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National Association of Area Agencies on Aging

December 18, 2020

To: President-Elect Joseph Biden's Transition Team
From: National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a)
Re: **Responding to President-Elect Biden's Aging, Caregiver and Health Care Policy Priorities and Identifying Other Critical Opportunities to Meet the Needs of an Aging Nation**

President-elect Biden and his transition team of national policy leaders tapped to establish foundational health and aging priorities for the incoming Administration have a herculean task ahead. The incoming Biden Administration must successfully combat the raging pandemic which has disproportionately impacted older adults while at the same time laying the groundwork for responding to the historic demographic shift of our rapidly aging nation.

Fortunately, many aspects of both solutions are deeply rooted in enabling the 70 million Americans age 60 and older, as well as their caregivers and loved ones, to age with health, independence and safety in their homes and communities for as long as possible. This goal aligns with the long-term wishes of a vast majority of Americans who want to age in place.¹

On behalf of the country's 622 Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) and the more than 250 Title VI Native American aging programs, the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging ([n4a](#)) appreciates that President-elect Biden has outlined numerous policy options to strengthen home and community-based services and other aging supports in his existing policy platforms.

However, as the incoming Administration identifies first and next steps to meet these goals, we urge the team to prioritize:

- including the Aging Network in policy-development processes;
- making significant investment in and support for the federal Older Americans Act; and
- mounting a concerted effort to address and mitigate social isolation among older Americans.

The Aging Network Can Help Achieve Key Aging and Health Priorities of the Incoming Administration

As we outlined in our [December 8 COVID-19 memo to the transition team](#) highlighting the vital role of the nationwide Aging Network in serving older adults during the

¹ AARP, *2018 Home and Community Preferences: A National Survey of Adults Age 18-Plus*, <https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00231.001>.

pandemic, ***we urge the incoming Administration to recognize and embrace additional resources and strategies to achieve its aging, health and long-term care goals—including relying on the longstanding, trusted nationwide Aging Network as a critical partner in meeting the needs of a rapidly aging nation.***

The mission of AAAs, Title VI aging programs and other Aging Network organizations is to maximize the health, safety and independence of older adults so they can live at home and in the community as they age. Achieving these goals requires that AAAs develop, coordinate and provide a broad range of supportive services that include, but are not limited to, information and assistance, congregate and home-delivered meals, transportation, social engagement supports, evidence-based health promotion interventions, in-home personal care services and caregiver support. While all AAAs are grounded in their Older Americans Act foundation, many also play roles in administering and providing Medicaid home and community-based services, operating the local resource for Medicare insurance counseling, developing additional aging resources in their communities to meet growing needs, and taking a leadership role in building livable, age-friendly and dementia-friendly communities. Over two-thirds of AAAs also serve adults with disabilities of all ages.

As such, AAAs, Title VI aging programs, and all national, state and local stakeholders in the Aging Network have a deep well of expertise in addressing the home and community-based services and caregiver support goals espoused by the President-elect.

Given this deep expertise, n4a urges the incoming Administration to incorporate the Aging Network as an essential partner in advancing policies aimed at:

- Expanding access to the broad array of long-term services and supports options in local settings by closing gaps in and eliminating waiting lists for Medicaid home and community-based services (HCBS) for older Americans and people with disabilities.
- Advancing and extending widely supported programs—including the Medicaid Money Follows the Person (MFP) program, and broader rebalancing initiatives, such as the Balancing Incentives Payment (BIP) program—that prioritize access to home and community-based services options.
- Increasing supports and options for the nation’s 40 million informal and family caregivers to ensure that they can not only continue to care for loved ones, but also maintain their own health and well-being. The National Family Caregiver Support Program is operated by AAAs at the local level and is an essential source of resources and support for caregivers of older adults.
- Investing in and expanding a robust and well-trained caregiving workforce and addressing workforce shortages and challenges that strain families, aging services and health care systems.
- Protecting older Americans both in the community and institutional care settings by reauthorizing the landmark Elder Justice Act and ensuring that long-term care ombudsmen have access to long-term care facilities throughout the pandemic.
- Promoting access to affordable housing, transportation and technology options that make communities livable for all ages. This effort should include options to retrofit and modernize the nation’s aging housing stock—especially in the most rural areas—to ensure that older Americans can continue living in their homes as they age and mitigate a worsening senior housing crisis.
- Ensuring that supports are available to address the needs of people living with

- dementia, serious illness and/or chronic conditions, as well as those facing health disparities.
- Continuing to integrate care in a way that draws upon the expertise and dedicated roles of the health care *and* social services systems, while focusing on the social determinants of health (SDOH) to drive better health outcomes and save money in Medicaid and Medicare.

Achieving these and other important goals for an aging nation will require significant commitment from a diverse set of stakeholders at all levels of government and service delivery systems. n4a and our AAA and Title VI members deeply understand that aging services have been unable to keep pace with the growing needs and demographic trends, and that far too often older Americans are forced into less-desirable, more expensive, institutional care settings that are misaligned with their own and their family's wishes for long-term care options.

Additionally, we urge the incoming Biden Administration to ensure that the Administration for Community Living (ACL), which is the primary federal partner of the Aging Network, is prioritized as a key partner within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ***Strong communication and partnership between ACL and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services is particularly essential.***

n4a strongly believes that the perspective and expertise AAAs and Title VI aging programs will be instrumental to successfully addressing existing challenges and advancing important national aging and health care policy objectives that President-elect Biden and his team have identified.

Supporting Robust Investment in the Older Americans Act Is a Critical Component of Meeting the Needs of an Aging Nation

n4a deeply appreciates the incoming Administration's clear commitment to the above—and other—policy and program objectives that are vital to caring for an aging nation. However, we would be remiss in representing AAAs, Title VI aging programs, and other Aging Network stakeholders if we failed to highlight that the ***incoming Administration omitted mention of the important roles that the Older Americans Act and other non-Medicaid home and community-based services have in meeting the needs of millions of older Americans and caregivers each year.***

The Older Americans Act (OAA) is the backbone of our nation's home and community-based aging services system, providing older adults with much-needed services that include home care, congregate and home-delivered meals, case management, caregiver support, transportation, health promotion and disease prevention, legal services, elder abuse prevention, community service employment opportunities, and long-term care ombudsman services, which help protect and advocate for residents in nursing homes and assisted living facilities. For nearly 55 years, OAA programs have demonstrated a unique ability to provide these quality services while enhancing and protecting federal resources. On average, funding for OAA programs represents less than one-third of one percent (0.0031) of federal discretionary spending yet OAA programs and services offer an incredible return on investment by leveraging state, local and private dollars, as well as volunteerism, to help more than 11 million older adults and family caregivers every year.

Together, these services save taxpayer dollars by enabling older people to remain

independent and healthy in their own homes, where they prefer to be and where they are less likely to need more costly hospital and institutional care paid for through Medicare and Medicaid. Furthermore, OAA programs have been particularly critical in responding to the pandemic, ensuring that those older adults most at risk from COVID-19 and in greatest need receive services that address their health, social and nutritional needs.

Unfortunately, underinvestment in these cost-effective, efficient and trusted aging and caregiver support services is the overarching reason that the Aging Network cannot universally meet the needs of an aging America. As the Biden Administration pursues strategies to invest in home and community-based services for older Americans and people with disabilities, improve the aging services and caregiver workforces, and expand supports for unpaid family caregivers, ***it is essential that the Administration work with, build from and significantly increase investments in the established, trusted and expert infrastructure in the Aging Network that already exists.***

In the effort to promote access to aging at home and in the community, n4a echoes the requests of many of our national, state and local organizational colleagues in strongly urging that these additional investments reflect the substantial and prolonged pandemic response still being provided by the Aging Network and the significant increase in older adults who will continue to need home and community-based services in years to come.

During the 116th Congress, a bicameral, bipartisan reauthorization of the Older Americans Act was enacted, which n4a strongly supported. ***We urge the incoming Administration to advance the new authorities provided in the statute and to promote an FY 2022 budget request that will bring those proposals to fruition.***

The Biden Administration Should Rely on the Aging Network to Help Mitigate the Ongoing Threat of Social Isolation and Loneliness Among Older Americans

The negative consequences and societal costs of social isolation and loneliness—particularly among older Americans—were well known before the COVID-19 crisis swept the country. ***The Biden Administration must prioritize policy solutions to address this growing and critical issue both during the pandemic response efforts and afterwards.*** Fortunately, the Aging Network—especially AAAs and Title VI aging programs—is inherently well-positioned to provide critical solutions to prevent and address isolation and loneliness, and we look forward to working with the incoming Administration on investment in policy proposals that strengthen social connectedness and address the negative health effects of social isolation.

It is well-documented that older adults are particularly at risk of adverse consequences of social isolation and loneliness. During the persistent stay-at-home orders and recommendations, n4a worked in collaboration with Senate and House lawmakers to introduce the Strengthening Social Connections Act of 2020, which would enable Area Agencies on Aging and other aging services providers to implement programmatic and technological solutions to address the very real threat of isolation among older Americans. While this proposal is one of many approaches, it is imperative that the President-elect and his team focus on addressing social isolation and loneliness among older adults.

The need is critical: AAAs and Title VI aging programs saw the swift effects of the isolation early in the pandemic and moved to mitigate the harms the stay-at-home protocols had on their clients and other older adults in their communities. Furthermore, the health risks of inaction are significant. One study found a prolonged lack of social connection was equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Loneliness and social isolation are also a significant financial burden to our health care system, costing taxpayers an estimated \$7 billion in Medicare expenditures each year. Social isolation that has been prolonged due to the pandemic will undoubtedly balloon these health consequences and costs. While all AAAs are actively working to address this issue, much more needs to be done given the staggering size of the problem, ***and we urge the incoming Biden Administration to prioritize focus on this quiet, but growing and potentially deadly, issue of social isolation among older Americans.***

It is incumbent on the incoming Administration to respond to the now universal scourge of social isolation and loneliness by ensuring that existing, trusted community-based organizations have the resources and support necessary to mount a widespread response strategy, and we look forward to working with the President-elect's transition team to implement solutions.

While there are numerous additional health and aging policy priorities that n4a and our AAA and Title VI members are eager to address in collaboration with the Biden Administration, this memo has identified three distinct opportunities for near-term action that we urge the transition team to embrace. We look forward to working with a Biden Administration to ensure that vital community-based aging and health care programs continue to meet the home and community-based services needs of older adults and their caregivers.

For further information on these and n4a's other policy proposals, visit www.n4a.org or contact:

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