

Testimony on Aging Our Way, PA
Secretary Kavulich, Department of Aging
Joint Public Hearing – House and Senate Aging Committees
June 12, 2024

Introduction

Good morning, Chairwoman Ward, Chairwoman Collett, Chairwoman Madden, Chairman Mentzer and esteemed members of the House and Senate Aging committees. Today, I am honored to offer testimony on the development, value, impact, and implementation of ***Aging Our Way, PA***, Pennsylvania's 10-year strategic plan for older adults.

I must thank YOU as the Aging Committee leaders from both chambers and your committee members for your support of this effort and for your steadfast commitment to the health, well-being, and quality of life of Pennsylvania's older adults. The successful development of ***Aging Our Way, PA*** can be directly attributed to your active participation, your engagement with your constituents, and your clear desire to make the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania the best place in the country to age.

Aging Our Way, PA is truly a plan crafted by and for older Pennsylvanians. I want to outline the development process to illustrate how we engaged stakeholders at every step of the way. On May 25, 2023, Governor Shapiro signed Executive Order 2023-09 which directed the Department of Aging and agencies under his jurisdiction to develop this 10-year strategic plan designed to help transform the infrastructure and coordination of services for our older adults.

The Governor initiated this planning process because we are a state that already has a large older adult population that is growing faster than any other demographic. Today, one in four Pennsylvania residents are over the age of 60, and by 2030, one in three Pennsylvanians will be over the age of 60. These demographic trends are more than numbers on paper; they are a call to action for us to lead the nation.

Stakeholder-Driven Approach

We immediately sought to gather input from stakeholders throughout the Commonwealth - including Pennsylvanians over the age of 60, caregivers, families, and community leaders supporting these populations. Through our robust relationships at the local level, the Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) engaged their local communities and held more than 200 listening sessions across all 67 counties. The work of the AAAs was crucial to gathering the stakeholder feedback needed to guide this Plan. Virtual listening sessions were held in different languages and were used to focus our outreach and engagement on specific populations like the LGBTQ+ community, individuals who are blind or with low vision and the deaf/hard of hearing community. In addition to our sessions, we received feedback through letters, calls, and emails. A community needs assessment survey was conducted and included a representative random sample of 900 participants across the state with an additional 7,000 older adults choosing to share their experience through the survey that was available both online and distributed in paper copies. The voices of older adults across the Commonwealth are woven into the

development of this Plan to reflect their preferences and needs – and ultimately fulfill its purpose. With ***Aging Our Way, PA***, we will collectively create a Pennsylvania where all older adults live with dignity and independence.

To organize our conversation and the extensive stakeholder feedback, we leveraged the AARP's Eight Domains of Community Livability framework. This framework was developed by the World Health Organization to support its global Age-Friendly Network and has been adopted by 875 states, counties, cities, and boroughs in the AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities. This framework helps cast a wide net to understand all of the factors that contribute to healthy and engaged older adulthood.

The eight domains include: Housing, Outdoor Spaces and Buildings, Transportation, Civic Participation and Employment, Communication and Information, Respect and Social Inclusion, Social Participation, Health Services and Community Supports. The availability and quality of these domains are known to positively impact the well-being of older adults and help make communities more livable for people of all ages.

Older adults provided their real, lived experiences related to transportation, engaging with government, volunteerism, employment, the need for navigation and getting information from trusted sources, respect and belonging, social engagement and the challenges social isolation and loneliness, access to health care including behavioral health and long-term care, and housing.

Since the inception of this project a comprehensive process was outlined to organize project activities, especially gathering and interpreting data from various sources to identify and develop the priorities, strategies, and tactics defined in the plan. The Department analyzed the qualitative and quantitative stakeholder data then interpreted and organized this stakeholder data into 8 summary reports aligned with the 8 Domain framework. These reports were created to facilitate recommendation development with the steering committee for this process: the Pennsylvania Long-Term Care Council.

Expert Collaboration

The Pennsylvania Long-Term Care Council is comprised of 35 members, including long-term care consumers, advocates, caregivers, providers, and policymakers, some of whom are here with us today: Chairs Ward, Collett, Mentzer, and Madden. This plan builds upon an existing community infrastructure and parallel improvement efforts across the state. Many state agencies, boards, and commissions administer plans, policies, and programs that have direct and implicit impact on the lives of older adults, people with disabilities, and family caregivers. Including members of the legislature, our sister agencies, older adults themselves, community advocates, experts and professionals across various fields was instrumental in ensuring that this work was not done in silos but a collective effort.

Throughout the months of October and November of 2023, the Long-Term Care Council, additional subject matter experts, and our interagency partners worked tirelessly to craft the recommendations that shaped ***Aging Our Way, PA***. The Long-Term Care Council received data briefings on the extensive stakeholder input in order to translate the data into eight domain-

focused recommendation reports. I cannot express how grateful I am to the commitment demonstrated by this Council to diligently develop these recommendations.

The Department synthesized these recommendations into the Plan's priorities, strategies, and tactics to create the first draft of the plan. The Department then began the review process with the Long-Term Care Council, the 29 partner agencies, and subject matter experts to complete the content and composition of ***Aging Our Way, PA***.

Public Comment Period

In February of 2024, the Department published the first draft. The plan was shared with stakeholders for a 30-day public comment period to seek more feedback on how action steps were characterized. The Department received more than 800 comments from different organizations and individuals during this time. All of these comments were considered in the revision and inclusion in the final draft. Comments were received that more concern needs to be paid towards older adult behavioral health, particularly suicide prevention. As a result of this direct feedback, tactics were added to increase access to evidence-based resources and training related to suicide prevention in older adults.

Many stakeholders highlighted the value of Older Adult Daily Living Centers and the LIFE (Living Independence for the Elderly) program as cost-effective alternatives to many of the caregiving workforce challenges that they are facing. We met with Older Adult Daily Living Centers and LIFE stakeholders to develop a tactic to enhance public awareness of these program.

The Department also received several comments that asked for consideration of the needs of incarcerated older adults and reentrants. We met with older adults at the Phoenix State Correctional Institution and developed a tactic based on this feedback that align with existing efforts within the Department of Corrections.

Some stakeholders expressed their interest in more detail about their expectations around next steps in implementation, transparency, and continued engagement. The final plan includes more narrative to characterize these components in the plan. Feedback related to specific language changes and tactic suggestions were received. The Department worked with experts to ensure that the language used in the plan would support our efforts to reframe how individuals think about aging, talk about older adults, and value all community members.

***Aging Our Way, PA*: Structure, Content, and Impact**

On Friday, May 31st, 2024, with Governor Shapiro and aging stakeholders, we celebrated the publication and signing of ***Aging Our Way, PA*** at Generations of Indian Valley Senior Center in Montgomery County. This signing took place a little more than a year after the Executive Order was signed and was the perfect ending to Older Americans Month. Pennsylvania's plan is already being regarded as the Gold Standard of partners like the Center for Health Care Strategies, AARP, and other subject matter experts.

Aging Our Way, PA is structured around five priorities, 36 strategies, and 163 tactics. Priorities are the areas of first concern, as raised by stakeholders, that define the desired future state and organize categories of strategies and tactics. Strategies are the conceptual solutions and approaches designed to address priorities and guide implementation through broader

aspirational activities and processes. Tactics are specific, measurable actions to direct resources that address the barriers faced by stakeholders, including policy proposals, new programs or program changes, research proposals, proposed new and changed legislation, or funding requests, to support each strategy.

Our five priorities are:

- **Unlocking Access:** We will design and offer equitable, affordable, and available options and opportunities that older adults may choose from for healthy and engaged lives, regardless of ability; socioeconomic status; racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural backgrounds; or geographical location.
- **Aging in Community:** We will remediate barriers that prevent older adults from remaining in their own homes, maintaining familiar surroundings, staying connected to their communities, and living in secure dwellings.
- **Gateways to Independence:** We will promote unhindered mobility by designing transportation systems that allow older adults' safe, convenient, and autonomous use of transportation services.
- **Caregiver Supports:** We will build a comprehensive catalogue of supports and enhancements that provide caregivers with help at home, respite, training, and navigation tools.
- **Education and Navigation:** We will lead a coordinated network of community and partners to raise public awareness of services for older adults, provide information that reaches everyone and is understandable by all, ensure timely and streamlined connection to assistance with any need, and resolve the challenging problems that older adults face in their daily lives.

Each of these priorities have their own strategies and tactics to make the plan real, executable, and successful. Of course, not all this work will be completed in one year. The early projects in the plan will focus on expanding and improving existing programs and resources that support older adults. The more complex projects that focus on needed changes to infrastructure or the construction of new systems of support will be developed over a 5-to-10-year timeframe.

In its first year, ***Aging Our Way, PA*** will immediately support the needs of older adults by improving successful and scalable programs while laying the groundwork for more ambitious long-term projects. By year 5, ***Aging Our Way, PA*** will build on research and program evaluation to develop new programs that address gaps in services and infrastructure supporting older adults. Through ***Aging Our Way, PA***, the service delivery and advocacy networks will deliver reimagined systems of supports that elevate the aging experience to be the best phase of a person's life.

The preventative services and supportive infrastructure identified by ***Aging Our Way, PA***, including home- and community-based programs, have long-term financial benefits by preventing facility placement, Medicaid spend-down, and utilization of more costly health services. Many of these tactics are investments in existing programs that have a strong return on investment and outsized impact on the older adult and caregiver population, especially the "near poor" demographic that often falls through the cracks of traditional assistance programs.

Many of the community members that were engaged in this process identified as “near poor” – those who hover above financial eligibility for public assistance programs but whose resources do not adequately meet their needs. These individuals cannot sustain the out-of-pocket costs for Long Term Services and Supports and will become eligible for Medicaid access. By investing in this demographic, we're enabling them to remain active contributors to society as workers, volunteers, taxpayers, active and independent community members, and voters. Proactive planning and strategic investment to build better community-based and statewide infrastructures that support these programs will yield substantial financial returns, improved outcomes, and reduced costs over the next ten years.

Ageing Our Way, PA: Budget Request

Governor Shapiro has proposed an allocation of \$11.73 million to support the year one implementation of ***Ageing Our Way, PA***. This would be a historic investment in our older adults and the Pennsylvania Aging Network. This proposal will support eight key initiatives in the first year, all of which seek to enhance or support programs that are already offered by the Department or the local Area Agencies on Aging.

This includes funding to support program planning and improvement, especially around navigation services. The PA Link to Aging and Disability Resources Centers (ADRCs) is PA's effort designed to help persons with disabilities and older adults find information that will connect them to supports and services in their community. However, many community members do not know about the PA Link, and it is seldom the first-place older adults and caregivers look to in seeking help. A request is included of \$5.5 million to refresh the PA Link to thoroughly redesign this program so that the structure of the ADRCs accomplish their intended purpose and incorporate No Wrong Door principles so that consumers are connected to the services they need, regardless of who they call. The redesigned version of the PA Link will provide a highly visible, reliable, and universal access point to aging- and disability-related services in the state.

This request includes \$2.95 million to support paid and unpaid caregivers by developing a statewide caregiver toolkit and recruitment tool. According to AARP, there are nearly 1.5 million unpaid caregivers across the Commonwealth providing important services valued at \$22 billion. They are caring for someone at home, coordinating home health care, or helping care for someone who lives in a nursing home. They are vital to our healthcare system and need access to financial, social, and emotional supports and resources. This funding would provide support for paid and unpaid caregivers, including information, training, respite services, and resources for families to evaluate and select professional caregivers. Better education and specialized trainings for behavioral health needs and supports and resources for grandparents raising grandchildren will help save costs. Decreasing caregiver burn out keeps older adults out of high-cost facilities, lightens the burden on home- and community-based services, and from needing protective services.

The Aging Network needs tools to continue to engage with their community members, including those who serve as volunteers. A request for \$250,000 to create an accessibility guide that will standardize the way the Aging Network communicates with the entire community and ensure that people who are visually impaired or hard of hearing receive consistent access across the state.

Volunteers are a vital population to the Aging Network. 11,202 volunteers in PA's Aging Network provide over 150,000 volunteer hours per year, saving the Commonwealth an estimated \$5 Million annually. The volunteer workforce outnumbers paid workforce 4 to 1. The Volunteer LTC Ombudsman program, for example, saved the Commonwealth \$316,346 in 2023 through the contributions of nearly 200 volunteers, each of whom provides around \$1,500 per year in value to the Commonwealth on average. We have requested \$280,000 to develop a volunteer toolkit that will help the Aging Network partners and the Department to maintain and strengthen this workforce by attracting, recruiting, and retaining candidates.

Many community members are unaware of the services provided by the Aging Network until they face a crisis. We must do a better job at connecting older adults with the network before they urgently need it and to prevent more significant challenges that older adults may face. This budget request includes \$750,000 for tactics will help make those connections. We have requested \$500,000 for two tactics related to better engagement with more communities like veterans, rural older adults, and those who speak languages other than English, like American Sign language, Polish, and Spanish. Similarly, we have requested \$250,000 for the Emergency Preparedness tactic. This funding will supplement our work and relationship with the PA Emergency Management Agency to improve how we connect community organizations like volunteer fire departments and places of worship to support neighbors in everyday crises like pipe bursts, fires, and weather-related safety preparations.

This budget request includes \$2 Million that will enable the Department to continually assess and improve this plan to stay relevant and innovative. Engaging in this type of holistic and comprehensive evaluation will help us as a network measure our impact and direct our investments. This will ensure that we are accountable with the valuable resources provided to implement *Aging Our Way*, as well as the programs, services, and resources that we currently provide.

Next Steps and Implementation

Aging Our Way, PA is a commitment to older Pennsylvanians, and must be more than words on paper or a plan on a shelf. To achieve this, we have outlined several key next steps that will bring this plan to life and ensure that we are empowered to age our way and live in age-friendly towns, cities, counties, and regions across the Commonwealth. Our commitment to the success of ***Aging Our Way, PA*** is dependent on the coordination and collaboration among our agency partners and private stakeholders. Everyone has a role to play and responsibility to uphold as we implement this plan. The Department intends to conduct regular data monitoring, track tactic progress, and openly report plan impacts to the public through a publicly accessible dashboard. Just as we kept stakeholders at the center of the plan's development, we will continue to engage older Pennsylvanians, caregivers, care partners, providers, experts, and the legislature to ensure that the plan stays relevant and effective.

We are forever grateful to the leadership and members of the House and Senate Aging committees for their support of this effort in developing ***Aging Our Way, PA***. Thank you for all that you do to support the health, wellbeing, and quality of life of older adults across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.