



July 19, 2024

The Honorable Bernie Sanders
Chairman
Senate Committee on Health, Education,
Pensions
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bill Cassidy
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and
Labor and Pensions
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bob Casey
Chairman
Senate Special Committee on Aging
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Braun
Ranking Member
Senate Special Committee on Aging
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tim Kaine
231 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Susan Collins
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Edward Markey
225 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Markwayne Mullin
330 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Submitted electronically at OAA@help.senate.gov

Dear Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Braun, and Ranking Member Collins, Senators Kaine, Markey and Mullin:

LeadingAge represents more than 5,400 nonprofit and mission-driven aging services providers and other organizations that touch millions of lives every day. Alongside our members and 36 partners in 41 states, we use applied research, advocacy, education, and community-building to make America a better place to grow old. Our membership encompasses the continuum of services for people as they age, including those with disabilities. We bring together the most inventive minds in the field to lead and innovate solutions that support older adults wherever they call home.

As advocates for high quality long-term services and supports across the aging services continuum, LeadingAge applauds the stakeholder process and is encouraged by your attention to our aging demographic and the providers that serve them. LeadingAge members are cornerstones of their communities, serving individuals across the care continuum using a wide range of funding sources and programs. They are trusted thought partners and collaborators working closely with local Area Agencies on Aging (AAA), and with their state units on aging, as referral sources, contracted providers and hubs for education and community engagement. We appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback on the discussion draft for the forthcoming reauthorization of the Older Americans Act (OAA) of 1965 and to authorize appropriations for fiscal years 2025 through 2029.

TITLE II—ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS AND COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENTS OF OLDER INDIVIDUALS.

Mental health is rapidly emerging as one of the most pressing issues for our members who increasingly report that the older adults they serve are dealing with its effects. Approximately 20% of individuals who are 55 years or older encounter some form of mental health issue, most commonly anxiety and depression often cooccurring with substance use disorder (SUD).¹ According to a May 2024 report by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 7.1 million older adults experienced An SUD),² and 1 in 50 older adults struggled with an opioid use disorder (OUD). Among older adults, alcohol is the most used substance, with approximately 10 million older adults engaging in binge drinking in the last month.

LeadingAge members report a rising number of residents, clients, and their family members experiencing mental health challenges and substance use disorders, often complicated by the effects of aging, medication and cognitive impairment and a dearth of services available to support these individuals. Members repeatedly discuss challenges with loneliness, depression, and hoarding, often comorbid with substance use. A recent report from the Senate Special Committee on Aging exposed both the prevalence and costs associated with hoarding in our older adult population.³ LeadingAge was pleased to [respond to the committees RFI](#) and share the experiences of our members.

LeadingAge is heartened to see attention to the state of the mental health of older adults and the drafts designation of an individual within the Department of Health and Human Services charged with raising the visibility of this issue and coordinating research and services where possible, but more needs to be done. This is an issue that we started to hear about with great frequency during the pandemic and that drumbeat continues. We encourage a focus *on* and funding *for* attention to the unique needs of the aging population and the cooccurring manifestation of substance abuse, mental health diagnoses, undiagnosed depression and loneliness, and cognitive impairment or decline.

TITLE III – ADMINISTRATION ON AGING

We are supportive of the work being done by the Interagency Coordinating Committee on Healthy Aging and Age-Friendly Communities, which is working to create a national plan focused on supporting the ability of older individuals to age in place and access preventative health care, promote age-friendly communities, and address access for older adults to long-term care services and supports. While outside the scope of the OAA, LeadingAge believes that, ultimately, we need an office on aging policy in the White House with authority to

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention & National Association of Chronic Disease Directors. (2006). Issue brief #1: What do the data tell us? In *The State of Mental Health and Aging in America* (pp. 1–6).
https://www.cdc.gov/aging/pdf/mental_health.pdf

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2024). Behavioral Health among Older Adults: Results from the 2021 and 2022 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health. In *Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*.
<https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt45341/2022-nsduh-older-adult-info.pdf>

³ Majority Staff of The U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, & Casey, B. (2024). *HOW HOARDING DISORDER AFFECTS AMERICA'S OLDER ADULTS, FIRST RESPONDERS, AND THEIR COMMUNITIES THE CONSEQUENCES OF CLUTTER*.
https://www.aging.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/the_consequences_of_clutter.pdf

ensure an “all of government” approach to the challenges faced by our aging population and to ensure true interagency coordination should reside at the highest levels of government. ⁴

We support funding for the 2025 White House Conference on Aging and look forward to helping to shape the agenda to ensure that all stakeholders, including nonprofit providers of aging services, have a voice at the Conference

TITLE III—GRANTS FOR STATE AND COMMUNITY PROGRAMS ON AGING

Peer Support and Improving Caregiver Assessment and Supports

LeadingAge supports the expansion of resources available for family caregivers through the inclusion of peer supports for family caregivers in addition to counseling and support groups. We also encourage the clarification of caregiver assessments to include considerations such as how easy it is for caregivers to access information, supports, or services or the timeliness, accessibility, and quality of these services. We believe that improving the quality and consistency of caregiver assessments will have national significance in our ability to fully meet the needs of older adults.

Respite Care

LeadingAge strongly encourages increased funding to support responsive and accessible respite care and other programs to support family caregivers. We encourage the inclusion of increased respite services, particularly for those family caregivers of individuals with Alzheimer’s or other cognitive impairments, which may include respite care through various models including adult day. Many of these programs are designed to support family members and other persons providing voluntary care while unable to leave a care dependent person alone and needing time to conduct tasks necessary for maintaining a home or livelihood.

LeadingAge fully supports access to home modification services and funding for older adults to obtain *and retain* their housing. In addition to expanding the scope of home modification beyond much-needed accessibility modifications to include weatherization efforts, we recommend also including modifications and alterations related to climate resilience and energy efficiency. Because disaster-prone areas are often less expensive in terms of land and housing costs, low-income households are disproportionately impacted by climate change, weather events, and natural disasters. To support older adults as they age, LeadingAge supports home modifications that may include resiliency alterations including energy efficient and climate resilience as well as utility efficiency upgrades to reduce recurring costs.

Nutrition Services

LeadingAge members work closely with community-based organizations that provide the full array of OAA services and frequently report the lifesaving support provided through OAA-funded nutrition services, including by local Meals on Wheels organizations. OAA funded nutrition programs are particularly important to affordable senior housing providers whose residents are underserved by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and often struggle with age-appropriate nutrition and with overall food insecurity. As a result, LeadingAge's affordable senior housing provider members have called OAA-funded nutrition programs like Meals on Wheels and similar programming, "incredibly important." We encourage increased opportunity for expansion of meal services through congregate, grab and go, and delivery and increased flexibility for service provision and expansion.

⁴ <https://leadingage.org/leadingage-to-white-house-america-needs-an-office-on-aging-policy/>

TITLE IV—ACTIVITIES FOR HEALTH, INDEPENDENCE, AND LONGEVITY

LeadingAge has long supported increased investment in the paid, professional caregiver workforce – both through OAA and through other mechanisms. We appreciate and support the discussion draft establishment of a national resources center to support the growth and professionalization of the direct care workforce. This is an important investment in the paid, professional caregiver workforce. We urge the committee to include authorization and funding to explore the creation of micro credentialing programs that support a career lattice and recognize the acquisition of skills through short term training programs allowing caregivers to work across the aging services continuum.

Title VIII – MISCELLANEOUS

LeadingAge is disappointed in the discussion draft’s missed opportunity to formally link OAA funded programs and resources to Department of Housing and Urban Development-funded public housing agencies, private owners, and continua of care, which coordinate homeless services funding at the local level. Unfortunately, the discussion draft’s Government Accountability Office study, in Section 821, on the affordable housing needs of older adults with low incomes will mostly result in information duplicative of what is already widely researched and understood: there is a severe shortage of affordable housing for all households, including for older adults, and older adults are the fastest growing population of people experiencing homelessness.

As we did in our previous comments, we continue to urge the bill to include increased funding authorization for Title II’s Aging Network Support Activities to provide new funding for the National Eldercare Locator to partner with the Continuums of Care on services for older adults experiencing or at risk of homelessness. LeadingAge also urges the Committee to include increased funding authorization for Title III’s Area Agencies on Aging and State Units on Aging to better coordinate and partner with state and local Continuums of Care to better serve older adults experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

We have an exciting opportunity to integrate the powerful lessons learned during the Covid-19 pandemic and enact a robust and exciting vision for the future of aging services, embodied in the Older Americans Act. Our members strongly support bold action aimed at integrating services and streamlining resources and implore Congress to pair it with an equally strong financial investment.

LeadingAge appreciates the opportunity to provide comments and promote access to the full continuum of community-based services for older adults. OAA funded services provide vital support for families, family caregivers, and older adults. We are grateful for the opportunity to provide comments to support members in prioritizing OAA programs and look forward to continued dialog with Congress on aging services. If you have any questions about LeadingAge comments, please contact Nicole Howell at nhowell@leadingage.org

Sincerely,

Nicole Howell

Nicole Howell
Director of Workforce Policy