

United States Senate Special Committee on Aging

*The Older Americans Act: The Local Impact of the Law and the Upcoming
Reauthorization*

on

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Testimony provided by

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Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Braun, and members of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today to discuss the Older Americans Act.

My name is Leslie Grenfell. I am the Executive Director of Southwestern Pennsylvania Area Agency on Aging, Inc., serving older adults residing in Fayette, Greene and Washington Counties. It has been an honor for me to serve as the Executive Director for the past twenty-three years.

In terms of population, Southwestern Pennsylvania Area Agency on Aging is the largest rural Area Agency on Aging, or AAA, in the Commonwealth. Its three-county service and planning area encompasses 2,223 square miles. The Agency acts as a community focal point providing information and assistance about services and programs, protecting older adults who are most vulnerable, assisting caregivers and their families, reducing food insecurity, and empowering older adults to live independently and age well.

Having worked in the Area Agency on Aging Network since 1976, I have witnessed the transformation and development of the Older Americans Act Programs and Services which have evolved from its early days as a nutrition program into a comprehensive and coordinated service delivery system for older adults who may be at risk of losing their independence.

Older Americans Act Programs

The Older Americans Act Nutrition Program is the cornerstone of the Older Americans Act and includes congregate, home-delivered, and grab n' go meals, which were introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The flexibility of the grab n' go meal option, where older adults can pick up a meal to take home, has been well-received by our consumers, especially those who are providing caregiver services to a loved one.

Our home-delivered meal providers are struggling. High costs, due to the increased cost of food, supplies, packaging, and staffing, the long distances between homes, and traveling on winding back-country roads or in mountainous areas, especially during inclement weather, can make delivery difficult. One of our most demanding routes is in the Laurel Highlands of Fayette County, called Kentuck Knob, which requires travel through State Game lands, is 32 miles long, and takes 54 minutes to complete.

Although challenging, the home-delivered meal providers have successfully developed and sustained a service delivery system utilizing dedicated volunteers who not only deliver hot, well-balanced nutritious meals five days a week, but also provide wellness checks to each older adult ensuring their safety and well-being. Last fiscal year, a total of 691 volunteers provided 97,638 hours of service and delivered 434,872 in-home meals to at-risk consumers.

The major challenges identified by our thirty-four home and community-based agencies who provide personal care services in rural communities are the costs associated with transportation due to the distance to consumer homes, the recruitment and retention of direct care workers, and the need for increased reimbursement.

Funding

Last fiscal year, the Southwestern Pennsylvania Area Agency on Aging received \$591,073 in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds which provided a necessary infusion of financial support for the OAA nutrition program and the home and community-based program, permitting us to help a growing number of older adults.

With the number of older adults projected to continue to increase, there will be a corresponding growth in the need for services, and yet, no appreciable amount of additional Older Americans Act funding has occurred for over a decade.

Increasing Older Americans Act funding and increasing its flexibility is a cost-effective financial investment which would enable older adults to stay healthy longer, living in their own homes and communities, whereby reducing the need for more costly long-term care interventions.

Looking Ahead

In 2023, the Pennsylvania Department of Aging began development of a 10-year Multisector Plan for Aging called ***Aging Our Way, PA***. It is a state-led and stakeholder-driven strategic plan designed to help transform the infrastructure and coordination of services for older Pennsylvanians and persons with disabilities to reflect the needs and preferences of this population to live where they choose and to access the supports they need to thrive and age in place.

The network of AAAs was essential to the stakeholder process, which yielded over 20,000 responses from across the state. Each Area Agency on Aging engaged their local communities, encouraged community participation, and facilitated listening sessions – at least one in each of the 67 counties and over 200 sessions in total.

From that engagement and those 20,000 responses, state government agencies, state experts in different areas of livability, and members of the Long-term Care Council developed ***Aging Our Way, PA's*** five priorities, and a number of strategies, and tactics. The AAAs are integral to many of the recommendations developed through this process and are looking forward to working with the Pennsylvania Department of Aging and other stakeholders.

In conclusion, I would like to especially thank Senator Casey for inviting me to provide testimony today. On August 5th, I will be retiring after 48 years in the

Aging Network. It has been an honor and a privilege for me to share my insights with you and it is truly a wonderful capstone of my career!

Attachment to Testimony

Aging Our Way, PA is Pennsylvania's 10-year Multisector Plan for Aging (MPA). This Plan is designed to address the needs and preferences of older adults and their caregivers in Pennsylvania and support the Commonwealth's preparedness as this older adult population grows dramatically over the next 15 years.

On May 25, 2023, Governor Shapiro signed Executive Order 2023-09, which directed the Pennsylvania Department of Aging (PDA) and agencies under his jurisdiction to develop this 10-year strategic plan that has been designed to help transform the infrastructure and coordination of services for Pennsylvania's older adults. ***Aging Our Way, PA*** defined by six key traits including:

- **Necessary:** The investments and improvements outlined in the Plan are needed for Pennsylvania to grow alongside its aging population.
- **Stakeholder-Driver:** community members were invited from across the state – including Pennsylvanians over 60, caregivers, families, subject-matter experts, and community members – to recommend improvements to the services and infrastructure in their communities.
- **Collaborative:** Drawn from stakeholder input, state agencies and community expert partners worked together to articulate the priorities, strategies, and tactics (initiatives) included in the plan.
- **Achievable:** To guarantee achievability, each Tactic has been refined in active partnership with the agencies responsible for its implementation.
- **Responsive:** The Plan is designed to adapt alongside shifting needs and resources over its 10-year timeframe.
- **Effective:** The Plan presents an opportunity for Pennsylvania's government to work smarter.

Pennsylvania's network of Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) was essential to the stakeholder process that yielded over 20,000 responses from across the state. The AAAs engaged their local communities, encouraged community participation, and facilitated listening sessions – at least one in every county and over 200 sessions in total. The AAAs structured these listening sessions around the AARP's 8 Domains of Community Livability. These domains organize the holistic older adult experience related to transportation, engaging with government, volunteerism, employment, the need for navigation and getting information from trusted sources, respect and having a sense of belonging, social engagement and the challenges of social isolation and loneliness, access to health care including behavioral health and long-term care, and most broadly, challenges with housing. From that engagement and those 20,000 responses, state government agencies, state experts in different areas of livability, and members of the Long-term Care Council drew out ***Aging Our Way, PA's*** five priorities, strategies, and tactics. The AAAs are integral to many of the recommendations developed through this process and are eager to work with the PDA and other Commonwealth agencies. The Plan's 5 priorities include:

- **Unlocking Access:** Eliminate barriers preventing equitable ability of older Pennsylvanians to live healthy, fulfilling lives.
- **Aging in Community:** Enable older Pennsylvanians to maintain secure housing, active community involvement, and familiar surroundings.
- **Gateways to Independence:** Promote older adults' unhindered mobility and safe, convenient, and autonomous use of transportation.
- **Caregiver Supports:** Provide support, training, respite, and navigation tools to paid and unpaid caregivers.
- **Education and Navigation:** Streamline the resolution of complex problems faced by older adults through improvements to the connection, reach, and delivery of the services network.