

Testimony of
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Before the

Senate Special Committee on Aging
Field Hearing on
Reauthorization of the Older Americans Act

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Senator Kohl, it is my honor to appear today before the Special Senate Committee on Aging. Senator, your work on behalf of seniors is without compare. You have championed our nation's elders' rights to be free from abuse and exploitation, to have pension and income security, and in Wisconsin, the right to a real affordable prescription drug plan, Senior Care. On behalf of the over 150,000 persons aged 60 and over in Milwaukee County, I thank you for your support of the Older Americans Act and for your interest in improving it in the 2011 reauthorization.

It is a pleasure to meet and appear with Assistant Secretary Greenlee whose accomplishments in aging services are remarkable.

The mission of the Milwaukee County Department on Aging is to affirm the dignity and value of older adults of this county by supporting their choices for living in and giving to our community. The Older Americans Act of 1965 promulgated principals and programs that are the backbone for allowing us to carry out that mission.

Everyday, seniors in this community enjoy food and fellowship at our 30 congregate meal sites. Another 850 receive a hot nutritious home-delivered meal and a caring visit from their driver. Everyday, hundreds of seniors get rides to their doctors. They are also transported to senior centers, nutrition sites, and adult day centers. Everyday, dozens of caregivers of our frail elders receive counseling, support, and respite. Everyday, people's lives are improved by immediate information and assistance through our Aging Resource Center. Everyday, the state of Wisconsin supplements Older Americans Act funds in the areas of elder abuse, legal services, and benefit counseling.

The programs supported by the appropriations of the Older Americans Act are the underpinning for home and community based services open to all citizens 60 years of age and over. They are important, appreciated, and as most would agree – are underfunded. Any additional money in the Older Americans Act programs would be greatly appreciated. However, I contend it is the mission, principals, and structures of the Older Americans Act that have led to lasting change.

First, the Older Americans Act mandates that we lead. As the designated Area Agency on Aging for Milwaukee County, it is our responsibility to be the visible, effective advocate for older people and to be the focal point for all issues, concerns, and dreams of our citizens. We take that role very seriously.

We convene workgroups, form counsels, foster partnerships, train senior leaders, and take every opportunity to say to this county, state, and nation, that our older citizens are an important and effective party of the fabric of our society.

Together in Milwaukee County, we, the Area Agency on Aging, county and city government, service providers, and older people themselves, have used our position at the Area Agency on Aging to:

- Demand and design service provision in public and low-income housing.
- Organize seven neighborhoods and municipalities into connected, caring communities where older people can age in place.
- Create an Intergenerational Council to foster understanding between citizens of all ages.

- Form a Wellness & Prevention Council so that community collaboration can bring our elders more opportunities to become and stay well.
- Collaborate on an Economic Security Initiative that will assure easy access to all economic opportunities.
- Support the Interfaith Program for Older Adults to operate our Mature Worker Center.

Most importantly, we piloted, with the State of Wisconsin, a long-term care redesign called Family Care. We were one of nine original Aging & Disability Resource Centers and one of five counties chosen to operate a Care Management Organization. In Milwaukee County, home and community based care is an entitlement – no more waiting lists. As an Area Agency on Aging, it is our duty to lead the effort to find solutions for all aging issues.

Next, the Older Americans Act mandates that we seek the advice of older people. In Milwaukee County, we are led by older people who serve on our commissions, boards, advisory groups, neighborhood teams, and governing boards. We not only listen to older people, but we follow their lead in figuring out what we must do next.

The Older Americans Act requires us to advocate. We have successfully advocated for an end to waiting lists for home and community based care, for a real affordable prescription drug program, for economic security, for elder rights and justice, for the support and services and structure that truly allows everyone to live in and give to our community, etc.

On August 24th, the Milwaukee County Commission on Aging sponsored a forum on the 2011 Older Americans Act Reauthorization. Together we crafted our wishes and the full list of Milwaukee County's recommendations is attached. They include: creating State Protection and Advocacy organizations for aging (modeled on the disability Protection and Advocacy agencies), expanding wellness and prevention, nationalizing Aging & Disability Resource Centers, beginning a transportation initiative, and six additional recommendations.

Senator Kohl, we need your leadership in Congress to help us realize these goals. In the meantime, I know that we will forge ahead with solutions, through collaboration, advocacy, and older adult leadership, we always have, we always will.

The Older Americans Act has given us the power to lead, listen, and advocate. It can only get better with reauthorization.

Thank you.