The Pie Slicing Begins: Let Congress Know OAA Programs Deserve More than Crumbs

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As you may have read in this week’s member-only Legislative Update, Congress appears to have come to agreement on the major budget issues that have held up finalization of funding for FY 2014, which started on October 1. Progress and a return to standard process is a good thing, but since Congress has only partially offset sequestration for FY 2014 and FY 2015, our advocacy work must continue on behalf of vulnerable older adults!

The Process: Appropriators Begin To Slice the Pie

The budget deal, which was approved by the House last night and expected to pass the Senate next week, finally gives appropriators the overall spending level needed to begin negotiating on the details (i.e., specific funding levels for each federal program this fiscal year). Given that the current “continuing resolution” (CR) expires on January 15, the House and Senate appropriators will have just a few work weeks to negotiate the details of 12 separate appropriations bills. The only way this could move in a timely fashion is if the various spending measures are merged into an omnibus bill. In order to accomplish this feat, another short-term CR may be needed before January 15 to buy appropriators more time to do their work. It’s also important to understand that given the tight timing, some larger appropriations bills (including the one that funds OAA) may not get the full level of line-by-line scrutiny, but may instead end up looking like a slightly adjusted CR, with across-the-board adjustments.

This means that n4a and all OAA advocates have a small window to press for the highest possible FY 2014 levels for all OAA programs and services. This is the appropriations advocacy we usually do in the summer, but need you to do now!

The Problem: The Pie is Still Really Small

Since the budget deal only offsets roughly 41 percent of sequestration cuts in FY 2014 (and only 16 percent in FY 2015), the overall amount of discretionary spending remains historically very small. It’s a bigger pie than current law would have forced without this deal, but it’s still smaller than most recent years.

For example, the $492 billion in total FY 2014 spending for non-defense discretionary (NDD) spending is now set just slightly above the FY 2013 levels before sequestration ($491 billion). In FY 2012,
Congress spent $615 billion on NDD. This reality puts Older Americans Act (OAA) funding in a dangerous position. There are two likely scenarios and we need to prepare for both.

If appropriators take the fastest approach and simply adjust current post-sequester CR levels $22 billion upward until they reach the new NDD cap, and if they share that relief equally across categories, then OAA programs may return to roughly FY 2013 levels before sequestration.

However, if appropriators make hard choices about which programs to invest in, then not all programs will see a boost in funding. Some programs may even be cut in order to restore or invest in a preferred program. This approach reflects the traditional appropriations process that has suffered in recent years thanks to political stalemates.

How OAA fares will depend on the efficacy of our advocacy in the next 4-6 weeks. Instead of fighting an across-the-board sequestration cut, we now must get back into the appropriations ring and fight for specific funding levels for each and every program we care about. We cannot wait until after the holidays to make our press, as it is unclear how long this decision-making process will take.

The Pitch: OAA Deserves Maximum Funding!

1> Next week, write a letter or memo to all your Representatives and Senators regarding the importance on investing in programs for older adults and what the effects of the federal budget cuts, now and in the future, mean to the work of your agency. They won’t all be appropriators, but you should still encourage them to do what they can.

Weave in the already existing effects of sequestration. Especially take the time to localize what this current funding gap means for the older adults and people with disabilities in your state and community. (Let us know if you need an example from another AAA; and please share your letters with us!)

n4a will share its own letter to appropriators as soon as possible, but you can also borrow talking points from our original request letter to Congress from April 2013, as well as consult other tools on our FY 2014 OAA campaign page.

Potential messages to adapt and weave into your letter or memo:

- Federal funding cuts, including the sequester, have harmed our ability to serve older adults and caregivers in the following ways...
- OAA helps support X older adults in our community. It is critical to continue to invest in these programs given the growth in the aging population and the value of these programs in helping older adults to age with independence, health and dignity in their homes and communities.
- Invest in the Older Americans Act to ensure older adults can age with dignity in their homes and communities while saving federal and state dollars on Medicare and Medicaid!
- Please ensure that Older Americans Act funding is raised in the final FY 2014 spending bill. Given the cost-effective and cost-saving nature of these programs, as well as the escalating senior population and demand for home and community-based care, we request a return to FY 2012 levels for all OAA programs and services.

Note: If one of your Senators or Representatives is on an Appropriations Committees, it is especially vital that you reach out ASAP. See our list (page 3).
2> Share it widely with...

The Media: Share your letter/memo and the n4a report “Squeezing Seniors” with local media outlets. If you can also provide some compelling stories of what the budget cuts have meant or will mean this year for your staff and/or clients, we believe they will be very interested. Even if part of the sequester was turned off, years of stagnant/reduced funding is taking its toll on aging programs.

Your Network, Allies and the Public: We know you will want to inform your providers and other partner networks, but please also find creative ways to share your agency’s realities with the broader public.

Thank you!

If you have questions about this Advocacy Alert, contact n4a’s Senior Director, Public Policy and Advocacy Amy Gotwals at agotwals@n4a.org or n4a’s Manager, Public Policy Neal Karkhanis at nkarkhanis@n4a.org.