July 28, 2017

The Honorable Thad Cochran, Chairman
Senate The Honorable Patrick Leahy, Ranking Member
House Appropriations Committee
Washington, DC  20510

The Honorable Roy Blunt, Chairman
The Honorable Patty Murray, Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor/HHS/Education
Washington, DC  20510

Dear Chairman Cochran, Ranking Member Leahy, Chairman Cole and Ranking Member DeLauro:

As Senate Appropriators consider the FY 2018 Labor/HHS/Education appropriations, the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a), which represents the country’s 622 Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) and more than 250 Title VI Native American aging programs, urges you to reject the cuts to critical aging programs that were approved by the House Appropriations Committee last week.

Namely, we urge you to reject elimination of the Medicare State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP), and cuts to the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) and critical Elder Justice programs. All of these programs provide important services to the financial health and well-being of older adults, and we were dismayed to see them targeted for cuts in the House’s FY 2018 Labor-HHS funding bill.

While n4a fully understands the economic realities facing governments and families, and we support sound federal budget decision-making that values key domestic programs, the limited savings recouped from deep cuts to critical discretionary programs that support our growing aging population pale in comparison to the added costs to seniors and taxpayers when critical services and supports are insufficient to allow older adults to stay in their homes and communities. (n4a’s full appropriations request letter outlines all of our priorities.)

As such, we urge Senate appropriators to fully fund SHIP, Elder Justice and SCSEP programs in the Senate version of the FY 2018 Labor-HHS
funding bill. Furthermore, several of your House Majority colleagues have committed to working in a bipartisan fashion as FY 2018 appropriations bills advance to find solutions to remedy the cuts outlined in the House Labor-HHS funding bill. We would be very happy to work with Members in both chambers to find appropriate and acceptable solutions to ensure that these cuts are not reflected in a final funding bill.

**State Health Insurance Assistance Programs (SHIPs)**

Nearly 70 percent of Area Agencies on Aging participate in the national network of 54 state SHIP grantees and 3,300 local SHIPs that are essential to helping Medicare beneficiaries—many of whom are on extremely limited incomes—navigate an evolving and complicated Medicare landscape. SHIPs play a critical role in ensuring that older adults make informed decisions about their Medicare coverage, including selecting among a dizzying array of supplemental Medigap plans, Medicare Advantage (MA) plans and Part D prescription drug plans.

Over 15,000 mostly volunteer SHIP counselors provide one-on-one assistance to Medicare beneficiaries and their families, and these critical services cannot be replicated or replaced by 1-800-MEDICARE, medicare.gov materials or other broad outreach activities. SHIPs handle the most complex cases, where only personalized help will do. In fact, approximately one-third of all partner referrals to SHIP originate from Medicare Advantage and Part D prescription drug plans, local and state agencies, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, the Social Security Administration, and Members of Congress and their staff.

SHIP counseling assistance can save individual Medicare beneficiaries hundreds, or even thousands, of dollars every year. For many Medicare beneficiaries on limited incomes, the Medicare counseling services that SHIPs provide may spare them additional unfortunate choices between paying more for health care and covering other critical essentials such as rent or food.

*At a minimum, we ask that appropriators reject attempts to eliminate the SHIP program and restore funding to SHIPs to FY 2017 levels of 47.1 million. With 10,000 boomers becoming eligible for Medicare every day, n4a urges lawmakers to adequately fund SHIPs to reflect the increasing number of clients and complexity of Medicare.*

**Elder Justice Programs**

Financial exploitation and elder abuse costs taxpayers and victims over $35 billion each year. Initiatives such as the bipartisan Elder Justice Act (EJA), passed in 2010; the Elder Justice initiatives—which have seeded the national Adult Protective Services (APS) data system, programs to stop abuse in guardianship and elder abuse prevention programs in Indian Country—and other Elder Justice support activities, have received bipartisan, but insufficient, support given the scope of the crisis of elder abuse and the work that must be done to develop effective, evidence-based prevention, intervention and prosecution practices. Given the national and personal cost of elder abuse and exploitation, lawmakers must be
investing in, not eroding, any federal efforts to prevent and combat neglect, abuse and fraud against vulnerable seniors.

We urge Senate appropriators to reject any erosion of essential elder justice funding in the FY 2018 Senate Labor-HHS bill and to continue to support level or increased investments in these efforts.

**Senior Community Service Employment Programs**

The Senior Community Service Employment Program, Title V of the Older Americans Act, is the only federal job training program focused exclusively on helping older Americans return to the workforce. Each year, more than 60,000 older workers from nearly all U.S. counties develop new skills, add relevant work experiences, and strengthen aging and other local programs through their SCSEP on-the-job training and community service assignments. SCSEP helps to address long-term joblessness of older adults and SCSEP even exceeded its performance goals during its recent program year for entered employment rate, employment retention rate and six-month average earnings, according to the Administration’s FY 2018 budget. We are deeply disappointed that the FY 2018 House Labor-HHS funding bill proposes slashing SCSEP programs by 25 percent over FY 2017. On a related note, we have no objection to the moving of SCSEP to the Administration for Community Living.

We urge Senate lawmakers to reject this substantial cut to SCSEP and to, at a minimum, fund the program at FY 2017 levels.

While we understand the difficult fiscal constraints under which you are operating, we hope you will make every effort in FY 2018 to fully fund Older Americans Act and other critical aging programs. We are happy to work with you to prevent the erosion of, and reinforce your commitment to, innovative, efficient and cost-effective programs that enable older Americans to live at home and in their communities for as long as possible. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Sandy Markwood  
Chief Executive Officer

cc:  
Members of the Senate Appropriations Committee