



Testimony of Department of Aging Secretary Robert Torres

Senate Aging & Youth Committee  
Public Hearing on Programs and Services Offered by the Department of Aging  
March 16, 2021

Chairwoman Ward, Chairwoman Collett, and members of the Senate Aging and Youth Committee, thank you for the opportunity to meet with your Committee today to provide an overview of how the Department of Aging serves older Pennsylvanians.

The department's mission is to promote independence, purpose, and well-being in the lives of older adults through advocacy, service, and protection. We are funded primarily with lottery funds which are 81% of our budget and federal funds, allocated through the Older Americans Act (OAA), which make up the remaining 19%.

The department provides essential services for our most vulnerable older adults, age 60 and older, to help them remain independent in their homes and communities as long as possible. We are designated as the State Unit on Aging by the federal government. This requires us to target services to "older individuals with the greatest economic need and older individuals with the greatest social need". The term "greatest economic need" means the need resulting from an income level at or below the poverty line. The term "greatest social need" means the need caused by non-economic factors, which include: (a) physical and mental disabilities; (b) language barriers; and (c) cultural, social, or geographical isolation, including isolation caused by racial or ethnic status.

At the local level, the department contracts and works in partnership with 52 Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) located across the 67 counties of the commonwealth to provide these services. Currently, one in four Pennsylvanians are age 60 and over, and that number is projected to increase and reach 4 million by 2030. The AAAs serve as the local resource for all older adults and oversee a comprehensive and coordinated service system for the delivery of community and in-home services and supports.

The department serves over 1 million older Pennsylvanians annually, and with a growing aging population, the demand for aging programs and services will continue to increase.

The department's OPTIONS Program provides in-home services to older adults who are in need of additional services and supports in order to help them remain in their homes safely and independently. Through the OPTIONS Program, four core services are provided to more than 68,000 older adults: personal care services, care management, in-home meals, and adult day services. AAAs may also offer additional services, such as emergency services, home health services, home modifications, home support, medical equipment and supplies, pest control, personal emergency response systems (such as LifeAlert), and medical transportation.

The department offers a wide range of evidence-based health and wellness programs to promote healthier lifestyles among older Pennsylvanians. These programs are designed to help achieve measurable improvement in the quality of life of older adults and reduction in overall healthcare costs by maintaining their health and well-being. Administered throughout the AAA network, our health and wellness programs include education on managing chronic conditions, exercise, nutrition, mental health, and injury and disease prevention. As an example, one of our programs focuses on falls prevention; preventing falls helps to maintain a person's quality of life and avoids hospitalization, short-term rehabilitation and the premature need for long term care. More than 11,400 older adults participated in one of our health and wellness programs in 2019.

The department is responsible for providing protective services for seniors age 60 and older. The investigatory and protective activities administered by the department are governed by the Older Adults Protective Services Act (OAPSA). For the past 33 years, OAPSA has served as the cornerstone for the commonwealth's system by which it protects older adults from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and abandonment. OAPSA is victim-oriented and aims to protect the rights of older adults while working to reduce or eliminate an older adult's exposure to abuse.

Unfortunately, long awaited and much-needed updates to OAPSA did not make it to the finish line in 2020. As a result, this remains one of the department's top legislative priorities for this legislative session. As reports of abuse continue to rise, with reports increasing by 80% over the past five years, these updates are critical for the safety and protection of older adults. The necessary updates that the department supports will address the rise of financial exploitation as a form of elder abuse and changes in the direct care workforce and facilities that serve older adults that are currently not covered in OAPSA. We thank Senator Mensch, this Committee, and the Senate for their previous support and are committed to working with the General Assembly to achieve passage of these crucial updates.

Pennsylvania's Caregiver Support Program, which the department administers, was the first of its kind in the nation to support unpaid caregivers, including the increasing number of grandparents raising grandchildren. During this legislative session, we will be working with the General Assembly to enhance and increase the flexibilities of this program, which provides resources, respite and assistance to caregivers with the purpose of alleviating stress as well as enhancing their well-being and the caregiving relationship. Through the Caregiver Support Program, caregivers are afforded the opportunity to receive vital supports and services such as care management, benefits counseling, caregiver education and training, and financial reimbursement of approved, caregiver-related expenses, such as respite or consumable supplies. Our proposal, which has been sponsored by the Chairs as Senate Bill 195, would increase access to services and allow for greater flexibility in program administration. This initiative is also supported by the Alzheimer's Association, AARP Pennsylvania, and the Pennsylvania Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

Our PACE and PACENET pharmaceutical benefits provide access to prescribed medications to qualified low income individuals. The PACE program also conducts education and outreach to help eligible older adults get medications and other benefits. It also provides case management support to curb inappropriate drug use. More than 275,000 older Pennsylvanians receive prescription drug assistance through the PACE/PACENET programs on an annual basis. We will again look to the General Assembly to renew the PACE/PACENET cost of living adjustment (COLA) moratorium set to expire December 31, 2021. Renewing the moratorium will prevent more than 17,500 older adults from becoming ineligible for these benefits because of the Social Security COLA.

The department continues to address the impact of Alzheimer's Disease and other related disorders on older adults and their families. With support from Pennsylvania's Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Task Force, other state agencies, and stakeholders, we are working to respond to the anticipated increase in Alzheimer's Disease and other dementias. The 2020 Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Forum covered racial disparities and inequities

in early detection, diagnosis, and treatment of dementia. We have also expanded our efforts through a partnership with the Jewish Healthcare Foundation to create a dementia-friendly Pennsylvania by collaborating with national and statewide partners to support training, build awareness, and promote action among community stakeholders. As a result, 5,596 individuals in Pennsylvania, including employees of businesses that embraced this training, have been trained to become a Dementia Friend or a Dementia Champion who helps to train others. There are currently 221 Dementia Champions in 46 counties with a goal of training Champions in the remaining 21 counties this year.

The department also includes the Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman, which is a federally mandated office that advocates for the rights of individuals living in long-term care facilities. The State Long-Term Care Ombudsman oversees a statewide team of staff, volunteers, and Pennsylvania Empowered Expert Residents (PEERs), who are long-term care residents trained to self-advocate and empower their fellow residents, to respond to the concerns of individuals living in long-term care facilities across the commonwealth.

During this past year, the Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman has been integral in supporting residents of long term care facilities and their families including implementing a pilot partnership with AARP to help nursing home residents connect with their families and friends by providing over 100 smartphones and tablets to 49 nursing homes in 37 counties. Additionally, regional ombudsmen offices across the commonwealth have piloted and are now using PadBots, which are robots, with videoconferencing capability, used to reach residents in long-term care facilities when ombudsmen are unable to visit in person. Finally, to support family members who could not visit their loved ones in long term care facilities, a virtual family council was developed that meets on a bi-weekly basis to support each other, gather information and meet with officials in the administration who could address their concerns. We were the first state to create a forum like this to support families and some states worked to replicate it after they learned about it.

In closing, I want to note that this past year magnified the important role the department and the AAA network play in serving older adults. I am very fortunate to work with so many dedicated individuals who keep older adults at the center of everything we do and I look forward to continuing our work with you to help meet the needs of our senior population. Thank you.