



**Statement for the Record
Submitted to the Special Committee on Aging
United States Senate**

Hearing on

“COVID-19 One Year Later: Addressing Health Care Needs for At-Risk Americans”

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**Submitted by
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Dear Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Scott, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of Meals on Wheels America, the national network of community-based senior nutrition programs, and the individuals they serve, thank you for holding the important hearing, “COVID-19 One Year Later: Addressing Health Care Needs for At-Risk Americans.” We are grateful for your leadership and commitment to addressing the needs of our nation’s older adults, especially as we pass the difficult one-year anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately claimed the lives of thousands of older Americans and has harmed the health and well-being of millions of others.

Meals on Wheels America is the national nonprofit organization that supports the network of 5,000 community-based senior nutrition programs across the country that are dedicated to addressing senior isolation and hunger. With the support of committed volunteers and staff members, local Meals on Wheels programs deliver nutritious meals in group settings and/or the home, and provide friendly visits and social interaction, safety checks, and connections to other social and health services to older Americans in virtually every community nationwide. The individuals served through the senior nutrition network are among the most vulnerable to experiencing severe complications related to COVID-19, as well as challenges accessing nourishing food and social connections.

For nearly 50 years, community-based senior nutrition providers have been welcomed into the homes of our nation’s seniors with every meal delivery. The person-centered services provided by this network are made possible by the federal funding and support authorized by the Older Americans Act (OAA) and are designed to specifically meet the nutritional and social needs of high-risk, underserved seniors. Senior nutrition programs have long worked on the front lines of combatting the harmful effects of hunger, social isolation and loneliness in older adults, but their efforts have never been as essential as during the pandemic, as they continue to provide their communities with nutrition, social connection and most recently, support with accessing vaccinations.

The variety of topics covered at the hearing and diversity of experiences and perspectives outlined by the witnesses were informative and encouraging. Well-coordinated mass vaccine distribution plans and outreach, expansion of broadband and telehealth, improved caregiver and direct workforce support, and funding for essential wrap-around aging services are all vital to ensuring the health and wellbeing of older adults. We appreciate the opportunity to submit this written testimony for the hearing record and will focus our statement on the senior nutrition network’s specific experience – both the successes and challenges – around providing care and support to older adults in their homes and communities amid the pandemic.

ADDRESSING SENIOR HUNGER AND ISOLATION BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19

Senior hunger, social isolation and loneliness are recognized as major threats to public health, though the awareness of these issues has grown significantly due to the pandemic. Before the COVID-19 crisis, nearly 9.7 million seniors in the United States faced the threat of hunger –

among those, 5.3 million were food insecure or very low food secure.¹ One in four older adults reported feeling lonely, and over 17 million lived alone, putting them at risk of social isolation.^{2,3} We know that a far more significant number of older adults are now experiencing food insecurity, and many more are lonelier than before the pandemic.

Despite the efforts of dedicated local programs working tirelessly to serve their communities with limited resources, the gap between those struggling with hunger and those receiving nutritious meals through the OAA continues to widen across the country. Even prior to the pandemic, federal funding for aging services, like Meals on Wheels, was not keeping pace with increasing demand, rising costs and inflation. Consequently, the network served over 17 million fewer OAA meals in 2019 than in 2005, and with the onset of the health and economic crises caused by COVID-19, the demand for OAA services like Meals on Wheels has soared to unprecedented levels.⁴ With 12,000 individuals turning 60 every day, and the pandemic exacerbating existing inequities in food and health access, further federal investment is unequivocally needed.

As we heard from witnesses in the hearing, local community-based programs have been critical to our nation's pandemic response, and Meals on Wheels programs, in particular, have been highly sought out for the trusted nutrition and social connections they offer. More than a year into this public health crisis, these programs are continuing to deliver these life-saving services at sustained high rates.

CARE DURING COVID: THE MEALS ON WHEELS RESPONSE AND OUTLOOK

Practically overnight, 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. Programs quickly adapted their traditionally high-touch service model to continue safely offering their senior clients critical person-centered components that go well beyond the meal itself. Most Meals on Wheels programs reported being able to not only continue their operations, but also to rapidly scale up to serve more older Americans in need because of the hope and promise that additional emergency funding would be coming their way.

The innovative approaches that Meals on Wheels programs have utilized during pandemic response include transitioning congregate services to fully home-delivered or to grab-and-go and curbside pick-up alternatives that allowed older adults get their meals from the safety of their car in senior center parking lots. To address social isolation, many programs that were temporarily unable to offer a daily touch point with in-person deliveries pivoted to offering virtual socialization alternatives and wellness checks over the phone. In light of the challenging circumstances, Meals

¹ Feeding America (research conducted by J. Ziliak and C. Gunderson), 2020, *The State of Senior Hunger in America in 2018*. Available at <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/senior-hunger-research/senior>

² AARP, 2018, *Loneliness and Social Connections: A National Survey of Adults 45 and Older*. Available at <https://www.aarp.org/research/topics/life/info-2018/loneliness-social-connections.html>

³ U.S. Census Bureau, 2020, *American Community Survey 2018*. Available on the Administration for Community Living Aging, Independence, and Disability Program Data Portal (AGID): <https://agid.acl.gov/CustomTables/>

⁴ Administration for Community Living (ACL), 2021, *State Program Reports 2005-2019*. Available on the AGID: <https://agid.acl.gov/CustomTables/>

on Wheels programs further established creative community partnerships with food banks, restaurants and other local non-profits to meet the needs of the clients they serve as well as to reach other higher-risk populations living in rural or unserved delivery areas. Local providers are also proving to be critical partners in the national effort to improve COVID-19 vaccine awareness, access and distribution to homebound older adults, including through education and referral information to isolated individuals, assisting with vaccine registration, partnering with health departments and pharmacies, coordination of vaccine deployment, and use of congregate sites for vaccine administration.

Despite the incredible response from the senior nutrition network to quickly scale services, challenges remain in addressing the full demand for services. According to a survey of Meals on Wheels America membership, **nine in 10 local Meals on Wheels programs report there is unmet need for home-delivered meals in their community, and many report increased numbers of seniors forced to go on waiting lists for services.** On average, Meals on Wheels programs are serving about 60 percent more home-delivered meals than before the onset of COVID-19, and the majority believe they will not be able to sustain their current levels of operations without additional emergency federal funding.⁵

The federal relief packages passed in response to the widespread health and economic effects of the pandemic have provided the aging services network with desperately needed supplemental funds to continue delivering meals to and maintaining social connections with seniors. The *Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA)*, the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act of 2020*, the *Continuing Appropriations Act of 2021*, and the *American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act of 2021* delivered a cumulative total of almost \$1.7 billion for OAA Congregate, Home-Delivered and Native American Nutrition Services and the flexibilities required to enable this crucial support to local nutrition programs in every state and district. However, additional Congressional funding and action is necessary to ensure the safety and social connectedness of our nation’s seniors, build the capacity of OAA programs and services to better serve this skyrocketing population, and bridge the growing gaps and unmet need for services in communities nationwide.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We hope that our insights on the response and experience of the senior nutrition network in providing essential services throughout the pandemic are valuable as the Committee considers further action to support older adults, their families and caregivers. There remains a clear need for a strong community-based aging services and supports system as the country’s older adult population rapidly grows. It is also essential to prepare for future emergencies and unknowns that may again disproportionately complicate and harm the lives of seniors. Fortunately, with adequate support, Congress can strengthen and leverage existing private-public programs like Meals on Wheels, which are already reaching and serving the most at-risk and vulnerable older adults—and

⁵ Meals on Wheels American (research conducted by Trailblazer Research), 2020, results from a COVID-19 impact survey of Meals on Wheels America membership.

keeping them more healthy, safe and independent at home and out of Emergency Rooms, hospitals and long-term care facilities.

Therefore, we urge Congress to continue its tradition of bipartisan support for this network and consider the following recommendations to support local nutrition providers and the older adults they serve:

- Increase federal funding for the Older Americans Act (OAA) Nutrition Program to, at a minimum, a total level of \$1,091,753,000 in FY 2022, which is \$140 million (or 15%) above current levels. This simply reflects the total amount previously authorized for the program in the *Supporting Older Americans Act of 2020* reauthorization legislation.
- Implement the *Supporting Older Americans Act of 2020*, the law reauthorizing the OAA as the primary piece of legislation supporting nutrition and social services for individuals age 60+ and their caregivers for more than 50 years, with consideration for the evolving needs of senior nutrition programs due to pandemic response and recovery.
- Strengthen other federal anti-hunger nutrition programs, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), that provide essential services to older adults and their families.

CONCLUSION

Thank you again for convening this important hearing and for the opportunity to share our unique perspectives and experience on this pressing issue. We would like to extend special appreciation to Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Scott and their staff for their leadership and commitment to bipartisan work that will benefit the health, safety and economic security of older adults. We hope the insights shared in this statement are helpful in the Committee's work to address and implement policies that support older Americans, in COVID-19 response and recovery and beyond. We look forward to working together to ensure that no senior is left hungry and isolated and realize our vision of an America in which all seniors live nourished lives with independence and dignity.