



June 12, 2015

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Durham, NC 27709

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Dear Commissioners Chilton and Doar:

As the National Commission on Hunger continues to develop innovative ideas and policy recommendations for Congress and the Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), we strongly urge you to keep the unique needs of millions of seniors struggling with hunger and isolation at the forefront of your decision-making process. Ensuring that both today's and tomorrow's seniors receive the proper nutrition needed to maintain health and improve quality of life is not only an investment in our nation's fiscal future, but it also a preventative prescription for significantly reducing Medicare and Medicaid expenses.

At a time in our nation's history, when both the need and demand for nutritious meals are already substantial and will continue to climb exponentially, it is critical that proven and effective programs serving our most vulnerable seniors are further strengthened. We all know that without proper nutrition, one's health deteriorates and can inevitably fail. For seniors, even a slight reduction in nutritional intake can exacerbate health challenges, increasing risk of hospitalization and/or nursing home care. *The Causes, Consequences, and Future of Senior Hunger in America* report found that a senior facing the threat of hunger has the same chance of an activities of daily living (ADL) limitation as someone 14 years older. This means there is a large disparity between a senior's actual chronological age and her/his "physical" age, such that a 67 year old senior struggling with hunger is likely to have the ADL limitations of an 81 year old.

Furthermore, findings from the recently released *More Than a Meal* study showed that compared to a national representative sample of aging Americans, seniors on Meals on Wheels waiting lists are among our nation's most vulnerable citizens. Specifically, the seniors who participated in this study were significantly more likely to:

- Report poorer self-rated health (71% vs. 26%)
- Screen positive for depression (28% vs. 14%) and anxiety (31% vs. 16%)
- Report recent falls (27% vs. 10%) and fear of falling that limited their ability to stay active (79% vs. 42%)
- Require assistance with shopping for groceries (87% vs. 23%) and preparing food (69% vs. 20%)
- Have health and/or safety hazards both inside and outside the home (i.e., higher rates of tripping hazards, (24% vs. 10%), and home construction hazards, (13% vs. 7%)

Year after year, the gap between the number of seniors struggling with hunger and those receiving nutritious meals through programs such as Meals on Wheels continues to widen and waiting lists for services are mounting in every state. Since 2005, the nationwide Meals on Wheels network has served 21 million fewer meals to seniors. This growing gap is due to

declining public funding through the Older Americans Act and other federal and state grants; stagnant private funding; rising food and transportation and other increasing operational costs. At a minimum, we must stave off this continuous decline not only for the health of our seniors, but our nation as a whole.

Given the magnitude of the senior hunger problem and continued demographic shifts resulting in a rapidly aging population, there are several recommendations the Commission should consider including in any final report to Congress and the Secretary of the USDA. Our recommendations are as follows:

OLDER AMERICANS ACT (OAA) NUTRITION PROGRAMS

The OAA has been the primary piece of federal legislation supporting social and nutrition services to Americans age 60 and older since 1965. In 2013, the last year for which we have data, the OAA enabled more than 219 million meals to be provided to 2.4 million seniors.

Urge Congress to:

- *Pass a bipartisan reauthorization of the OAA*, legislation that has been unauthorized since 2011 and underfunded for decades
- *Consolidate Titles III C-1 (congregate nutrition) and C-2 (home-delivered nutrition) into one Title III C*, giving states and localities more flexibility to meet the growing need and improve program efficiency
- *Eliminate or reduce the 30% cap states can transfer between Title III B (supportive services) and Title III C (nutrition services) funding*. This alone could increase federal funding for OAA Nutrition Programs by nearly \$50M and reduce healthcare costs
- *Provide adequate and stable funding to OAA Nutrition Programs*. At a minimum, approve the Administration's FY 2016 Budget Request of \$854.6M and support an additional \$20M for Nutrition Innovation Demonstrations
- *End sequestration for FY 2016 and beyond and replace it with a balanced plan* that recognizes the significant cuts already made to Non-Defense Discretionary Programs; OAA Nutrition Programs have yet to recover from the harsh and unnecessary cuts in FY 2013

CHARITABLE TAX PROVISIONS

There are more than 5,000 community-based senior nutrition programs who rely day in and day out on a dedicated army of two million volunteers nationwide to deliver nutritious meals, friendly visits and safety checks to America's seniors; enabling them to live more nourished lives with independence and dignity. A Meals on Wheels volunteer route can range from one mile in an urban area, to nearly 150 miles in rural parts of the country, where recipients may live 40 miles apart.

Urge Congress to:

- *Set the charitable mileage deduction* (in 2015, \$0.14/mile) *to the same level as those at the business rate* (\$0.57.5/mile)
- *Permanently expand the enhanced food donation tax credit*, allowing local farmers to donate food to senior nutrition programs and accept a nominal, voluntary contribution donation for food used in prepared meals

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP)

SNAP is our nation's largest federal nutrition program, targeting households at or below 130% of the federal poverty line, or an annual income of \$15,171 for a senior living alone. Less than 40% of eligible seniors are enrolled in SNAP and on average access only \$139 a month.

Urge the USDA to:

- *Explore and disseminate state-level best practices for improving senior SNAP participation*, such as simplified application and screening in senior centers
- *Recognize the statute allowing states' eligibility for surplus or "bonus" commodities* through the OAA-authorized Nutrition Services Incentive Program
- *Maximize voluntary contributions for home-delivered meals via SNAP*, as has been allowed under the law since 1971, by supporting mobile point of sale devices for senior nutrition programs; similar to pilot tests that have occurred in farmers markets

IMPROVE DATA COLLECTION EFFORTS

USDA reporting on, and analysis of, food security trends and participation rates in programs like SNAP for the senior population is limited and irregular.

Urge the USDA to:

- *Conduct and prepare a SNAP Characteristics Report for seniors 60+ on a biannual basis at a minimum*
- *Provide annual SNAP senior participation rates*
- *Analyze food security rates for all "elderly," not just "elderly living alone" or "households with elderly," in the annual Food Security Report*
- *Define elderly as "60 and older" for the annual Food Security Report, not 65 and older, which is consistent with other USDA nutrition program definitions for "elderly"*

As you work toward fulfilling the Commission's objectives to provide policy and innovative approaches to combating domestic hunger and food insecurity, we strongly encourage you to consider our recommendations in your final report to Congress and to the Secretary of the USDA. We hope you look to the 5,000+ Meals on Wheels programs nationwide as part of the solution and a proven preventative prescription for saving billions in avoided healthcare costs.

Thank you for your commitment to our nation and the millions of Americans struggling with hunger and food insecurity. If there are other ways we can be of assistance as you move forward, please do not hesitate to reach out to me or my staff.

Sincerely,



Ellie Hollander
President and CEO
Meals on Wheels America

cc: National Hunger Commissioners; RTI International