trusted others.⁶ EFE can contribute to a loss of independence, stability, and social connection in elderhood. The aftermath can be destabilizing for older adults, many of whom may be less able to recover financial losses in later life, restore frayed relationships with abusing family members, and regain emotional security in older age.

Elder Financial Exploitation Underreports

Financial crimes are frequently unreported, unrecognized, and unaddressed. It is estimated that only 1 in 44 cases of exploitation receives formal supportive services.⁷ Among the reasons for abuse nondisclosure, older victims may be reluctant to reveal harms because of shame and embarrassment, concerns that a complaint will result in loss of independence and autonomy, fears of retaliation by the offender, or the cognitive inability to recognize, discover, and communicate abuse to authorities. Older adults may also be less likely to perceive a financial situation as exploitative when the misconduct is committed by a trusted other.

Complexity of Cases

Cases of financial exploitation can be very complex, involving deceptive tactics, detailed financial transactions, multiple accounts, and hidden or converted funds.⁸ Additional challenges arise in EFE where elder financial harms intersect legal, social, medical, psychological, and familial domains. Issues of an older person's medical and decisional capacity, an offender's undue influence, and family ties, may impact investigations, asset recovery, case resolution, and outcomes for elders. Core MDT members, including APS, law enforcement, and attorneys, provide guidance on the multifactorial issues that may arise in cases of abuse, but frequently lack the highly specialized investigative skills, financial expertise, time, and resources to review the intricate details of complicated financial transactions.

The Role of a Forensic Accountant

Financial records can be dense and difficult to understand. Review often requires examination of voluminous records and multiple transactions to detect unusual transfers, hidden funds, and signs of illegal activity. Forensic accountants are specially trained to conduct financial investigations. They are knowledgeable in the structure, process, and management of financial transactions; the range of financial crimes, patterns, and practices; common deceptions and deviations; the preservation and admissibility of evidence; and the provision of expert testimony.⁹

Forensic accountants collect and analyze financial records, trace the flow of funds, identify potential irregularities, inform investigations, and report findings.¹⁰ They can identify the types of assets that may have been diverted, compromised accounts, and records that require for review. For example, professionals can detect changes in banking practices, atypical withdrawals, missing funds or property, unpaid bills, and/or

forged signatures on documents, among other potential financial misdeeds. In both civil and criminal legal proceedings, experts can unpack complicated financial records and economic damages in ways that are comprehensible and meaningful to the judges and juries.

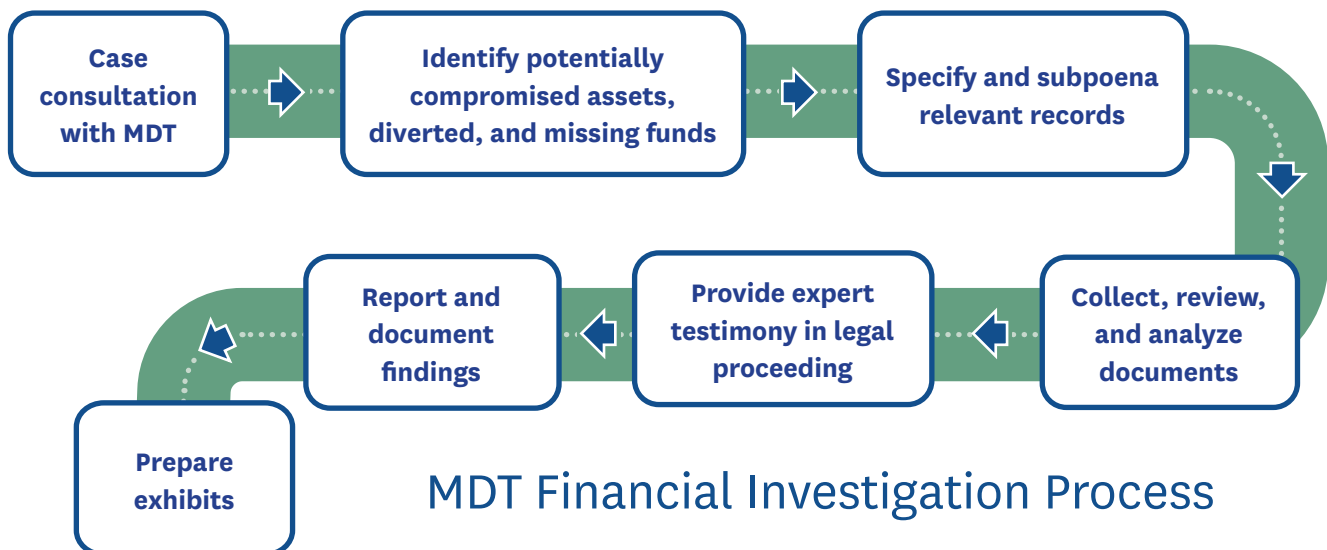
Forensic accountants often use data extraction software to analyze voluminous records and identify aberrant spending patterns more efficiently than manual methods. This software enables practitioners to create descriptive tables that clearly show fraudulent money transfers.

Types of Activities Forensic Accountants Might Look For

- Patterns of unusual spending
- Forged signatures on checks, wills, or other documents
- Purchases not intended for the benefit of the older adult
- Checks written to the alleged offender or to cash
- Discrepancy between prior and current spending habits
- Hidden accounts
- Uncharacteristic cash advances or withdrawals
- Missing income
- Comingling of funds
- Fraudulent real estate transactions
- Recent changes to wills, powers of attorney, health care proxies or beneficiaries

Collaboration with MDTs

Forensic accountants can assist MDT collaborators by investigating and untangling complex financial transactions that underlie allegations of elder financial abuse. The process begins with team members providing information about the older victim's condition, relationship to the alleged perpetrator, and the circumstances that gave rise to the alleged criminality. Informed of the case facts, forensic accountants can identify, gather, and review the relevant medical, legal, and financial records with the collective engagement and expertise of MDT agencies.



Importantly, team members can share the victim’s self-identified values and goals for case resolution. Through a common understanding, members can define the purpose and scope of the financial investigation and exchange reciprocal guidance through the investigative process. Examples of forensic accountant and MDT alignment are provided below:



APS

Forensic accountants most commonly draw foundational case and client information from APS caseworkers, including details about a client’s condition and capacity, relationship with the alleged offender, spending habits, sources of income, and timeline of relevant events. The findings of their financial review can help substantiate or negate an allegation of abuse.



GERIATRICIAN, GEROPSYCHOLOGIST, MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

Medical and mental health professionals can inform the investigative process by evaluating and explaining the older adult’s physical, psychological, cognitive, and mental health capacity. Specifically, the vulnerabilities that may impact financial decision-making including an older person’s medical condition, physical frailty, decisional capacity, situational vulnerability (e.g., immigration status, recent divorce, loss of a loved one), and/or susceptibility to undue influence.



LAW ENFORCEMENT

Forensic accountants can help law enforcement investigate and develop evidence for potential prosecution. They can assist with identifying the relevant financial documents for review, where to gather them, and in what form to request them. Forensic accountants can also suggest interview questions for older adults and alleged perpetrators based upon the state of the investigation, the financial evidence collected, and presumed evidence yet to be discovered.

Depending upon the facts and circumstances of the case, suspicious transactions may be reflected in bank records, statements, and cancelled checks; loan applications and disbursements; tax returns, credit reports, credit card statements, insurance policies, cash, collectibles, and safe deposit boxes. Records may be maintained in electronic or paper format, and they may be housed in a home office, medical files, work computer, mobile phone, in another device, or location. Law enforcement can secure subpoenas to access relevant documents and collaborate with forensic accountants on the analysis of documents like powers of attorney, bank signature cards, wills, and trusts.



CIVIL ATTORNEY

Civil attorneys can work with forensic accountants to calculate the economic losses and damages in cases of civil fraud. The accountant’s findings may help support an action for the recovery of misappropriated assets, uncover financial abuse by a guardian or agent under power of attorney, or request for a permanent restraining order against an offender. Forensic accountants may also serve as expert witnesses in legal proceedings, translating confusing financial materials into informative and understandable graphics or plain language.



PROSECUTOR

As with civil attorneys, prosecutors can leverage the expertise of forensic accountants to identify, analyze, establish, and present evidence of financial wrongdoing. Forensic accountants can effectively reconstruct and simplify complex transactions into understandable components so that jurors can understand the sequence, cause, and consequences of the misappropriation. Prosecutors can work with accountants to ensure that the financial evidence supports the crimes alleged in the complaint and is conveyed clearly through exhibits.

Benefits and Challenges of Forensic Accountant Alliances

BENEFITS

- Investigations can help substantiate or negate suspicions and allegations of abuse.
- Forensic accountants bring specialized financial expertise, which many agencies lack, to complex, time-consuming, and time-sensitive investigations.
- Forensic accountants may be able to detect financial irregularities and nuanced transactions that may not be readily apparent to other MDT agencies.
- An investigation may uncover stolen assets, facilitating recovery, and potentially preventing future abuse.
- Data collection software can improve efficiency and accuracy in analyzing and reviewing detailed transactions.
- Financial accounting reports, charts, and exhibits can help explain anomalous transactions and help bolster criminal and civil fraud actions.
- Financial accountants can educate MDT members on financial literacy, effective interventions, and asset recovery.

CHALLENGES

- MDTs may not have the funds to retain forensic accountants.
- Determining whether forensic accounting services are cost-effective or have become cost prohibitive.
- Forensic accounting expertise may not be readily available in certain areas.
- Forensic accountants may only be able to assist when access to complete records is available.
- Agencies may lack the time or resources to inform and assist with investigations.
- Even with forensic accounting recommendations, intervention from other MDT members is required to achieve case resolution, including asset recovery and prosecution.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Training and technology tools are available to MDTs. For more information about forensic accounting services, contact your local MDT.
- Open source resources are available, including the [Senior Abuse Financial Tracking and Accounting Tool \(SAFTA\)](#).

Resources

[U.S. Department of Justice Multidisciplinary Team Technical Assistance Center](#)

[National Elder Abuse MDT Training and Technical Assistance Center](#)

[National Center on Elder Abuse - Issue Brief: Multidisciplinary Teams](#)

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