

Collins, Gary, 'Cash cows': The secret senior trafficking playbook for exploiting Maryland's elders, Fox 5 News (Dec. 11, 2025) <https://foxbaltimore.com/spotlight-on-maryland/secret-trafficking-playbook-for-exploiting-maryland-seniors>

## **'Cash cows': The secret senior trafficking playbook for exploiting Maryland's elders**

BALTIMORE (WBFF) — Daniel Jenkins, 85, [was found dead](#) on a desolate stretch of East Baltimore's Edison Highway on March 3, 2019. He had dementia, according to court records, and was likely confused and cold on that frigid, winter day.

Four days earlier, Jenkins had been placed into [Asa Ene Ita's unlicensed assisted living home](#) on North Luzerne Street in Baltimore after its operator claimed the vulnerable adult would be safe.

Instead, Jenkins wandered from the house unnoticed, unmissed and unreported for more than 12 hours, according to a guilty-plea statement of facts filed by then-Maryland Attorney General Brian Frosh's office and [agreed to by Ita](#).

When his daughters repeatedly called the unlicensed home for updates, the operator and its employees assured the family he was "fine," "adjusting," and "out with staff." But Jenkins had vanished into the cold. An autopsy determined his cause of death to be hypothermia.

The case provides a window into unlicensed assisted living facilities that [Spotlight on Maryland continues to investigate](#). It's one of the few cases brought in Maryland against unlicensed operators, despite hundreds of complaints. The prosecution offers a view of what two former state officials describe as a "playbook" behind [a hidden but growing industry](#).

Both experts warned that the pattern of deception, financial exploitation, neglect, and quiet coordination among people who see older adults as commodities in a booming underground market is getting worse.

### **An industry with an informal playbook**

"Definitely, definitely it is happening and in every state," said Anna Thomas, executive director of the National Center for State and Tribal Elder Justice Coalitions and one of the nation's foremost experts on human trafficking of seniors. "It is underreported, under the radar, and traffickers have a well-oiled machine we just can't get our hands around."

Thomas, who helped pioneer anti-trafficking enforcement models in Georgia, said what's unfolding in Maryland mirrors a pattern she has been seeing nationwide. She was also the technical advisor for [a 2023 Maryland law](#) that made operating an unlicensed assisted living facility, where abuse or neglect occurred, a felony.

This playbook's "commodity," she said, consists of older adults — [especially those with dementia](#), disabilities, facing homelessness or lacking family advocates — who are "funneled" into unlicensed homes run by individuals posing as caregivers.

Once inside, Thomas said, the victims enter an often-inescapable loop. "It is like an underground network," she said. "Once they're in, it's really hard for them to get out."

Thomas described traffickers trading seniors between homes the way people would "trade baseball cards," upgrading for residents who bring higher monthly income from Social Security, disability benefits, food assistance, or Medicaid.

***They see these individuals as cash cows," Thomas said. "One person might bring \$700 if they pack 10 to 15 people in a house, that's thousands of tax-free dollars."***

In Jenkins' case, court records show that Ita kept more than 100 prescription vials in her care — most were full — belonging to residents of her two [unlicensed assisted living homes](#). Many were medications that should have been taken daily for chronic conditions.

Ita's workers, according to witness statements, were paid \$50 a week under the table and lived in the same house as the residents they were expected to supervise. Spotlight on Maryland visited a Baltimore home owned by Ita, according to public records, and contacted her by phone, but could not reach her. Ita's previous employees could not be immediately located.

"It is a form of racketeering," Thomas said. "If you look at the structure, the money flow, the exploitation, it is a trafficking enterprise."

### **How seniors are recruited into the shadow system**

The critical question of how people like Jenkins end up in unlicensed facilities revealed another part of the trafficker playbook.

Operators recruit from homeless shelters, hospitals, day programs, jails, churches and even public benefits offices, Thomas said. Some pose as social service professionals. Others sit in waiting rooms or lobbies, handing out cards and offering rides, beds, and care.

***They will recruit anywhere," Jenkins said. "They have no morals. They show up and say, 'I'm a good person. I can take them into my home.' And people believe them."***

In Jenkins' case, a family friend who worked at his adult day program unwittingly became part of that funnel. She met Ita at the facility where Jenkins received daily care. Ita told the family friend she had staff, experience, and beds available, and had

previously told Jenkins's daughters she could provide the dementia care he needed, according to prosecutors.

The attorney general's case later proved the promise false. Ita pleaded guilty to two counts of abuse of a vulnerable person, receiving five years in prison with three years suspended.

### **Maryland's system not built to detect or stop senior trafficking**

Dorinda Adams, former director of the Maryland Office of Adult Services, spent 22 years overseeing Adult Protective Services statewide — from 1999 to 2021. She told Spotlight on Maryland that state systems are not designed to identify an operation like this early enough.

"Navigation of our systems is a challenge," Adams said. "People don't know who to call. They don't know what questions to ask. And sometimes we think sending someone to a website is enough, but it's not."

Adams said the sprawling landscape of state agencies, ranging from the Maryland Department of Aging, Social Services, the Office of Health Care Quality, and local case management offices, is overwhelming even for professionals.

Unlicensed assisted living homes, Adams said, "fly under the radar" because state agencies lack the staffing capacity to track them proactively.

Recalling cases from her tenure, Adams said surveyors sometimes found 14 to 20 seniors living in a basement, conditions that were similarly reported in unlicensed assisted living homes statewide during her career.

***These facilities are making money by not providing care," Adams said. "People are left unattended. They're not fed. They're not given medication. They're stripped of their dignity."***

Worse, she added, many seniors in these facilities "don't have anyone advocating for them," making them especially easy to exploit.

### **A prosecution that shows the entire playbook**

Frosh's case against Ita showed almost every hallmark of the trafficking described by Thomas and Adams. Court records showed the following:

- **Targeting a vulnerable elder.** Jenkins had dementia and required supervision. Ita knew this.
- **Recruiting through a trusted intermediary.** A familiar adult day care worker recommended Ita's facility to Jenkins's family.

- **No contract, no oversight, no license.** The family paid by money order after telling staff, “Take care of my daddy,” according to the plea document.
- **Isolated living conditions.** Multiple vulnerable adults lived in a crowded room with untrained staff.
- **Locking residents inside.** Witnesses told investigators they were told to lock doors to keep Jenkins from leaving.
- **Medication control and financial exploitation.** Police recovered more than 100 bottles of residents’ medication in Ita’s car, with many unopened.
- **Delayed reporting.** Even after Jenkins went missing in cold temperatures, Ita told his daughters he was “fine” and “would be back soon.”
- **A preventable death.** Jenkins died outside, alone and cold.

“This is what happens when people are trafficked,” Thomas said. “They lose their voice, their freedom, and their care — all because someone is profiting off them.”

### **Why experts say senior trafficking is about to explode**

Maryland’s aging population is expected to rise sharply. The state faces a severe shortage of affordable assisted living beds, mental health services, and safe housing for older adults. Hospitals are under pressure to discharge patients quickly. Many seniors are aging without strong family support.

***It is the perfect storm,” Thomas said. “People have nowhere to go, and traffickers know that.”***

Adams agreed: “We as a community have to realize the accountability is on all of us. This is the first time in history that people are living this long. But the systems around them have not kept up.”

### **Is there a way out?**

Both women said there is no single solution.

Awareness is the first step. Hospitals, shelters, and churches must know how to distinguish licensed facilities from unlicensed operators. Families must know where to find inspection reports and what red flags to look for. The public must understand that unlicensed assisted living homes are not “cheaper options” but potentially lethal.

“If you find one of these houses, don’t stop reporting until someone pays attention,” Thomas said.

Thomas and Adams said the outlook is grim without immediate action.

“It’s only going to get worse,” Thomas said. “Once you see one of these homes, you never forget it. You never forget the people inside.”