How might I plan for a loved one who is aging with SMI?

As people get older, symptoms of schizophrenia and use of illegal drugs typically decrease. However, living with SMI across many years takes its toll so that adults with SMI have a life expectancy up to 15 years shorter than people with no SMI. Older adults with SMI may have physical health challenges adding to their complex needs.

Advocacy is needed to push our systems to accommodate the needs of aging individuals with SMI. Many more skilled nursing facilities that can provide psychiatric care are needed. Lack of appropriate and less-restrictive community options results in over-burdened state hospitals, which often house older patients much longer than medically necessary because there aren’t enough placements for safe discharge. This problem contributes to the national bed shortage.

Research suggests that almost half of older adults with schizophrenia live with family members, who unfortunately find themselves acting as mental health professionals, assisted living nurses, and more.

When a loved one is aging, they may become more vulnerable financially, physically, or mentally. Planning for their safety and stability has added challenges. Here are a few terms and resources for basic guidance:
• **Eldercare:** An Area Agency on Aging is a public or private non-profit agency, often referred to as “eldercare,” that serves older adults. Meal delivery and help with basic housekeeping are common, and services cater to an individual’s needs. The goal is to help the person stay home or wherever they most want to live. Eldercare agencies (AAAs) may be categorized by county, city, regional planning council or council of governments, private, or non-profit. The Administration on Aging, in collaboration with the Administration for Community Living, provides an [eldercare locator](#), searchable by zip code.

• **Health and Human Services:** The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS.gov) offers information on aging to support individuals and their caregivers in planning for benefits, home care, elder justice, long-term care, and more.

• **AARP family caregiving:** The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) provides an online [Caregiver Resource Center](#). The AARP site includes options to enter basic information for a more personalized selection of resources to match your concerns and needs.

• **Adult Protective Services:** Abuse of a senior citizen, including financial abuse, can be investigated by Adult Protective Services. You can call information or look online to find contact information for the agency serving this role in your area. Elder abuse might be obvious physical assault or might be more subtle. The abuser might take advantage of the person because they are vulnerable, causing financial and/or psychological harm. Adult Protective Services investigates all types and levels of suspected abuse.

**Further reading**


• The World Federation of Mental Health offers a free downloadable guide, “Older Adults with Schizophrenia and Their Caregivers – An Often Invisible Population.”

• The NIH National Library of Medicine offers an [article](#), “Integrated Care for Older Adults with Serious Mental Illness and Medical Comorbidity: Evidence-based Models and Future Research Directions.”

• On a website titled Caring for the Ages, The Society for Post-Acute and Long-Term Care Medicine offers an [article](#), “Older Adults and Serious Mental Illness: What We Know and What We Imagine.”