

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**Contact:** Kate Burkhart, (907) 465-4970, kate.burkhart@akleg.gov**OMBUDSMAN INVESTIGATES APS COMPLAINT**

January 11, 2024, JUNEAU – Alaska State Ombudsman Kate Burkhart has released a report of an investigation of a complaint about the Alaska Department of Health, Division of Senior and Disabilities Services (SDS), Adult Protective Services (APS). The investigation revealed that APS was unable to find meaningful solutions to address an adult’s increasingly dangerous living environment.

Multiple people contacted APS about the elder adult, who experienced chronic illness and was unable to care for their basic needs. The adult was scammed out of thousands of dollars by an internet scammer. They hoarded belongings and animals, resulting in them living in a home which the APS worker described as “the most unsanitary conditions” they had ever seen. The adult’s roof was caving in and their access to heating was uncertain. Their ability to seek help without assistance had clearly diminished over the course of APS’s contacts with them.

The largest number of reports received by APS involve self-neglect, followed by financial exploitation. The adult in this investigation experienced both, to such a degree that they died alone, in squalor, of hypothermia.

The ombudsman’s office investigated two allegations: APS unreasonably categorized reports of harm alleging significant health and safety risks to a disabled elder as a low priority level for review, and APS did not initiate services soon enough to protect a vulnerable adult. The Ombudsman found both allegations justified.

The evidence showed that APS made good faith efforts to help the adult, but the situation warranted more oversight and action by agency staff. The Ombudsman recognizes that APS has a duty to respect the rights of the individual, and this was a challenging case. However, APS should

have been prepared to quickly pivot to provide protective services as the elder adult's situation worsened. The Ombudsman made eight recommendations designed to strengthen APS's ability to provide services to vulnerable adults confidently and lawfully:

- Train screeners so they are able to make well-informed, documented, and unbiased screening decisions.
- Establish regional Multidisciplinary Teams.
- Add an Administrative Assistant 2 position.
- Identify and implement a reasonable limit on the number of cases assigned to each APS worker in order to ensure delivery of comprehensive services.
- Update the APS policy and procedures manual to include more guidance on reporting criminal activity to law enforcement.
- Add a Protective Services Manager 2 position.
- Work with stakeholders and service recipients to ensure that the agency's vision and policies for performing its mission align with community expectations and values.
- Add a Quality Assurance Manager position.

The agency accepted six of the Ombudsman's recommendations and partially accepted two of the recommendations. SDS leadership commented: "This case demonstrates the need for adequate staffing to ensure that APS has adequate oversight and 'fail safe' policies and procedures and is able to develop and implement quality assurance protocol, from screening and investigation to [the] case closure process."

The Ombudsman appreciates the agency's efforts to improve its system to better serve Alaskans. To learn more about this investigation, visit www.ombud.alaska.gov to read the public report.

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