BACKGROUND INFORMATION
AAAs, Title VI Aging Programs and the OAA

The Older Americans Act

Since its inception in 1965, the Older Americans Act (OAA) has been the foundation of our national system of home and community-based services (HCBS) for older Americans. The OAA provides funding to states for a range of community planning and service programs to older Americans at risk of losing their independence. Since its enactment, the OAA has been amended 15 times, most recently in 2006, to expand the scope of services, increase local control and responsibility, and add more protections for the elderly.

The Aging Network

To develop and implement the wide array of OAA services, a system of federal, state and local agencies, known as the Aging Network, was established. The core of the Aging Network is the U.S. Administration on Aging (AoA), 56 State and Territorial Agencies on Aging, 618 Area Agencies on Aging, 246 Title VI Native American and Native Hawaiian aging programs, and over 20,000 service provider organizations. This critical aging infrastructure is the backbone of our nation’s HCBS system, offering assistance to older adults, caregivers and people with disabilities.

Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) were established under the Older Americans Act (OAA) in 1973 to serve as the “on-the-ground” organizations charged with assisting vulnerable older adults to live with independence and dignity in their homes and communities. Today, there are 618 AAAs serving older adults in every community. The OAA emphasizes local control and decision-making, hence each AAA has evolved in the context of unique social, economic and political environments. Furthermore, AAAs are flexible and take advantage of emerging opportunities to mount new initiatives or expand services. Consequently, no two AAAs are alike. Yet the OAA provides the umbrella uniting them in a common mission with a common set of roles and responsibilities.
While the mission has not changed, over time the OAA has broadened the scope of core services provided by all AAAs. Gradually, these have been augmented by a range of other services financed by various sources (e.g., Medicaid waivers). Today, AAAs operate complex service delivery systems that provide access, community-based, in-home and elder rights services. As custodians of the public interest, AAAs demonstrate responsible fiscal stewardship by maximizing use of public and private funding to serve as many older adults as possible.

Additionally, 246 Title VI Native American aging programs are funded under Title VI of the OAA. These grants to Indian tribes and Native Alaskan and Hawaiian nonprofits promote the delivery of nutrition, HCBS and caregiver supports to Native American elders. Older American Indians are the most economically disadvantaged elders in the nation. Current Title VI funding levels are woefully inadequate to meet the needs of Indian elders; there has long been a lack of proper investment in Title VI.

**OAA Programs and Services**

Through the Aging Network, each year more than eight million older Americans receive critical support such as nutrition, in-home care, transportation, disease prevention/health promotion, legal services, elder abuse prevention, senior employment and other social supports essential to maintaining their independence. Additionally, one-half million families are provided assistance vital to their role as caregivers for older persons under the National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP), which provides grants to AAAs/Title VI aging programs to help family members who are caring for their older loved ones who are ill or who have disabilities.

Together, these services save taxpayer dollars by enabling seniors to remain independent and healthy in their own homes, where they prefer to be, and where they are less likely to need more costly care paid for through Medicare and Medicaid. Further, when older adults do live in assisted living or nursing home facilities in our communities, the OAA’s long-term care ombudsman program works to protect their rights and well-being.

The wide range of OAA services administered by the Aging Network enables it to direct consumers to service choices that best meet their individual needs. In particular, AAAs/Title VI aging programs play a pivotal role in assessing community needs and developing programs that respond to those needs. They often serve as portals to care, assessing multiple service needs, determining eligibility, authorizing or purchasing services and monitoring the appropriateness and cost-effectiveness of services.

**The Challenges Ahead**

For over forty years, OAA programs have demonstrated a unique ability to provide these quality services while enhancing and protecting federal resources. OAA programs represent less than 0.2 percent of federal discretionary spending, but offer an incredible return on
investment by leveraging state, local, and private dollars to help seniors age in place. Additionally, the OAA’s HCBS can help prevent unnecessary hospital stays and readmissions, delay or avoid costly institutional placements, and promote efficiencies within the health care system by coordinating care and managing care transitions.

Despite these successes and efficiencies, funding for the OAA has not kept pace with inflation or population growth for decades, and current levels are inadequate to meet this increased need. n4a determined in 2009 that in order for OAA funding to simply catch up with the growth in the senior population and the costs of services over the past decade, it would have to be increased by at least 12 percent a year for several years.

Since then, OAA appropriations have continued to lag behind the rising costs of fuel, commodities, and wages, while the nation’s senior population, as well as demand for OAA services, has continued to grow. Additionally, many states remain hampered by the lingering effects of the economic downturn, and federal discretionary spending has faced a series of devastating, unprecedented cuts in the name of deficit reduction.

In response, AAAs and Title VI aging programs have skillfully managed care for vulnerable aging populations by maximizing private and public resources to ensure that essential services are available to millions of minority, frail and low-income older persons in need of comprehensive long-term services and supports. However, as the aging population grows—with more people living longer but facing chronic illness and frailty—and in the absence of significant funding increases, the Aging Network will increasingly be unable to meet the demands for care.

Currently, 41 million Americans are over the age of 65, an 18 percent increase since 2000. With 10,000 baby boomers turning age 65 each day, by 2040 an estimated 80 million Americans will be 65 or older. Older adults are also living longer: people reaching age 65 today have an average life expectancy of an additional 19 years, and those age 85 and older is the fastest growing segment of the aging population. Many of these older adults face economic and health challenges, making them more likely to need long-term services and supports. Currently, 80 percent of seniors have at least one chronic condition; 3.6 million adults over the age of 65 live in poverty; and one in seven seniors struggles with hunger.

Significant increases in funding are crucial to assure the availability of OAA services and enhance the ability of older Americans to live with maximum health, independence and dignity.

➔ For more information about these challenges and how policymakers can respond, please contact n4a’s public policy and advocacy staff, Amy Gotwals and Neal Karkhanis, 202.872.0888. You can also learn more about OAA reauthorization at www.n4a.org/advocacy.