Call the Senate TODAY!
HELP Committee Votes on S. 192 This Week

January 26, 2015

n4a is requesting your urgent action in support of the Older Americans Act. This Wednesday, Jan. 28, the Senate HELP Committee will take up a bill to reauthorize the Older Americans Act. The bill (S.192) is a bipartisan compromise bill that makes very modest changes to the Act. This compromise has n4a’s support as we believe it represents a reasonable approach to moving a bill through the Senate, and reinforces the critical importance of OAA programs and services that you develop, coordinate and deliver every day.

While only HELP Committee members can vote in Wednesday’s markup, it will help raise the visibility of OAA and the importance of reauthorization if other Senators communicate their support to their counterparts on the Committee—and this is where you come in!

Requested Action

If your Senator is on the HELP Committee: Step 1) Please call or email your Senator(s) today or tomorrow to show your support for S. 192 and to urge a yes vote on the bill.

If your Senator is NOT on the HELP Committee: Step 1) Please call or email your Senator(s) today or tomorrow to show your support for S. 192 and urge him or her to call colleagues on the HELP Committee to encourage support for OAA.

Step 2) Go beyond just you calling for your agency/program: enlist others in your community (Advisory Board Members, partners, vendors, clients, etc.) who understand the value of the Older Americans Act to take action as well.

Key Messages:

Here’s a sample script for your calls or emails, but please be sure to personalize it.
“On behalf of [insert your agency name here or simply say “older adults and caregivers in MY STATE”], I support passage of S. 192, the Older Americans Act Reauthorization Act of 2015, when it comes before the HELP Committee on Wednesday and in the full Senate. The Older Americans Act is critically important to seniors here at home, as it creates and funds the vital home and community-based services that help older Americans to live with maximum health, independence and dignity. We are so pleased the bill has bipartisan support and urge the Senator to vote in favor of reauthorization.”

Tips:
—If you know who the DC seniors/health staff person is for your Senator, speak to or leave your message with him/her.
—If you can get the word out to your local networks and drive lots of calls, customize the above message to your state and encourage supporters to leave messages with the person in the Senate office who is answering the phone.
—If you have more time while speaking to the Senator’s staff or leaving a message, please add a few details about the value of these programs and/or provide examples of the types of programs you funded under OAA (e.g., in-home supportive services, transportation, etc.).

Background on the Bill
NOTE: n4a Members received this background in our Jan. 21 Legislative Update.

Last week, the new Senate Health Education Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee leadership joined with the Senators who led efforts to reauthorize OAA in the previous Congress to re-introduce the bipartisan compromise legislation that stalled out last year over funding formula issues. On January 20, HELP Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN), Ranking Member Patty Murray (D-WA), Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Senator Richard Burr (R-NC) introduced the Older Americans Act Reauthorization Act of 2015 (S. 192). The new measure includes all but one provision (a transportation report that has already been completed) from S. 1562, which was the bill considered last Congress to reauthorize OAA. The current bill also adds a new provision to address the funding formula agreement, and it would authorize the Act for three years. Read the Senate HELP Committee Press Release.

n4a endorsed S. 1562 in October 2013 and continued to push for its advancement ever since. We hope that the Senate HELP Committee will also approve S. 192 and that the full Senate will quickly follow suit to pass the bill. Without speaking to the merits of the funding formula compromise, n4a has also endorsed the current bill and the bipartisan approach of HELP Committee leaders. We look forward to working with the House to continue to advance this vital reauthorization.

Please note that like other national membership organizations, n4a does not weigh in on details of funding formula changes, most particularly those that have varying financial considerations for our members. Our endorsement of this legislation is based on many factors, but we do not have a position on the modifications to the “hold harmless” provision that were key to achieving a funding formula compromise. The compromise alters the current hold harmless provision, which currently protects state OAA funding from falling below FY 2006 levels.

As many of you experienced first-hand, the FY 2013 sequester did not override this provision, leading to double-digit cuts for many of the fastest-growing states and lower-than-average cuts for the states with slower growing aging populations. Absent increased funding for the Act overall, Senators struggled to respond to the concerns of the fastest-growing states without directly reducing funding to other states.
Here’s how the compromise would work: the hold harmless provision would be replaced by an alternative calculation that stipulates that for the next three fiscal years (FY 2016–FY 2018), no state shall receive less than 99 percent of what it received in the previous year. In FY 2019, unless Congress acts to update the law again, the hold harmless resets so that no state shall receive less than 100 percent of what it was allocated in FY 2018. (Confused about how the formula works in current law? Read this helpful fact sheet.)

While we acknowledge that the formula compromise is, like any compromise, imperfect, it appears that HELP leaders have secured support for the new provision from Senators representing both slower and faster growing states. This compromise alone represents a major step forward.

As advocates will recall, the overall legislation is fundamentally modest. More ambitious proposals made back in 2012 and 2013 did not survive the bipartisan negotiation process in the summer of 2013 that eventually led to HELP Committee approval during the last Congress. Provisions in the bill do address definition updates (elder justice, Aging and Disability Resource Centers); technical corrections (eligibility under National Family Caregiver Support Program); new emphases on evidence-based health and wellness programs and coordination of human services transportation; and detailed instructions on prevention and remediation of conflicts of interest in the long-term care ombudsman program.

If you have questions or concerns about this Advocacy Alert or n4a’s policy positions, please contact Autumn Campbell at acampbell@n4a.org and Amy Gotwals at agotwals@n4a.org.