



**Outside Witness Testimony of
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**Submitted to the U.S. House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies**

**Regarding: Administration for Community Living Fiscal Year 2022 Appropriations
May 19, 2021**

Dear Chairwoman DeLauro, Ranking Member Cole and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony concerning Fiscal Year 2022 (FY22) appropriations for the Older Americans Act (OAA) Nutrition Program, administered by the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Administration for Community Living (ACL). On behalf of Meals on Wheels America, the national network of community-based senior nutrition providers and the individuals they serve, we are grateful for your ongoing support for the program, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic over the last year. With the help of Congress and its actions to deliver much-needed emergency relief funding to the OAA network, local senior nutrition programs (e.g., Meals on Wheels) continue to serve on the front lines of the ongoing public health crisis, delivering essential nutrition assistance and so much more to older Americans. Despite this historic emergency supplemental funding and recent investments in annual appropriations, senior nutrition programs continue to face persistent challenges to meet the need for services that had existed prior to COVID-19, and to address the dramatic increase in requests for meals and social connection, soaring costs and other expenses and investments that are needed to sustain and scale up operations for the future. For this reason, **we request a total of \$1,903,506,000 in FY22 for the OAA Title III C Nutrition Program – Congregate Nutrition Services, Home-Delivered Nutrition Services, and Nutrition Services Incentive Program (NSIP)**. Our specific appropriations requests are:

- **\$965,342,000 for Congregate Nutrition Services (Title III C-1)**
- **\$726,342,000 for Home-Delivered Nutrition Services (Title III C-2)**
- **\$211,822,000 for Nutrition Services Incentive Program (Title III)**

The total ask is double the FY21-enacted funding levels for the program and is reflective of the amount required to maintain current levels of service, while enabling the network to expand and adapt to serve more seniors. As our country strives to respond, recover and rebuild from the health and economic crises brought on by the pandemic, these nutrition programs are a lifeline for millions of older adults, and the services they provide must be able to be maintained and grow as the need demands.

Overseen by ACL's Administration on Aging and implemented at the local level through more than 5,000 community-based programs, the OAA Nutrition Program provides nutritious meals, opportunities for social connection and safety checks to adults aged 60 and older – either in a group setting or directly in the home – and has been at the forefront of addressing senior hunger and isolation for nearly fifty years. Amid the pandemic, older adults have been facing an unprecedented threat to their physical and mental health, independence and financial well-being, and the local providers that serve them are seeing a far greater demand for their services as operation expenses and/or overall costs to safely deliver meals continue to rise. Accordingly, additional federal funding and continued flexibilities for utilizing OAA dollars are needed for senior nutrition programs to adequately adapt and expand operations to meet the growing and evolving needs of the communities they serve.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, nearly 9.7 million (13%) older adults aged 60 and older were threatened by hunger – [5.3 million \(7%\) of which](#) experienced *low food security* or *very low food security*. Social isolation – which has been amplified amid safety and social distancing measures – is another threat to the nearly [17.5 million \(24%\) seniors](#) that lived alone in 2019. [One in five older adults](#) reported frequent feelings of loneliness prior to the pandemic, and many more seniors have experienced lack of social connection since then. Most older Americans possess at least one trait that puts them at increased risk of experiencing food insecurity, malnutrition, social

isolation and/or loneliness, thereby increasing the likelihood of experiencing myriad consequential negative health effects. Despite the wide recognition of the relationship between healthy aging and access to nutritious food and regular socialization, millions of seniors were struggling to meet these basic human needs pre-COVID, and these issues have only intensified.

The OAA Nutrition Program is designed to reduce hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition, and to promote socialization and the overall health and well-being of older adults. Providers across the country have long played a pivotal role in supporting the independence and quality of life of the older adults they serve. OAA services are targeted toward seniors with the greatest social and economic need, as well as minority older adults and those at risk of institutional care. A significant portion of the [2.4 million seniors](#) receiving Title III C nutrition services through the OAA network experience poverty and live in rural areas. For many program participants, the volunteer or staff member who delivers meals to their homes may be the only individual(s) she or he sees that day. Fortunately, the OAA Nutrition Program enables seniors with these risk factors to remain safer, healthier and less isolated in their own homes and communities.

Additionally, the OAA Nutrition Program is a true public-private partnership that provides critical support and resources to local community-based organizations. By serving seniors in their homes and communities, programs generate a powerful social and economic return on investment for older adults and taxpayers alike. They leverage funds granted to states through the OAA to offer nutrition and social services with the help of millions of volunteers, who provide innumerable in-kind contributions to support daily operations. In the aggregate, funding from the OAA accounted for 40% of the total amount spent to provide over 223 million congregate and home-delivered meals in 2019, based on the [latest available data](#). As public spending on healthcare rises each year, it is imperative that we invest in these cost-effective programs that safely promote independence and reduce costly healthcare utilization among many of our country's most at-risk

seniors. To further illustrate, Meals on Wheels can serve a senior for an entire year for the equivalent cost of one day in the hospital or 10 days in a nursing home.

Prior to the pandemic, federal funding for the senior nutrition network was not keeping pace with increasing demand, rising costs and inflation, leaving a huge gap between seniors served and those in need of services but not receiving them. Nationally, the OAA Nutrition Program network served [over 17 million fewer meals](#) in 2019 than in 2005 – a 7% decline – despite the population of adults age 60 and older rising 53% over that same period. Among Meals on Wheels America members [surveyed](#) in 2019, nearly half of all local programs reported maintaining an active waiting list due to insufficient resources, and 85% of programs surveyed saw unmet need for services in their communities at that time. The emergency funding provided through COVID-19 relief legislation not only helped address a huge influx of older adults newly in need of nutrition services because of the pandemic and, in many cases, allowed programs to provide services for those individuals in their communities who had long been eligible and in need. An increase in FY22 appropriations is needed to ensure that these individuals can continue to receive the nutritional and social support unique to the OAA Nutrition Program that helps them remain healthier and independent at home and out of costly institutional or healthcare settings.

With the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, as mentioned above, the Meals on Wheels network faced an unprecedented surge in demand as the number of older adults sheltering in place increased and congregate centers shifted ways of operating – including transitioning congregate services to fully home-delivered or to grab-and-go and curbside pick-up alternatives, as well as offering virtual socialization activities and wellness checks over the phone. Most Meals on Wheels programs overcame significant pandemic-related challenges to continue and rapidly scale their operations to serve more older Americans in need. In a survey conducted in November 2020 on behalf of Meals on Wheels America, programs reported delivering an average of 100% more

home-delivered meals at their highest number served during the pandemic than they served before. At that time, programs also reported serving home-delivered meals to 84% more clients on a weekly basis, and four out of five local programs agreed that “new clients are here to stay.”

Despite the incredible response from the senior nutrition network to quickly scale services, barriers remain in addressing the full demand. According to the November 2020 survey, 88% of Meals on Wheels programs reported increased costs due to the necessary purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE) and safety supplies, meal production expenses and/or labor needs. Local programs reported that costs are expected to remain high, and nine in 10 Meals on Wheels programs reported unmet need for home-delivered meals in their community. Nearly a third of programs said they would need to at minimum double their home-delivered efforts to fill the gap in their community, as many reported increased numbers of seniors forced to go on waiting lists. More than a year into this public health crisis, local programs are continuing to deliver these life-saving services at high rates and have cited funding as the primary factor impacting their ability to serve individuals most directly affected by the pandemic. Without additional funding through the OAA, many nutrition providers stated they will not be able to support their current client base.

We understand the difficult decisions you face with respect to annual appropriations bills and other budgetary challenges, as Congress works to mitigate the impacts of the global pandemic and recover from this prolonged national emergency. As the Subcommittee develops its FY22 Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill, we request you provide a minimum of \$1,903,506,000 for the OAA Nutrition Program so that local Meals on Wheels programs can ensure the safety and social connectedness of our nation’s seniors, build the capacity of OAA programs and services and bridge the growing gaps and unmet need for services in communities nationwide. Thank you for your leadership, support and consideration. We look forward to working together to ensure that no senior in America is left hungry and isolated.