



Texas Special Task Unit Manual

Texas Department of Family and
Protective Services (DFPS)
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Background

Authorizing Legislation

This Special Task Unit (STU) manual was developed in compliance with certain mandates of Senate Bill 6 from the 79th Texas Legislature, Regular Session, related to the investigation of complex cases. Senate Bill 6 amended Chapter 48 of the Human Resources Code by adding Section 48.1521 to read as follows:

- (a) The department (DFPS) shall develop and implement a system to ensure that, to the greatest extent possible, investigations conducted by the department that involve especially complex issues of abuse, neglect, or exploitation, such as issues associated with identity theft and other forms of financial exploitation, are:
 - (1) assigned to personnel who have experience and training in those issues; and
 - (2) monitored by a special task unit for complex cases.
- (b) Each county with a population of 250,000 or more shall appoint persons to serve as standing members of a special task unit to monitor cases that arise in the county and require monitoring as provided by Subsection (a). The standing members of each special task unit must include:
 - (1) a provider of mental health services or aging services or a representative of a nonprofit entity serving persons with disabilities;
 - (2) a representative of a law enforcement agency; and
 - (3) a legal expert.
- (c) In addition to the standing members specified by Subsection (b), the special task unit:
 - (1) must include, for purposes of monitoring a particular case, the caseworker on the case and the caseworker's supervisor; and
 - (2) may include a financial forensics expert and any other person with expertise that would be useful in monitoring a particular case.
- (d) The department shall develop and make available to each county described in Subsection (b) a manual to assist the county in establishing and operating the special task unit required by this section. The manual must describe:
 - (1) the purpose and potential benefits of the unit;
 - (2) a description of the monitoring process the unit is expected to follow and potential problems the unit may encounter;
 - (3) the composition and administration of the unit; and
 - (4) the department's criteria for selecting cases to be monitored by the unit.
- (e) Before the special task unit makes a recommendation that a guardian be appointed for a person in a case being monitored by the unit, the unit shall thoroughly consider all less-restrictive alternatives for legal intervention in the case.

Acknowledgements

The Wisconsin Elder Abuse Interdisciplinary Team Manual was used as a model in developing this manual. DFPS wishes to thank Betsy J. Abramson and the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services/ Bureau of Aging and Long Term Care Resources for permission to adapt and reprint portions of their materials for this manual.

Purpose and Goals of the Special Task Unit

Purpose and Benefits

The purpose of the Adult Protective Services Special Task Unit (STU) is to improve the response to adults who are elderly or have disabilities and are victims of abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The unit is a group of selected professionals from a variety of disciplines who meet regularly to discuss and consult on specific cases of abuse, neglect, or exploitation. The STU uses the varied backgrounds, training, and philosophies of the different professions to assist Adult Protective Services (APS) to create the best service plan for the cases involved. In addition, the STU explores ways to improve services to these populations.

Research has clearly shown the decisions made by groups - especially groups comprised of individuals from different perspectives and disciplines - will be more creative, better informed, and ultimately, more successful. We hope this description will help you and your county create a Special Task Unit to address the issues of abuse, neglect, and exploitation of adults who are elderly or have disabilities.

Goals and Objectives

The goals of Special Task Units are to:

- ◆ decrease abuse, neglect, and exploitation of people who are elderly or have disabilities by developing appropriate resources, implementing preventative strategies, or identifying or intervening in cases earlier;
- ◆ increase awareness in the community of abuse, neglect, and exploitation of people who are elderly or have disabilities, especially among professionals who regularly work with and serve these populations;
- ◆ coordinate the efforts of the various agencies dealing with the abuse, neglect, and exploitation of people who are elderly or have disabilities and build a better understanding and respect for all agencies involved; and
- ◆ discover ways the public and private sectors can work together to meet these needs to provide the best services to these populations.

The specific objective of the Special Task Unit is to monitor and consult on complex cases that Adult Protective Services (APS) investigates. The purpose of the Special Task Unit is not to direct casework or critique the work of others, but to assist in meeting the Unit's objectives.

Additional objectives may include:

- ◆ providing different perspectives on problems;
- ◆ identifying and developing needed resources; and
- ◆ acting as a sounding board for APS caseworkers.

Special Task Units provide many benefits, including:

- ◆ increasing knowledge of community resources;
- ◆ a wider range of alternative solutions to consider;
- ◆ better coordination of inter-agency efforts;
- ◆ networking and "door-opening" among professional groups;
- ◆ providing a more holistic approach, by considering the entire life of the individual - not limited to just one area (e.g., health status);
- ◆ raising awareness of abuse, neglect and exploitation against persons who are elderly or disabled, as more people are involved in a concrete way;
- ◆ improving relationships with agencies dealing with the elderly and disabled adult populations; and

The Process for Creating a Special Task Unit

In General

The Special Task Unit is comprised of a Coordinator and members of the community where the STU team functions. The STU Coordinator will recruit members, work with caseworkers on selecting and presenting cases, facilitate the meetings, arrange for meeting minutes to be taken, handle administrative issues, and provide updates on previously discussed cases. A more complete overview of the duties of the STU Coordinator is covered later in this manual.

Members of the STU may be asked to educate the team on matters with which they have expertise. The STU may invite a guest speaker occasionally to provide information on relevant issues. At times, the STU Coordinator may ask other professionals to attend meetings to discuss specific cases. The STU Coordinator should also update members regarding previously discussed cases, which will help members know the outcome of the interventions and the success of the recommendations made.

The date, time, and location of the meetings are determined by each team according to their own schedules, convenience, and perceived need. A Special Task Unit may require regularly meetings (monthly, bi-monthly, etc.) most often for about two hours. The suggested minimum number of meetings to be held annually is eight, which accommodates vacation and holiday schedules.

Role of the STU Coordinator

The first step for developing a Special Task Unit is to appoint a Coordinator. In order for the STU to ultimately be a valuable asset for the county, the Coordinator must have

the interest, background, and commitment to issues of abuse, neglect and exploitation of people who are elderly or have disabilities.

This Coordinator should have some of the following skills:

- ◆ an understanding of the legal issues and constraints of casework involving people who are elderly or have disabilities;
- ◆ familiarity with community resources (i.e., a good "networker");
- ◆ good oral and written communication skills, including active listening;
- ◆ an understanding of group dynamics and the ability to facilitate discussions; and
- ◆ good administrative, planning and organizing skills.

The STU Coordinator's major duties and responsibilities might include:

- ◆ recruiting and convening members of the STU;
- ◆ acting as a liaison between the STU members and Adult Protective Services;
- ◆ administrative duties including:
 - the responsibility to plan, organize, and facilitate regular meetings; and
 - taking minutes (or assigning "minute-taking") at the meeting and obtaining and distributing copies of the last meeting's minutes;
- ◆ working with regional APS management, identify cases appropriate for discussion from caseworkers and supervisors, and assist in preparing cases for presentation;
- ◆ following up on recommendations from Unit members. This may involve consulting with STU members outside of meetings to obtain additional information and referral sources; and
- ◆ meeting with the STU members to review Unit issues.

Recruiting Team Members

Membership of the Special Task Unit is outlined in Chapter 48 of the Texas Human Resources Code (as referenced at the beginning of this manual under "Authorizing Legislation").

The following members should be recruited:

- ◆ a provider of mental health services or aging services or a representative of a nonprofit entity serving persons with disabilities;
- ◆ a representative of a law enforcement agency;
- ◆ a legal expert, who is either the APS attorney, or the county or district attorney that will routinely handle APS cases.

Additional members may include:

- ◆ a financial forensics expert; and
- ◆ any other person with expertise that would help monitor a particular case, such as a subject matter expert in the areas of financial exploitation or self-neglect.

The caseworker assigned to a case and the supervisor of the caseworker must be present at the discussion of a given case.

Confidentiality is mandatory. Information during the investigation stage of casework cannot be revealed to members except as authorized by statute. Liability for decisions made and supported by the Special Task Unit in the service delivery stage cannot be ruled out, no release from liability is provided.

Suggested Membership of a Special Task Unit

For the team to be successful, it is important that its membership reflect various agencies or disciplines within the county that deal with abuse, neglect, and exploitation issues of people who are elderly or have disabilities, both in the public and private sector.

The chart below provides a suggested list of core team members and their respective roles in the Unit. Selection of members should include consideration of racial, cultural and geographic diversity within the county.

Knowledge, Skills and Abilities of Members

The team coordinator should find individuals who are committed to the Special Task Unit concept, being participants, and continuing to learn about abuse, neglect, and exploitation issues of people who are elderly or have disabilities. Members of the Special Task Unit should have:

- ◆ communication skills, especially active listening;
- ◆ problem analysis skills;
- ◆ interpersonal skills;
- ◆ genuine care and interest in elderly and disabled adults;
- ◆ ability to tap community resources;
- ◆ commitment to the Unit's goals;
- ◆ commitment to maintain confidentiality;
- ◆ willingness to act as a "team player";
- ◆ competent in his or her profession; and
- ◆ if possible, have a history of service with their represented organization.

Profession	Expertise Sought	Individual's Contribution to the STU
*Mental Health Professional	Psychiatrist, psychologist, clinical social worker, or licensed professional counselor	Information about the mental health system, voluntary and involuntary mental health and mental retardation treatment and services, involuntary commitment process.
*Legal	County attorney or DFPS regional attorney	Legal advice and information on issues such as confidentiality and privacy, public benefits, guardianship, powers of attorney, when acts are criminal in nature, and relevant statutes and regulations.
*Law Enforcement	Police or sheriff's office representative	Expertise and information regarding the law enforcement process, including what the police can and cannot do related to entering an alleged victim's home, removing the abuser from the home, identifying possible crimes, instructions on documentation, evidence-gathering, and the criminal justice system.
Financial	Local bank manager/officer and/or a financial management specialist with access to the banking community	Information about direct deposit of income checks, preventing fraud through pre-authorized charges to bank accounts, verifying transactions through microfilm, etc., and trust services and guardianships.
Medical	Physician or Geriatric Registered Nurse (home health care experience preferred)	Advice and information regarding available medical resources, home health services, and the limitations and effects of medication.
Domestic Violence	Domestic violence program advocate	Expertise and information regarding domestic violence, local services for domestic violence victims, temporary restraining orders, victim-witness services, and support groups.
Clergy	Local person with counseling experience.	Advice from a religious perspective, information about community resources and possible support available from a church, mosque, synagogue, etc.,

(NOTE: An * indicates members that must serve as standing members as specified in law)

Special Task Unit Membership Agreement and Confidentiality

In order to ensure commitment to fully participating, STU members must sign a membership agreement or "letter of commitment."

The agreement should address at least the following issues to which the team member should commit to:

- ◆ full participation;
- ◆ attendance at Unit meetings;
- ◆ commitment to learn about issues surrounding abuse, neglect, and exploitation of people who are elderly or have disabilities;
- ◆ advocating for better alternatives for vulnerable individuals; and
- ◆ respecting and maintaining confidentiality.

Each of the STU members must commit to keeping the discussions of specific cases confidential. To help ensure confidentiality, all STU members must agree to protect confidentiality by signing their Membership Agreement. In addition, caseworkers and the Coordinator must redact the identities of clients in reports and records.

Starting the Special Task Unit

To begin the process of creating a Unit, DFPS Adult Protective Services regional management will contact the county commissioner's court and brief them on the STU proposal. Then, the DFPS staff will ask if they can present the proposal to the commissioner's court or its designee. After DFPS completes the presentation and the county agrees to create the STU, the meetings and input may begin.

Special Task Unit Meetings

The first order of business for a STU is to educate and orient members about the Unit's purpose and how it will operate. The Coordinator should outline the Unit's functions and potential benefits, how the Unit's work will be monitored and recorded, the Unit's composition and administration, and how cases will be selected for review by DFPS.

Individual members should present information about their agencies and a brief overview of the abilities and limitations of their particular area or agency.

The Unit's Coordinator must stress the legal requirements of confidentiality and the purpose of the STU. The Coordinator should set an overview of schedules, protocols, and frequency of meetings. The Coordinator should also reinforce that the purpose of the STU is not to direct casework or critique the work of others, but to assist in meeting the Unit's objectives.

Presenting Cases to the Special Task Unit

The purpose of presenting cases to the Unit is to address cases that do not have a clear, easy answer. The advantage of presenting these difficult cases to the STU is that members will view the case differently because of their backgrounds, experiences, and training. These different community viewpoints and contacts may provide alternative courses of action not initially thought of by the Adult Protective Services (APS) worker.

APS regional management will determine which cases to present to the STU. The cases selected for discussion will involve especially complex issues of abuse, neglect, and exploitation whose resolution will benefit from the expertise of the STU members.

The caseworker and the caseworker's supervisor must be present when a case is presented to the STU. When presenting cases, workers will provide STU members with brief written and verbal summaries. A case summary should include:

- ◆ a description of the abuse, neglect, or exploitation;
- ◆ a summary of the client's status (any environmental, medical, or legal concerns)
- ◆ formal and informal support systems for the client already in place;
- ◆ a listing of interventions used thus far; and
- ◆ the worker's questions and concerns about the case.

The STU should discuss the case and recommend possible actions for APS to take regarding the case. Decisions about a case are ultimately APS's responsibility.

Forms Appendix

Appendix A: Sample STU Member Agreement

The goal of the Special Task Unit ("STU") of _____ County is to improve the response to victims of abuse, neglect, and exploitation of people who are elderly or have disabilities. As a member of the Special Task Unit, I agree to:

1. Commit the time to fully participate.
2. Respect and maintain the confidentiality of all clients in the Adult Protective Services (APS) system.
3. Attend regular STU meetings as requested, except where an unavoidable conflict occurs. Whenever possible, I will give advance notice to the STU Coordinator when my absence is anticipated.
4. Learn as much as possible about the problems of abuse, neglect, and exploitation of people who are elderly or have disabilities and how to respond to victims.
5. Provide my professional opinion and advice on how to proceed with the cases presented and attempt to find the answers to questions in my field of expertise.
6. Consult via telephone on an emergency basis.
7. Advise and assist in developing and implementing procedures to integrate the efforts of the STU and other local agencies.
8. Refrain from soliciting for my paid services any clients whose cases are discussed by the STU.
9. To the extent possible, assist in educating my profession and the public about the problems of abuse, neglect, and exploitation of people who are elderly or have disabilities.
10. Not miss more than two (2) consecutive STU meetings. If this happens, I understand that I may be replaced as an STU member.

I also understand that if at some point in the future I am no longer employed with my represented agency or my role within the agency changes, my membership on the Special Task Unit may become void.

Signature of STU Member

Signature of STU Coordinator

Effective Date

Appendix B: Sample STU Member Confidentiality Form
Special Task Unit Member Statement of Confidentiality

I understand and fully acknowledge the high degree of importance of exercising discretion and maintaining confidentiality regarding all information to which I am exposed as a result of being affiliated with the Special Task Unit of _____ County.

In the regular course of my membership on the Special Task Unit of _____ County, I recognize that I may have access to client information that is personal, financial, medical, or other. I am also fully aware that I am strictly forbidden from discussing, transmitting, or narrating such confidential information in any form, except in the routine procedures of case discussion within and between other Special Task Unit members or as otherwise permitted by law.

I also fully understand the following:

- ◆ Information provided by Adult Protective Services (APS) is confidential by law;
- ◆ Information provided by APS may not be used for any purpose other than the purpose for which I am serving as a member of the Special Task Unit; and
- ◆ Information, including client identities and case details obtained while meeting with the Special Task Unit must not be discussed or disclosed to any person, other than current APS employees and Special Task Unit members, and then only on a strict need-to-know basis within the scope of the Special Task Unit.

I also understand the disclosure of this confidential information may be considered a violation of law subject to a criminal penalty under both the Texas Open Records Act, 552.352 Government Code and/or 40.005(e) Human Resources Code.

I have read this confidentiality statement fully, and I understand what it means, and I am signing it freely and voluntarily.

Signature of STU Member

Signature of STU Coordinator

Effective Date