WASHINGTON — When the phone rings at the national call center for elder care services, there is a good bet the caller is an older woman looking for a ride.

The national Eldercare Locator — a referral service providing information about care resources available in communities around the country — released a first-time report on the 271,000 calls it received last year, showing that 19% of all calls were about transportation issues, and the overwhelming majority of callers were women.

"Many callers express frustration because they can't do simple things like visit the doctor, buy food or socialize with peers because the options for getting from Point A to Point B are limited," the report explained.

Transportation needs edged out calls for home- or community-based services that allow seniors to avoid moving to some form of institutional care, even though those calls cover a broad variety of topics and concerns.

Transportation issues for seniors are "the first point of isolation and need," said Sandy Markwood, CEO of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, which runs the call center. "It's a very specific need — people are looking predominantly for a ride to some kind of medical appointment," but "If somebody needs transportation, they also typically need some kind of other services."
Markwood said that transportation is also a key component of most other services communities provide for seniors living at home. "You can have the best services in the world in the community but if people can't get to them, they have no value."

The call center attempts to connect people to immediate services, but also to longer-term care options in their community.

The data also reflects some broader trends in senior care: Three-quarters of the people calling into the center were women, and 70% of the calls received were from people over the age of 60 seeking services for themselves. Markwood said those numbers are not surprising because women still live longer than men and women "give up the (car) keys much sooner than men — men will hold on to those keys as long as they can."

The 270,000 calls in 2014 is a 25% increase over 2012, the organization says, an indication of the growing need for services as the population ages.