

October 27, 2023

Honorable [Legislator]

[U.S. House of Representatives/U.S. Senate]

[Office Address]

Washington, DC [20510 for Senate/20515 for House]

Dear [Legislator]:

On behalf of the Milwaukee County Area Agency on Aging – an organization with the mission to improve the health and well-being for all older adult residents of Milwaukee County by acknowledging and overcoming structural racism, promoting health equity, improving communication and collaboration, and addressing all dimensions of wellness – we are writing regarding the FY 2024 federal funding for Older Americans Act (OAA) within the Administration for Community Living (ACL) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Milwaukee County is home to 945,726 residents; 185,000 residents are older adults. In the next decade, we expect that our residents aged 65 – 85 years old will increase by 30,000 and our residents aged 85 and older will double. We currently experience high demand for the services and programs we provide to our older adults. As we plan for the population of older adults in Milwaukee County to grow over the next several years, we anticipate that service demand will rise accordingly. Funding for OAA programs and services is essential to the health and independence of the older adults and caregivers we serve in your district.

Unfortunately, even with the acknowledgement of the growing demand for home and community-based services among America's rapidly aging population, OAA remains underfunded, typically receiving modest increases that do not reflect the current and future need that exists in our community. Our requests for these long-overdue sustainable investments are essential for us to continue carrying out our mission—supporting the ability of older adults to age well at home safely and with dignity, as we all hope to do.

While we support increases to every part of the OAA, we encourage you to prioritize and significantly increase the capacity of three OAA programs:

- Title III B: Supportive Services & Centers
- Title III C1 and C2: Congregate & Home-Delivered Meals
- Title III E: Family Caregiver Support

OAA Title III B is our most flexible source of OAA funding, and a backbone set of services that older adults rely on. With this funding, we have developed programs and services that meet seniors where they are at and engage participants from different backgrounds and cultures. Not only do we interact our participants at our five County-owned senior centers, but we provide support through counseling services, telephone reassurance, household and outdoor maintenance, financial counseling, and multicultural community center programming. These programs are just a small sample of the work we do to help older adults connect with their community, reduce social isolation, and promote health and wellness.

To further support health and wellness, we also encourage increased funding for our Title III C nutrition programs. The purpose of these vital services is to reduce hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition in older adults. Home-delivered meals promote the health and wellbeing of older adults by assisting them in gaining access to nutrition and other disease prevention and health promotion services. 52 percent of home-delivered meal recipients report that they live alone and the social interaction they receive during their meal delivery is vital to their mental health. Congregate meal sites have the benefit of providing proper nutrition and wellness, while also promoting socialization. When we can encourage an older adult to go to a congregate meal site, we can also connect them with other needed services. In 2022, we served 40,777 congregate meals, 179,365 takeout meals, and 322,969 home-delivered meals. We try to be innovative and provide as many, nutritious and appetizing, meals as possible, but demand exceeds funding.

Finally, our agency also administers programs to support family caregivers under the Title III E National Family Caregiver Support Program. As the aging population continues to grow, so does the need for both professional and unpaid caregivers. We support caregivers by providing them with training, respite, support groups, and other in-demand services that help older adults age in place. There are nearly 600,000 family caregivers in Wisconsin providing an estimated 490 million hours of care valued at \$6.9 billion annually. Investing in caregivers ensures that they can remain in the workforce and avoid pay cuts, helps older adults remain in their homes and out of costly institutions, and provides them with access to training and respite.

We are asking that the 2024 budget prioritize the programs that help older adults age well in their homes and communities and that support caregivers. In the interest of the older adults that we serve and that you represent in Milwaukee County, we hope you will support, and urge your colleagues to support, a final 2024 funding bill that includes significant increases for critical OAA and other aging programs that reflect the incredible need for these aging services that exists in our community and around the country.

Please feel free to reach out anytime on these or any aging issues of importance to you and your constituents.

Sincerely,

Milwaukee County Area Agency on Aging