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The South Australia Eldercaring Coordination Pilot: Findings and Opportunities

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Contents

Eldercaring coordination services are established across various US states, but they have not yet been adopted in Australia.
Eldercaring coordination is designed to address intra-familial conflict, which is a contributor to elder abuse and has other ill effects on the lives of older people.
This presentation considers findings from a 19-month pilot project that brought eldercaring coordination services to Australia, with implementation based in Adelaide, South Australia.

Background – what is eldercaring coordination?

How does eldercaring coordination address elder abuse?

What were we trying to achieve in running the pilot?

The pilot – who was involved and what did we do?

What we learned

Eldercaring coordination is …

‘[A] process where Eldercaring Coordinators assist elders, legally authorized decision-makers, and others who participate by court order or invitation, to resolve disputes with high conflict levels that impact the elder's autonomy and safety by:

- Enabling more effective communication, negotiation and problem-solving skills;
- Offering education about elder care resources;
- Facilitating the creation and implementation of an elder care plan;
- Making recommendations for resolutions; and
- Making decisions within the scope of a court order or with the parties' prior approval.’

Eldercaring coordination is …

Modelled on parenting coordination.

It is not about fixing conflict, which may not be possible.

It is about overcoming conflict to remove its ill effects from the caring relationship.

And thereby facilitate care in line with the preferences and wellbeing of the older person.

Legal context - US

Developed in the US as an adjunct to its legal processes.
The US is a more litigious context. Disputes about the care of older people are frequently resolved, or at least contested, through the courts. In that setting, eldercaring coordination has a clear value proposition: it reduces the burden, time and cost that formal litigation imposes on families. It operates as a structured, less adversarial alternative that can keep matters out of court, or at least narrow the issues that reach a judge.

Formalised in Florida in section 44.407 of the Florida Statutes, which provides for mandatory appointments for up to two years.

Legal context – South Australia

Australia presents a different picture. Disputes of this kind are less likely to be litigated in the ordinary courts. Instead, they are dealt with through a tribunal-based system, such as the South Australian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (SACAT).

Deals with matters most likely to arise in eldercaring disputes: appointment of guardians and administrators and questions of consent to medical treatment.

SACAT is designed to be accessible, low-cost and relatively informal, and it is intended to resolve these matters without the adversarialism of ordinary litigation.

Elder abuse

Elder abuse frequently arises from within the family system rather than from outside it, and it is often bound up with the same high-conflict dynamics that eldercaring coordination is designed to address.

Applications involving older people increasingly disclose elder abuse and financial exploitation, neglect and the isolation of an older person from other relatives commonly occur where one family member has assumed a dominant caregiving or decision-making role and communication with the wider family has broken down.

Elder abuse

Existing responses struggle with this pattern.
Investigations can establish whether abuse has occurred but does little to repair the relationships that allowed it to develop, and a guardianship or administration order transfers authority without necessarily addressing the underlying conflict that placed the older person at risk.

Eldercaring coordination offers something between these responses. Where risks appear, the coordinator can surface them, refer the matter to the appropriate authority, and continue to keep the family focused on the older person's immediate care needs while any investigation proceeds.

Elder abuse

Eldercaring coordination can address risk factors for elder abuse, such as isolation and carer fatigue that may lead to neglect or worse.
There is also protective value in the combination of internal transparency and external confidentiality.
Bringing several family members into a structured process, each accountable to the others and to the coordinator, reduces the capacity of any one person to control information, conceal financial dealings, or 'gatekeep' access to the older person.
In the Australian context, eldercaring coordination would not replace existing safeguarding mechanisms but could operate alongside them.
Could also augment moves to supported decision-making.

Pilot study team

In the US:

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UniSA (now Adelaide University) researchers:

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The pilot

The Florida model is ‘top-down’ (court-mandated), but we needed to adopt a ‘bottom-up’ approach to recruiting cases for the pilot study.

The pilot was launched in a webinar for service providers, along with a brochure, in November 2022 before referral pathways had been fully integrated and established, and ran until the end of June 2024.

Duration of 19 months, but it took a while to understand and implement referral pathways – we got our first referral in January 2023 ...

The pilot

There were 30 referrals – from OPA, ASU, SACAT, GP, website, etc.

Of these, 20 cases were initiated.

Of these, four became fully-fledged ‘eldercaring coordination’ cases.

Stage	No. of cases	Descriptor of stage	Data collection methods
1	10	Enquiry only, no intake completed	Enquiry recorded
2	16	At least one intake completed	○ Eldercaring coordinator pre-service survey ○ Older person pre-service survey, pre-service survey/s completed by other participant/s ○ De-identified case notes ○ Eldercaring coordinator ‘did not proceed’ survey
3	4	At least one meeting attended with the eldercaring coordinator	Additional pre-surveys by either the older person or other participants after their intake
4	0	Eldercaring coordination intervention completed	In addition to the pre-surveys and de-identified case notes ○ Eldercaring coordinator post-service survey ○ Older person post-service survey ○ Post-service survey/s completed by other participant/s

Findings

The pilot examined two key questions: whether eldercaring coordination would strengthen existing services for older people and families in conflict, and how it could feasibly operate within South Australia's current legal and institutional framework.

We compiled surveys designed to examine the way in which the intervention worked in the SA context.

We saw that it can help in ways that are similar to the US experience.

The big difference between the US and Australia is not in the types of abuse and other problems that older people face as a result of family conflict. But rather, the legal context in which this plays out …

Implications

We see a place for eldercaring coordination in Australia.

It addresses two paradoxes of elder abuse:

- Family as source of abuse and preventive factor
- Protective measures that also serve the preferences of older people (the new s.39B of the *Advance Care Directives Act 2013* (SA))

Without a court mandate or referral power, uptake in Australia depends on referral pathway and voluntary participation.

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Eldercaring coordination and supported decision making

Eldercaring coordination can create the conditions for supported decision-making, as it is designed to address two of the recognised limits on the model: social isolation and family conflict, are precisely the dynamics that eldercaring coordination is designed to address.

Where one family member has isolated the older person or where entrenched disputes have made calm, supported deliberation impossible, an individual support relationship is unlikely to hold.

By reducing conflict across the wider family system, re-establishing communication, and countering the 'gatekeeping' that cuts an older person off from other relatives, eldercaring coordination can restore the relational environment that supported decision-making requires. In this sense it operates upstream of supported decision-making, clearing the interpersonal obstacles that would otherwise defeat it.

Eldercaring coordination can also strengthen supported decision-making once it is in place. Because the process is systemic rather than focused Used this way, eldercaring coordination supports Australia's broader shift toward supported decision-making by helping to preserve capacity and autonomy where conflict would otherwise push families toward substitute decision-making.

Publications

Our report:

Ben Livings, Eileen O'Brien, Dale Bagshaw & Pen Roe, *Preserving Dignity, Overcoming Conflict – Adelaide's Eldercaring Coordination Project*
https://www.relationships.org.au/document/research-report-preserving-dignity-overcoming-conflict-adelaides-eldercaring-coordination-project/

Article in the *Family Court Review*:

Eileen O'Brien, Ben Livings & Dale Bagshaw, 'Exploring eldercaring coordination as a way to safeguard the rights of older people: A case study from South Australia' (2026) 64 *Family Court Review* 284
https://doi.org/10.1111/fcre.70057

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