

US Senate HELP Committee

The Older Americans Act: Supporting Efforts to Meet the Needs of Seniors

Testimony of Michelle Branham, Secretary for the Florida Department of Elder Affairs

Introduction

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, esteemed committee members, and fellow panelists, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss how Florida champions seniors and the important role of the Older Americans Act in supporting our elderly population.

Florida, with over 6.3 million residents aged 60 and above, stands as a premier haven for seniors, ranking among the nation's fastest growing and third most populous states. As the Secretary of the Florida Department of Elder Affairs, I am truly grateful for Governor Ron DeSantis' unwavering commitment to prioritizing our seniors.

Our agency is at the forefront, steering initiatives to ensure the dignity, independence, and fulfillment of Florida's senior population. Operating as the designated state unit on aging, our goal is to provide an environment where seniors can maintain their independence within their homes for as long as possible, fostering a contented, healthier lifestyle while promoting fiscal responsibility.

Under the leadership of Governor Ron DeSantis, Florida leads nationally in addressing Alzheimer's and other related dementias, with pioneering initiatives, a first in the nation mobile outreach program, and significant funding increases, reflecting our commitment to those impacted by Alzheimer's and related dementias. Our agency oversees \$511 million in state and federal funding, including \$154 million from the Older Americans Act, aiming to enable older adults to age in their homes and contribute vibrantly to Florida's communities through our collective efforts in the Aging Network.

Older Americans Act in Florida

As you know, the OAA tailors a range of services for seniors and caregivers, providing in-home and community-based support to address cognitive decline, individual needs, and foster social connections and reduces isolation, which has led to increased participation in various centers across Florida. **While the Department continues to review the new OAA rule and its potential fiscal impact, I urge Congress and HHS to work closely with states to ensure these new regulations do not unnecessarily hinder the progress Florida has made over the past three decades.**

Supportive Services

OAA funds provide crucial support for seniors, promoting independence at home and in the community. Services encompass transportation, outreach, and information, as well as in-home assistance like homemaking, home health aide support, companionship, and telephone reassurance. Additionally, services include home repairs, chore assistance, respite care, and specialized support for families facing Alzheimer's and related dementias.

Home-Delivered and Congregate Meals

In FY 2022-2023, over 10 million OAA-funded meals were provided, addressing the need for senior nutrition. Recognizing that a meal is more than sustenance, these programs make a significant impact on the lives of older residents. Home-delivered and congregate meals not only enhance physical health but also combat loneliness and social isolation, offering vital opportunities for socialization and engagement. With over 300 congregate meal sites in Florida, thousands of meals are served daily, fostering a sense of community and connection for our elders.

Florida's Dementia Care and Cure Initiative (DCCI)

The Department of Elder Affairs and the Aging Network, mandated by the Older Americans Act, play a crucial role in coordinating aging services at the community level. Governor DeSantis showcases his commitment through initiatives like the Dementia Care and Cure Initiative (DCCI), addressing the significant impact of Alzheimer's in Florida. The DCCI establishes Dementia-Caring Communities, providing training and support. Governor DeSantis solidified this commitment with a five-point Dementia Action Plan in 2019, leading to the recent establishment of the Florida Alzheimer's Center for Excellence in June 2022. Operated through the Department of Elder Affairs, this center marks a milestone in Florida's ongoing efforts against dementia, serving as a template for other states.

Health and Wellness

Florida's health and wellness programs empower seniors and caregivers with impactful interventions, fostering informed decision-making and proactive health practices. These initiatives, emphasizing medication management and lifestyle interventions, play a crucial role in averting nursing home placements. By preventing and managing chronic health conditions, these programs contribute to the sustained health and vitality of Florida's aging population, aligning with the objective of enabling older Americans to age in their preferred homes and communities.

Caregiver Support

Through OAA, Florida caregivers receive tailored support, including respite, adult day care, and assistance in health, nutrition, and financial literacy for individuals aged 60 and older. Caregiver Supplemental Services extend aid to caregivers of vulnerable individuals aged 60 and older or grandparents caring for grandchildren. Grandparent or Non-Parent Relative Support Services aid these caregivers, providing training, child day care, counseling, legal aid, and transportation.

Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP)

The Senior Community Service Employment Program aids unemployed or low-income Floridians aged 55 and older, addressing job market challenges. With dual goals of community service job training and transitioning participants to unsubsidized employment, the program fosters economic self-sufficiency, contributing to Florida's workforce vitality. A key aspect is filling workforce shortages, making it mutually beneficial. Participants engage in community

service activities at non-profit and public agencies, gaining valuable experience. In FY 2022-2023, the Department received over \$4.7 million in OAA funding to sustain this vital program.

Elder Abuse Prevention Program and Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program (LTCOP)

The Elder Abuse Prevention and Long-Term Care Ombudsman Programs, mandated by OAA Title VII in Florida, are pivotal in safeguarding seniors from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. While not directly involved in abuse investigations, the Department prioritizes prevention and education initiatives, with coordinators disseminating information statewide. The volunteer-driven Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program advocates for individuals in long-term care, emphasizing abuse prevention.

Prioritizing the Well-Being of Florida's Most Vulnerable Seniors

The OAA is a vital funding source for serving older Floridians, emphasizing responsible fund utilization. Prioritizing vulnerable seniors is facilitated by Population Maps, custom GIS maps for each Area Agency on Aging. These maps, integrating census and client data, identify concentrations of seniors needing assistance.

Summary

Florida proudly stands as the most senior-friendly state in the country, with the Older Americans Act being a key element in our efforts to address the needs of our seniors through their golden years. As Secretary of the Department of Elder Affairs, I have seen firsthand how Governor Ron DeSantis has shown unwavering dedication to seniors from his time in Congress through his groundbreaking initiatives like the Dementia Action Plan and the Florida Alzheimer's Center of Excellence. He reinforced training standards for senior care, increased funding for memory disorder clinics, and enacted comprehensive reforms to Florida's prescription drug market. Florida, under his leadership, sets a resolute example for other states to follow in prioritizing and supporting seniors.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.