

# Improving the standard of aged care

## Why SIRS mandatory reporting alone isn't enough

The Serious Incident Response Scheme (SIRS), which mandates that providers properly capture incident data and report serious incidents of elder abuse and neglect, is an important mechanism to ensure elderly Australians in care are treated with dignity, respect and receive proper care. But a mandatory reporting system alone isn't enough. Aged care providers must create the right environment and implement safe ways to speak up. When this happens, leaders can take swift and consistent action to address risks to the standard of care now and into the future.

### Elder abuse is under-represented

Research by Australian Institute of Family Studies suggests one in six older Australians were abused in 2021 (SIRS commenced 1 April 2021) and the Australian Human Rights Commission suggests two in three elderly people don't report abuse.

While a mandatory reporting scheme plays an important role in the detection of elder abuse and neglect, serious issues might be uncovered too late if people are not comfortable speaking up about their concerns.

Where there is a culture of silence, misconduct and abuses of power can go unchecked.

Therefore, it's critical that aged care providers create an environment where people providing and receiving care feel empowered to report issues, without fear of retribution and with confidence that their concerns will be taken seriously and acted upon.

### Why people don't speak up

Fear of retribution is the primary reason why people don't speak up. Raising

concerns challenges the *status quo* which can threaten relationships with care providers, co-workers and managers.

Raising concerns is risky for a person in care, especially if the complaint is against a person providing the care. It's also risky for workers who depend on their weekly income. Often, it's easier to remain silent than speak up.

A feeling of futility is another key reason why people don't speak up – why risk rocking the boat when nothing will change anyway?

To encourage people to speak up, providers need to counter people's fears of retribution and futility by putting in place systems that normalise raising concerns and actively respond to feedback.

### Practical steps for aged care providers

1. **Put 'speak up' at the top of your communications agenda.** Tell elderly people, families, health care workers and employees how to make a report, what steps the investigation will follow (so they trust the process is fair) and explain how your organisation will respond if the complaint is upheld. Start all meetings by inviting team members to share any concerns about care and ideas for improvement they may have. Add 'incident reporting' to the weekly agenda for staff meetings.
2. **Train care givers and managers how to listen.** It's important for managers and staff to understand how their own beliefs, biases and power differentials can block people from coming forward.
3. **Implement an independent speak up channel for 24/7 anonymous reporting.** Aged care happens around the clock in a range of settings, which makes it impossible for leaders to hear first-hand about



Kirsty Harvison says good governance needs more than SIRS mandatory reporting.

every incident. Allowing people to report incidents without disclosing their identity, in any location, at any time, and without fear that doing so will come at a personal cost, is a great way to encourage people to speak up.

4. **Use an incident management system (IMS) to capture all incidents, guide investigations and manage risk.** A good IMS, such as Rely ([www.relyplatform.com/aged-care/](http://www.relyplatform.com/aged-care/)), allows you to capture all issues, including near misses. An effective IMS guides managers on how to conduct fair investigations that follow the organisation's policies and procedures, and to create reports in a format suitable for SIRS mandatory reporting. Management dashboards help leaders get to the cause of incidents and identify trends and hotspots (as required by SIRS) so they can mitigate risk and ensure quality of care.

SIRS imposes a legal duty on all providers of Commonwealth-subsidised care providers to manage and take reasonable action to prevent incidents. But beyond the legal duty, aged care providers have a moral and social duty to create a safe environment that supports the highest standards of care.

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