

Interview with Experts – APS in Rural Areas

Michael Hagenlock on the challenges of providing APS services in rural areas.



Michael Hagenlock is the Bureau Chief for Adult Protective Services in the state of Montana which is the 4th largest in land area, and the 3rd least densely populated state of the 50 US states. Montana population as of 2019 is 1,074,532. It's also estimated that by 2030, Montana will be one of ten states in the country to have more people over the age of 65 than under the age of 18, and it is predicted Montana is on pace to rank #3 in elder population by 2030. Montana can be classified as rural, but in many areas is considered frontier. Montana Adult Protective Services runs a successful and innovative program, spending much of Michael's time and his program manager's time crisscrossing the state to manage Adult Protective Services.

What are the biggest challenges of providing adult protective services in a rural state?

Montana covers 147,040 square miles with an estimated 18% of the population over age 65 and expected to reach over 26% in the coming years. So, the biggest challenges are:

- Reaching the individuals and accessing services: This is a huge challenge for APS staff.
- Maintaining and continuing training on best practices to provide the highest level of services with a minimal budget allocated by the state. That budget is almost all general funds.
- Educating the public, law enforcement, medical and the court systems about abuse, neglect and exploitation.

How do you handle the challenge of reaching individuals and arranging for services?

Adult Protective Services (APS) has a teamwork mentality; we cannot do this alone. The APS team works very hard with local, county, and state providers and volunteers to arrange for services in very rural/frontier areas that are not only limited in service providers but have great geographic distance between the vulnerable adult and the support community. Some workers must travel one to two hours just to see the client.

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In some of our very rural areas, when there is no service provider, we will reach out to surrounding areas to see who can help. If no one can assist, we will work with the local churches, medical clinics and other organizations to see if we can find individuals that can help meet the needs.

How do you manage to train your staff given the fiscal and distance challenges?

Montana APS has utilized technology for training via video conferencing, webinars, and centralized training modalities to keep staff educated and trained on best practices. APS is constantly looking for grants, which have been few over the past years, and the commitment of other trainers in medical, mental health, legal, and law enforcement fields. We seek their time and resources to volunteer and assist APS to meet the needs of this growing population. APS keeps our options open and we seek out other agencies who are training on issues we see as important to APS and seek inclusion in their training to help elevate our message.

If your workers must work with multiple programs, how do you make sure that they understand all the policies and procedures for APS along with their other duties?

I have developed an operational desk manual to cover all aspects of APS work based on the [NAPSA Recommended Minimum Program Standards](#) and the ACL [National Voluntary Consensus Guidelines for State APS Systems](#). Through collaboration and dedication, we have staff that have special talents and desire to not only be a great investigator, but to specialize in areas such as financial exploitation, sexual assault, community training and agency program training. My team works hard to review, learn from webinars and other trainings, and then take this to the community and their colleagues.

Montana APS staff must wear many hats. They are investigators, educators and guardians for those who are in need with no one to step up. To help them with these various duties, we have instituted several programs that utilize members of our great staff to train on operational procedures for our data system, as well as providing training to the public, law enforcement and other agencies.

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How do you handle supervising and training staff?

In Montana, aside from myself traveling the state on a regular basis, I have one program manager and four talented people to supervise four regions. We utilize technology to keep us all mobile, so we have real time access to reports, staff and the community. We have partnered with a vendor who understands our challenges, and our computer system allows for all of our staff to be teleworkers and have access to all information, files, and reports in the field to save us time on travel and having to return to an office to complete reports. This system provides our supervisors with a variety of quality assurance audits of reports and progress on cases. We have immediate access to all staff, not only through our computer system, but also through use of cell phones that are provided to all staff for calls and text and we also have mobile hotspots for internet access.

How have you managed to innovate and improve your program while dealing with these challenges?

I make sure we are involved with as many resources as possible and research all possible resources. I constantly check in with the supervisors and investigators to identify what is working and what is not, and I empower my staff to have a stake in the direction we take utilizing the National Voluntary Consensus Guidelines for Adult Protective Services.

What advice would you give a manager or supervisor working in a rural area to help them improve their program?

Adopt technology, utilize telework for staff including adoption of teleconferencing. I cannot imagine how we would be able to keep up with the ever-increasing calls for services without the ability to telework and utilize technology for the staff and the vulnerable adults we service.

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