



advocacy | action | answers on aging

National Association of Area Agencies on Aging

December 8, 2020

To: President-Elect Joseph Biden's Transition Team
From: National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a)
Re: **The Nationwide Aging Network Is a Vital Partner in Mobilizing a Successful Response to Defeat COVID-19**

The nation and the incoming Biden Administration are facing a historic challenge to defeat the rampant spread of COVID-19 and its devastating effects on millions of Americans. The incoming Administration's commitment to—and early efforts aimed at—surmounting the ongoing threat coronavirus poses, as detailed in the [Biden-Harris Plan to Beat COVID-19](#), are vitally important to the nearly 70 million Americans who are age 60 and older and most at risk of severe consequences from COVID-19, as well as their caregivers and loved ones.

On behalf of the country's 622 Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) and the more than 250 Title VI Native American aging programs which the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a) represents, ***we urge the President-Elect's team to ensure that the nationwide Aging Network is a critical and core partner in implementing a national strategy to combat the coronavirus, and we implore the incoming Biden Administration to embrace and promote the enclosed priorities as key components of the Plan to Beat COVID-19.***

The Vital Role of the Country's Aging Network in Promoting the Health, Safety, and Independence of Older Americans

The mission of AAAs 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. To that end, 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.

During the many months of this national health and economic emergency, **AAAs, Title VI Native American aging programs, and other vital Aging Network partners have selflessly served on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic by meeting the emergency and ongoing needs of older adults who face significantly increased risks from the virus.** Relying on more than 55 years of experience in providing support to enable older Americans to stay safe and healthy in their homes, this nationwide network has efficiently and effectively responded to our new national reality and accommodated the dramatically growing needs for aging

services by deploying rapid-response innovations to address pandemic-related challenges.

The case is clear for including the insights and expertise of Aging Network stakeholders in executing a robust, long-term and effective strategy to both defeat the virus and recover from the pandemic's devastation. A report summarizing the results of a survey of n4a members released earlier this summer, [#AAAsAtWork for Older Adults: A Snapshot of Area Agency on Aging Responses to COVID-19](#), 93 percent of respondents reported serving more clients since the pandemic began, and 69 percent saw an increase in demand for their services among existing clients. More notably and importantly, in response to the unprecedented and rapid growth in demand for services—such as home-delivered meals, caregiver supports, wellness checks and information and assistance—almost overnight and nearly universally AAAs revamped their critical supportive programs to address the needs of their current client base and ensure that they were positioned to meet the expanding needs of other older adults in their communities. With critical emergency funding and temporary flexibility from Congress, states, AAAs and providers have been able to meet the rapidly growing and increasingly complex needs of some of the most vulnerable older members of their communities during COVID-19. By helping older adults stay safe and well at home, they have undoubtedly saved countless lives.

The Aging Network Should Be a Key Partner to Protect Older Americans in the Biden-Harris Plan to Beat COVID-19

Throughout our current national crisis—and in the more than five decades since its inception as part of the federal Older Americans Act of 1965—the nationwide Aging Network has unequivocally met the challenges, and seized the opportunities, of an aging America. As the incoming Biden Administration tackles the monumental task of controlling and defeating COVID-19, we urge transition team officials to include the voices of, and incorporate insights from, AAA and Aging Network leaders with generations of wisdom enhanced by crisis-driven creativity in deploying strategies to help older Americans stay safe in the ongoing pandemic.

As a leaders in enabling older adults in nearly every community to age with independence and dignity, n4a and our AAA and Title VI members are immersed in the realities of the long-term shift in the composition of our country's age demographics that has been ushered in by the maturing of America's baby boomer generation. Long before the urgency of the existing epidemic emerged, community-based aging services agencies and providers intimately understood that available home and community 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a tragic spotlight on the ramifications of disinvesting in home and community-based services (HCBS) for this rapidly growing segment of the population and their caregivers. *We are heartened that the incoming Biden Administration recognizes the endemic misalignment between widespread HCBS needs and existing long-term care options—exacerbated by the coronavirus crisis—and aims to reinvest and rebalance the national long-term care strategy. **The country's Aging Network must be involved in developing the immediate and long-term solutions to our collective long-term care challenges—both during and beyond the current national crisis.***

In the battle to defeat COVID-19, AAAs are perfectly positioned to play several important roles. The incoming Administration should understand that AAAs are *the* trusted health and social supports resource for their older adult and caregiver clients at the local level. This provides a level of access to community-dwelling older adults, especially those who need some help to remain independent and healthy at home, that is not matched by any other entity. The AAAs, working in coordination with their provider networks, know where these vulnerable older adults are and know how best to educate and support them. The same can be said for the Title VI Native American aging programs serving tribal elders.

Additionally, because AAAs are required to prioritize and target outreach and services to those most in need—specifically including racial minorities and other populations with greatest social and economic need—our network of AAAs can assist with future Administration efforts to focus on and connect with the older adults most affected by racial and/or socioeconomic health disparities in this pandemic and beyond.

That’s why the Aging Network workforce, leadership, advocates and other critical stakeholders are well-positioned to serve an important role in helping the President-elect’s COVID-19 task force achieve its ambitious, but essential, objectives to:

- Mobilize national testing and contact tracing strategies;
- Disseminate and promote culturally competent approaches to evidence-based virus education to the most at-risk populations;
- Deploy therapeutic and vaccine interventions; and
- Stand up a national U.S. Public Health Job Corps.

Furthermore, AAAs and their Aging Network partners understand the magnitude of the response required, and these local leaders in aging and community living serve an important role to help mobilize other critical partners to meet the needs of older Americans and their caregivers in nearly every zip code across the country. Community collaboration is a core component to the decades-long efficacy of the Aging Network.

In fact, on average, AAAs leverage 17 formal and informal partnerships with other agencies and organizations to expand the reach and impact of their programs in their communities. These partners include, but are not limited to, Adult Protective Services, transportation agencies, State Health Insurance Assistance Programs (SHIPs) and emergency preparedness agencies—all of which will be essential stakeholders in implementing successful strategies to mitigate the pandemic. Additionally, many AAAs work with health care partners, such as Medicaid, hospitals, health care systems and health plans. ***We urge the incoming Administration to recognize, integrate and take advantage of the vital role that the Aging Network serves as a bedrock of community collaboration as national leaders develop and deploy their state, regional and local tactics to combat the coronavirus.***

Additional Federal Support Is Essential to Protecting Older Americans and Caregivers in Their Communities During the Prolonged Pandemic

While n4a and the hundreds of AAA and Title VI programs we represent stand ready and eager to serve a key role in realizing the success of the Biden-Harris Plan to Beat COVID-19, we cannot collectively meet this monumental challenge without additional federal

health and economic relief. A necessary step in combating the coronavirus will be to pass additional federal funding that addresses the diverse needs of older Americans and their caregivers. ***We urge the incoming Administration to work with congressional leaders to promote another robust, comprehensive strategy that mirrors—in scale, scope and content—the bipartisan relief passed in early 2020.***

The 116th Congress' initial action to support older adults' safety and independence via emergency funding enabled the Aging Network to respond to rapidly increasing and evolving needs. Robust funding and added flexibility for Older Americans Act (OAA) nutrition services included in the Families First and CARES Acts and for OAA supportive services, family caregiver supports, and ombudsman and elder justice activities included in the CARES Act was an essential factor fueling the Network's expediency in responding to the needs of older adults in the early days of the pandemic. Unfortunately, that vital funding is nearly depleted, but the increased needs of older Americans persist in this pandemic. ***As a result, we urgently entreat the Biden Administration's incoming health and economic officials to working with federal lawmakers to pass additional support for policies and programs that enable older adults to remain safely in their homes and to avoid especially risky medical and institutional care settings.***

Further legislative delay is unacceptable in the face of ongoing suffering among older Americans, and on behalf of the millions of older adults and caregivers served by the Aging Network, n4a remains committed to working with the incoming Administration and 117th Congress to achieve another urgently needed relief package. The case for additional federal support could not be clearer. In the months since AAAs reported drastically increased demand for these and other home and community-based services, needs have persisted, but funding has not. State budget challenges in the wake of the pandemic's economic fallout has further strained an already underfunded network—and we anticipate those shortfalls to only grow worse. ***Therefore, we urge the incoming Administration to ensure that additional immediate emergency federal funding for the Aging Network is a key priority. This support is instrumental in enabling AAAs and other aging services providers to continue to meet health and community needs of older Americans and their caregivers.***

We understand the political challenges and fiscal concerns facing our national leaders as the pandemic's health, economic and social ramifications endure. However, addressing and alleviating suffering among our nation's most vulnerable populations should be a priority for all policymakers. ***Fortunately, providing additional emergency funding for Older Americans Act and other vital aging programs has both bipartisan and bicameral support among [Senate](#) and [House](#) lawmakers, and we urge congressional leaders to implement these funding recommendations [promoted by multiple national aging advocacy organizations](#) and included in these broadly supported Dear Colleague letters.***

In addition to vital funding for Older Americans Act programs, we urge the incoming Biden Administration's health and economic leaders to champion Aging Network policy recommendations included in n4a's previous [April](#) and [May](#) and [September](#) 2020 letters to lawmakers. These important proposals include:

- **Mitigate the individual and community scourge of long-term social isolation by incorporating the Strengthening Social Connections Act of 2020, [S. 4477/H.R. 8026](#) into coronavirus relief legislation.** This important, [n4a-endorsed](#) bill deploys expanded authorities included in the unanimously approved Supporting Older Americans Act of 2020, P.L. 116-131, to provide emergency supplemental funding to programs that strengthen social connectedness and address the negative health effects of social isolation among older adults who are particularly at risk of adverse consequences of social isolation and loneliness as the pandemic persists and stay-at-home recommendations continue. The need for this funding is obvious. Among AAAs [surveyed in mid-May](#), 60 percent were already seeing, among their clients, the negative health effects of social isolation. *While all AAAs are actively working to address this issue, much more needs to be done given the staggering size of the problem.*
- **Prioritize funding increases and policy changes for Medicaid and Medicaid home and community-based services (HCBS) waiver programs** to ensure that state Medicaid beneficiaries and HCBS service providers can sustain and increase home and community-based care options during the enduring pandemic. Eighty percent of AAAs partner with Medicaid, including a majority that are involved in delivering Medicaid home and community-based services (HCBS) waiver programs. HCBS options are essential to ensuring that, nationally, a majority of older adults and people with disabilities who require an institutional level of care can remain in their homes and communities. The coronavirus pandemic has starkly established the importance of ensuring that these populations have safer at-home services options, but without additional federal support these waiver programs are likely to be cut first by states facing dire budget realities. *We urge the incoming Administration to work with lawmakers to adopt the House-passed 14-percentage-point increase in the federal Medicaid allocation and 10-percentage-point increase for Medicaid HCBS waiver programs to ensure that the health and economic crises related to COVID-19 do not force states to choose between the health of their populations and other essential investments in state services.*
- **Prioritize ongoing financial relief to states, communities and other essential safety net systems** that have been especially hard hit from the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic to ensure that these systems—and the aging programs they support—are not subject to future devastating funding cuts. With stay-at-home orders shuttering businesses and concerns about health leading to wide-spread layoffs, state tax revenues have tumbled at the same time as state unemployment insurance and health care costs are skyrocketing. *Consequently, we support the state, local and tribal government funding included in the HEROES Act and urge federal officials and lawmakers to incorporate important state and local government funds to ease budget shortfalls that will hit vulnerable populations, including older Americans, particularly hard. Additionally, we urge the President-elect to insist that additional emergency funding for vital federal block-grant programs, including the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG), and life-sustaining food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is included in a national response.* Enacting these investments will bolster the ability of our nation to mitigate the devastating economic and health effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

We look forward to working with a Biden Administration and the 117th Congress to advance successful strategies to quell the pandemic and to ensure that vital community-based aging and health care programs continue to meet the needs of older adults and their caregivers during and beyond our current crisis.

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

Sandy Markwood, Chief Executive Officer, smarkwood@n4a.org
Amy E. Gotwals, Chief, Public Policy & External Affairs, agotwals@n4a.org
Autumn Campbell, Government Affairs Advisor, acampbell@n4a.org

National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a)
1100 New Jersey Avenue, SE, Suite 350
Washington, DC 20003
www.n4a.org / 202.872.0888