



Testimony of

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Before the

**Subcommittee on Primary Health and Aging
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate**

on

“Reducing Senior Poverty and Hunger: The Role of the Older Americans Act”

June 19, 2013

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr, and Members of the Subcommittee – good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today at this critical hearing about the issues of hunger and poverty among our senior citizens and the pivotal role of the Older Americans Act, specifically Senior Nutrition Programs authorized under Title III C.

I am Ellie Hollander, President and CEO of the Meals On Wheels Association of America, the oldest and largest national organization comprised of and representing local, community-based Senior Nutrition Programs in all 50 states and territories. Some of these programs serve meals at congregate locations like senior centers, some deliver meals directly to the homes of seniors whose mobility is limited, and the majority of the members of our Association provide both services.

Although I have only been with the Meals On Wheels Association for a few months, I have, in that time, witnessed the efforts of this Subcommittee and in particular, Mr. Chairman, your leadership and commitment to our seniors and to raising awareness about the critical, growing, and often hidden issue of senior hunger in our country. On behalf of our membership and our Board of Directors, who have joined me for this hearing today, I want to express our deepest gratitude.

As a national organization, the Meals On Wheels Association supports local Senior Nutrition Programs by:

- Providing education, training and professional development for Meals on Wheels staff and volunteers to equip them with the specific skills and tools they need to meet the ever-growing nutritional demands of the seniors in their communities;
- Securing financial and other resources to assist local programs in keeping their programs sustainable and advancing their mission so no senior goes hungry;
- Funding and conducting timely and relevant research on senior nutrition, best practices and the social and economic impact of Senior Nutrition Programs; and,
- Raising awareness about the issue of senior hunger and the tireless work undertaken every day by our local Meals on Wheels programs.

For more than 40 years, Older Americans Act Nutrition Programs, in communities large and small, urban and rural, have been serving our country's most vulnerable, frail and isolated seniors. What started as a demonstration project has grown into a highly-effective community-based, nationwide network of more than 5,000 Senior Nutrition Programs. While not all programs receive federal funding, for my testimony today I am referring to those that rely, in part, on federal funding provided through the Older Americans Act. That funding is then leveraged by those programs to help raise the remaining funds needed to provide daily nutritious meals and social contact to seniors 60 years of age or older who are at significant risk of hunger and losing their ability to remain independent in their own homes. Of course, this is one of the primary purposes of the Older Americans Act, a successful, community-driven model that needs to be reauthorized and funded at far more appropriate levels that take into consideration inflation, demographic shifts, and the growth in senior hunger and poverty rates.

However, before I get into the numerous and compelling reasons why the Older Americans Act should be reauthorized, strengthened, and properly funded, we should not lose sight of the seniors for whom these programs were created to serve and for whom it is their lifeline today, as well as the millions of other seniors who need meals but are not able to receive them.

Seniors like Mary. Mary is 90 years old and lives in eastern Pennsylvania. She began receiving meals from her local Meals on Wheels program in August of last year. Up to that time, she was preparing her own meals, but after a fall that required hospitalization and weeks of therapy, it was no longer safe for her to be at the stove. Married for over 56 years, Mary and her late husband, who worked as an auto mechanic, raised two children, a daughter and a son. For 18 years she worked as a sewing machine operator in a local sewing mill. Financially, it is very difficult to make ends meet, living on a very modest pension and Social Security. Sadly, Mary's pension check used to cover the cost of both her electric and gas bills, but now it barely pays the electric bill. Mary is enjoying the meals she receives and states, "Meals on Wheels is a marvelous program. Every volunteer is tops, so concerned, always happy and asking how are you feeling when they visit to deliver my meals."

For those of you on this Subcommittee who have personally delivered meals, stories like Mary's are all too familiar. For those of you who have not yet had the privilege to deliver meals in your state, I would like to personally extend an invitation to do so with

me. The reality is sobering. For those seniors who are struggling with hunger, it often means choosing between paying for medications or eating, or paying the electric bill or eating. These are trade-offs that no one should have to make, especially our most vulnerable seniors.

Of those receiving Meals on Wheels:

- The majority are women who are over 75 and live alone;
- 63% have between 6 to 15 serious health conditions, such as heart disease, hypertension, arthritis, and diabetes;
- 61% take between 6 to 26 medications; and,
- 39% live in poverty.¹

The profile of those seniors who are able to make it out of their home and into a congregate setting, such as a senior center, is slightly better:

- The majority are also women who are over the age of 75 and nearly 40% live alone;
- 40% have between 6 to 15 serious health conditions, such as those listed above;
- 31% take between 6 to 26 medications;
- 26% live in poverty; and,
- 72% need help going outside.²

¹ National Survey of Older Americans Act Participants. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging. 2011. <http://www.agidnet.org>

² Id.

For both Meals on Wheels and congregate meal recipients, an overwhelming majority need help bathing, dressing, going to the bathroom, and managing their medications. On top of these sad realities, many of the basic necessities of daily life that we take for granted every day, such as interacting with others and having access to nutritious food, are simply not options without Older Americans Act Nutrition Programs.

You probably have heard it said many times that Meals on Wheels is ‘more than just a meal.’ That’s because in addition to a daily nutritious meal, it is a safety check, a social visit from someone who cares, who is reliable and trusted. In short, Meals on Wheels is their lifeline, enabling seniors to live at home, independently and in better health.

So now that I have described the typical profile of the seniors being served, let’s delve into the driving reasons why reauthorizing, strengthening, and providing adequate funding for the Older Americans Act is a necessity:

The need is severe. We are merely scratching the surface on meeting the needs of an exponentially increasing hungry senior population as the gaps widen between need/demand and availability/affordability. Since the onset of the recession, the number of seniors struggling with hunger has increased in 44 states, including in each of the states that Members of this Subcommittee represent.³ Nationally, there are 8.3 million seniors⁴ currently struggling with hunger. We are providing nutritious meals to

³ Senior Hunger Report Card. National Foundation to End Senior Hunger. May 2012. <http://bit.ly/13S6C3s>

⁴ Ziliak, James & Craig Gundersen. *Senior Hunger in America: 2010*. University of Kentucky Center and University of Illinois. May 2012. <http://bit.ly/ZVLL01>

only 2.5 million.⁵ The difference in those numbers is devastating—nearly 6 million American seniors are still in need of reliable, nutritious meals. While the infrastructure exists to fill that gap, the resources fall substantially short.

The demand is increasing. The demographic swing to an aging population is already in motion. Baby Boomers are turning 60 at a rate of 12,000 a day. By 2030, the senior population will double to over 70 million.⁶ If one in seven seniors today is struggling with hunger, it is overwhelming to imagine 10 million struggling with hunger in a mere 17 years in the greatest and most affluent country in the world.

Funding levels have not kept pace. “Real” funding levels (adjusted for inflation) for Older Americans Act Nutrition Programs have decreased 18% from 1992 to 2012. At the same time, the population over 60 has increased 34%.

Programs effectively leverage federal funding to raise more. Older Americans Act funding provides on average about 31% of home delivered and 44%⁷ of congregate programs’ total annual budget. To bridge the funding gap, programs cultivate and leverage public-private partnerships to garner grants and donations from state and local communities, companies, private foundations, and individuals (including recipients and/or their families who may be able to pay for or contribute to the cost of their meals).

⁵ 2011 Older Americans Act State Program Reports. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging. March 2013. <http://www.agidnet.org/>

⁶ Aging Statistics. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging http://www.aoa.gov/Aging_Statistics/

⁷ 2011 Older Americans Act State Program Reports. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging. March 2013. <http://www.agidnet.org/>

There is an unrecognized but substantial return on investment. Meals on Wheels and congregate programs, which help keep seniors independent in their communities and able to live in their own homes for as long as possible, avert far more costly alternatives such as hospital and nursing home care. This, in turn, reduces Medicare and Medicaid expenses.

The Center for Effective Government recently found that for every \$1 invested in Meals on Wheels programs, there is up to a \$50 return in Medicaid savings alone.⁸ And we can feed a senior through Meals on Wheels for an entire year for about the same cost for that senior to be in the hospital for one day,⁹ or a nursing home for six days.¹⁰

Contributing to the business case, Brown University¹¹ conducted a recent study that found that by investing more in home-delivered meals, we can keep more seniors out of nursing homes. Specifically, the research found that for every additional \$25 a state spends on home-delivered meals each year per person over 65, the low-care nursing home population—seniors who are nursing home eligible but could remain in their homes with only a little outside support—decreases by a percentage point. In terms of Medicaid spending, one percentage point can translate to billions of dollars in savings.

Sequester has added insult to injury. Exacerbating an already horrific situation compounded by year-over-year declines in funding at both the federal and state level,

⁸ Schieder, Jessica & Lester, Patrick. Sequestering Meals on Wheels Could Cost the Nation \$489 Million per Year. The Center for Effective Government. April 2013. <http://bit.ly/16jmmRU>

⁹ Average Costs to Community Hospitals Per Patient: 1990 - 2009. U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States. 2012. <http://1.usa.gov/XOXIWc>

¹⁰ Market Survey of Long-Term Care Costs. MetLife Mature Market Institute. 2012. <http://bit.ly/Z6op5F>

¹¹ Thomas, Kali & Mor, Vincent. *The Relationship between Older Americans Act Title III State Expenditures and Prevalence of Low-Care Nursing Home Residents*. Brown University. December 2012. <http://bit.ly/16wl0B2>

increased transportation and food costs, and diminished individual contributions yet to rebound from the recession, the impact of the sequester on Older Americans Act Nutrition Programs has added another \$51 million in reductions to these programs for the remainder of 2013—compressed between now and September 30.¹² There is no telling what the ‘run rate’ impact of the sequester will impose for the subsequent years during which it is scheduled to continue, but it won’t be pretty.

The impact of the sequester on seniors is real, and it must be stopped. Based on a survey we recently conducted of our member programs that receive federal funding through the Older Americans Act:

- Almost 70% are cutting the number of meals served;
- Over 70% are establishing for the first time or adding to existing waiting lists;
- More than half are reducing the number of seniors being served;
- 40% are eliminating staff positions;
- Almost 40% are reducing the number of days they deliver meals;
- 25% are reducing the number of days open for congregate sites; and,
- 1 in 6 programs are closing congregate sites or home delivered meal programs altogether.¹³

The objectives of the Older Americans Act Nutrition Programs are to reduce hunger and food insecurity, to promote socialization and health and well-being. And services are

¹² Funding Allocations to States and Tribal Organizations. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging. May 2013. <http://1.usa.gov/16vSXSm>

¹³ Sequester Survey. Meals On Wheels Association of America. June 2013. <http://bit.ly/17rq4JQ>

targeted to those with the greatest economic and social need, including most at risk for nursing home placement. We know that these programs are saving lives and taxpayer dollars every day. They are efficient and effective, and they are doing precisely what they were designed to do.

Since my start with Meals On Wheels on February 11, at a time when the threat of the sequester was looming, I have travelled across the country to visit individual programs in Georgia, Indiana, Wisconsin, Kansas, Massachusetts, Texas, and South Carolina. While I have learned that each Meals on Wheels program is unique, the challenges they face are nearly uniform.

I have had the opportunity to conduct meal deliveries in nearly every state I have visited. And I have seen firsthand the full continuum of experiences—from my visit with Mrs. Gove, confined to a wheelchair from polio who volunteers as a Caller Coordinator for her church, to Mr. Hiatt, a farmer who had recently been discharged from the hospital following back surgery, to Mr. Huebschen, a distinguished military veteran who after 50 years in a loving marriage was recently widowed. I have arrived when someone was in immediate need of assistance and moments after a recipient passed away. I have been welcomed into homes and offered a seat to visit with people who had never met me before, simply because I announced I was from Meals on Wheels. Now, I fully understand what it means to say that we are more than just a meal; that we are, in fact, a social connection, a safety check, a friend, a member of their extended family. I cannot imagine how we can allow these seniors in need—who are our parents,

grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, neighbors, veterans—to bear the brunt of our inability to work in a nonpartisan fashion to prop up this program which is, in fact, working well. Even if the moral obligation doesn't prompt action, the business and economic cases certainly should.

Thank you sincerely for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee. I hope it has been insightful and compelling. I look forward to answering any questions you might have and to working with you to address the critical issue of senior hunger in America.