GUIDE

The first call about an aging parent is a step a family can check.

Information and referral for older adults has national standards, published by Inform USA, and a specialist credential, the CRS-A/D. Standard 4 of those standards puts follow-up in a written policy that a family can ask about on the first call.

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The discharge planner hands over a phone number on the way out. That evening it sits on the kitchen table next to a parent's ZIP code, a Medicare card and a page of discharge papers. The person who answers that number works in information and referral, the service behind the Eldercare Locator and every area agency on aging. That call is not a matter of luck. Information and referral has national standards and professional certification, so a family can ask the specialist whether they work to them and what happens after the referral, then check the answer against a written policy.

Federal law already asks the first call to assess, link and follow up

Federal law defines what an information service for older adults must do. Section 102 of the Older Americans Act, codified at 42 U.S.C. 3002, describes an information and assistance service as one that gives older people current information about services in their community, assesses their problems and capacities, and "links the individuals to the opportunities and services that are available." The same definition asks the service, to the maximum extent practicable, to make sure people receive what they need, "by establishing adequate followup procedures."

The law leaves the form of that follow-up to each office. A follow-up duty with no written form is a promise nobody can check. The field's national standards and its specialist credential supply the form, and the federal government backs them. On October 27, 2026, the Administration for Community Living's Administration on Aging announced a three-year cooperative agreement with ADvancing States to run the National Information and Referral Support Center. The first focus area of the award is training for aging and disability information, referral, and assistance programs, "including promoting national standards and professional certification."

The statute says what the service must do. The standards and the credential give a family the words to ask whether this office and this specialist do it. For the person on the line, the ACL award means those words are the field's own federally backed measure, so the question lands as a professional one, not as a challenge.

Inform USA Standard 4 puts follow-up in a written policy

Inform USA, the information and referral association formerly known as AIRS, publishes the field's national standards, the Inform USA Standards. Programs are accredited against them. The CRS-A/D, Community Resource Specialist, Aging/Disabilities, is the credential for the person on the line, earned by passing an exam built on those standards.

Standard 4 covers follow-up. It states the purpose plainly: follow-up "is conducted to benefit individuals and confirm whether or not their needs have been met, and if not, why." For people who are at risk or vulnerable, the program should attempt it. Each program writes a follow-up policy that names the "populations or situations requiring follow-up," sets the time frame for the follow-up call based on the person's original need, and sets how many attempts are made before they stop. The specialist follows that written protocol, and follow-up happens "only with the permission of the individual."

Standard 4 also says what happens when a referral does not work: "If the individual has not received services or their need has not been met, the Community Navigation service engages in problem-solving and attempts new or additional appropriate referrals." A no from a referred program is a no from one program on one day. Under Standard 4, it is the reason for a second call to the referral line, not the end of the first one.

Standard 4 does not set one number of days for every program. It requires every program that works to it to write its own down. A follow-up promise with no policy behind it is a courtesy. A written one is a commitment a family can quote back.

Five questions turn the first call into a record a family can check

The specialist who answers at the Eldercare Locator, an area agency on aging or a local resource center can be asked five plain questions. The Eldercare Locator, a public service of ACL, takes calls and texts at 1-800-677-1116.

First, about the office: "Is this program accredited by Inform USA, or does it work to the Inform USA standards?" Second, about the person: "Are you certified as a CRS-A/D?"

Questions one and two matter for one reason: they unlock the next three. A yes to question one means the program writes its follow-up down under Standard 4. A yes to question two means the person on the line was tested on those same standards. Either way, the answers to questions three

to five rest on a document the family can ask about, not on one person's memory. A no is information too. It is not a reason to end the call.

Third: "Based on what I have told you, which programs are you referring us to, and why those?" The statute describes the service as one that assesses a person's "problems and capacities." Question three asks the specialist to do that assessment out loud, where the family can hear it.

Say a daughter mentions early in the call that her father served in the Army. At question three, the specialist reads back two referrals, and neither one touches his service. She asks, "He's a veteran. Does that change the list?" The specialist can revisit the list while the call is still open. Without question three, that detail leaves with the caller.

Fourth: "Who will contact whom, and by when?" A referral that leaves the family holding three numbers is different from one where the agency makes the first contact.

Fifth: "What happens after the referral? Will anyone check whether it worked?" At a program that works to Standard 4, that answer is already written in its follow-up policy, and the family can ask which situations it covers, whether theirs is one, and what time frame applies.

The strongest case against asking: a credential is not a guarantee

The case against asking about information and referral standards is a fair one. A certification is a credential, not a guarantee. A certified specialist can have a rushed day, and an uncertified one can know every program in the county. The law qualifies its follow-up language with "to the maximum extent practicable," which a stretched office can read narrowly. Standard 4 asks for a follow-up attempt with people who are at risk or vulnerable, not with every caller. A skeptic can fairly add that nothing in the record links certification to better follow-up. And a tired caregiver may not want to quiz the one person on the phone who seems willing to help.

The credential does not promise a good call. It makes the call testable. Standard 4 requires a program that works to it to put follow-up in a written policy: which situations get it, how soon the call comes based on the original need, and how many attempts are made. A family can hold the office to that policy on the callback. A specialist who cannot say what follow-up to expect has told the family that the next step is theirs to own, and it is better to know that on day one than in week three.

Friction is real. The first two questions take ten seconds, and they can wait until the end of the call, after the help.

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Put the answers on one page: the date, the agency, the specialist's name, the programs and the reasons given, who acts next, and what follow-up was promised. The follow-up line carries the most weight. If a callback was promised, write the day it is due. If the specialist could not say, write unknown, not no. An unknown follow-up is a real answer: it tells the family who owns the next step, so they set their own date to call the referred program. A no from that program goes back to the referral line, where Standard 4 expects problem-solving and a new referral. That page is the start of an AIOSeniors plan, one dated line per answer. Read it to the next specialist first, and the second call starts where the first one stopped.

Further reading

1. Administration for Community Living, announcement of the $675,000 National Information and Referral Support Center award to ADvancing States, the primary document this essay turns on acl.gov/news-and-events/announcements/acl-awards-675000-national-information-and-referral-support-center
2. Older Americans Act, 42 U.S.C. 3002(28), statutory definition of information and assistance service, including linking and follow-up (text checked 2026-11-08) law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/42/3002
3. Eldercare Locator, ACL's public service connecting older adults and families to local help, source for the phone number and the trained staff description eldercare.acl.gov
4. Administration for Community Living, Area Agencies on Aging program page, definition of an area agency on aging and how to find one acl.gov/programs/aging-and-disability-networks/area-agencies-aging

AIOSeniors aioseniors.com

Most families never find out what they qualify for. Answer a few questions and get a personalized list of the programs, benefits and services available where you live. Free, about 5 minutes.