



Advocacy. Action. Answers on Aging.

Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging

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TESTIMONY BEFORE OHIO SENATE HEALTH COMMITTEE

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Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging
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Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the committee, I am Beth Kowalczyk, Chief Policy Officer for the Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

May is Older Americans Month! This year's theme is "Aging Unbound," which promotes flexible thinking about aging – and how we all benefit when older adults remain engaged, independent, and included.

Area Agencies on Aging were established in 1973 by the Older Americans Act to respond to the needs of adults aged 60 and older in every local community. There are over 600 Area Agencies on Aging across the country. The Older Americans Act grants Area Agencies on Aging the flexibility to ensure that communities' local needs and preferences are taken into consideration and that the resulting delivery system is tailored to local communities. By providing options that allow older adults to choose the home and community-based services, programming, and living arrangements that suit them best, Area Agencies on Aging make it possible for older adults to thrive in their homes and communities. This makes our communities stronger.

The Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging (o4a), a nonprofit organization, is a statewide network of agencies that provide services for older adults, people with disabilities, their families, and caregivers, as well as advocate on their behalf. The Association addresses issues that have an impact on the aging and disability network, provides services to members, serves as a collective voice for Ohio's Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs).
Equal Opportunity Employer/Provider

The Governor's budget proposes historic investments to support older adults, which we support. They are in line with our Association's budget priorities attached to this testimony. Our members will be coming before you and the Senate Medicaid Committee to provide additional testimony that speaks directly to the needs of older adults in their communities and the people and organizations that serve them.

Today I would just like to offer a few highlights.

Our top priority should be no surprise – we must ensure equal access to home care for older adults, with increased reimbursement rates and a competitive wage. We support the Administration's historic proposal to substantially increase provider reimbursement rates, and to create a level playing field across populations and programs. We are also very appreciative of the House amendment that would increase rates to support wages for personal care workers (the direct care workforce) at \$17/hour in 2024 and \$18/hour in 2025. Our request is for a provider rate that will enable providers to pay at least \$20/hour. We need a competitive wage, and to recognize that direct care work is valuable work that should be recognized for its impact on people's lives.

We are currently facing a workforce shortage that has resulted in at least 4500 people statewide enrolled in Area Agency on Aging programs waiting for home care services. In the Department of Aging PASSPORT waiver for older adults, more than 2000 individuals are waiting for personal care services.

Home care, specifically personal care services provide help with basic activities of daily living. These activities of daily living include bathing or showering, getting out of bed in the

morning and in bed at night, dressing, toileting and personal hygiene. With help with these things, people have the option to live at home with dignity and independence.

Different rates and requirements for similar work in the Medicaid, Aging and Developmental Disabilities systems, as well as nursing homes and other programs, result in competition for a small number of workers and an imbalance in the system.

Over the past several months, the Area Agencies on Aging have organized home care roundtables across the state to give a voice to the providers, caregivers, direct care workers and individuals we serve. Home care “made the difference” for one participant “feeling connected and less isolated.” Another stated that her worker was “an angel on earth.” A provider declared that their mission was “helping people help people.”

Key themes emerged from the roundtables, with low reimbursement rates resulting in an inability to pay a competitive wage as the number one concern. Providers shared that they have tried numerous retention and recruitment strategies with little success; that they lose potential caregivers to other providers, programs and industries that pay much more; that the reimbursement rate is insufficient to cover the cost to provide service, and that workers are facing a benefits cliff where small wage increases will mean they lose critical work supports. We have lost a number of home care providers in the PASSPORT program as a result of these pressures.

The Area Agencies on Aging are also impacted by workforce challenges. To ensure equal access to home care, we are advocating that PASSPORT operating and case management budgets be reflective of current environmental factors and increased complexities in care.

We are supportive of the Governor's proposed additional investments supporting older adults in the community. These include the increase proposed by the administration in the ODA budget for Senior Community Services as well as additional one-time "Healthy Aging" grants to support older adults in their communities with interventions that can delay and divert from Medicaid. Both proposals are consistent with the longstanding mission of the Area Agencies on Aging to identify and address local needs for older adults in their communities.

Finally, I would like to also bring your attention to the Ohio Aging Advocacy Coalition's 2024-2025 State Budget Blueprint. These 11 state organizations have come together as one to provide key principles and strategies that we all believe are necessary to improve Ohio's overall system of home and community-based services and strengthen the workforce that serves older Ohioans. Among these key principles and strategies is a proposal for \$20/hour wage for personal care workers who serve older adults in the Aging PASSPORT waiver and that there is wage parity across programs and populations.

Our association looks forward to continued conversations about these priorities. With your support, we can all work together to make Ohio the best state in the nation in which to age.



FY24 & FY25 BUDGET PRIORITIES



All Ohioans deserve the right to live healthy, engaged and secure lives, and to be able to age with dignity and autonomy. We need bold action so that Ohio will be the best place to age in the nation.

EQUAL ACCESS TO HOME CARE:

Eliminate waiting lists, ensure parity across programs, and build capacity to meet growing need for home care for older adults and people with disabilities in Ohio.

SUPPORT OLDER ADULTS IN THE COMMUNITY:

Enact policies and support programs that enable us all to continue to be active members of our communities and have options as we age.





Ensure continuing and future capacity of the Area Agencies on Aging to meet the needs of older adults in their communities.

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BUDGET REQUESTS



1

ENSURE EQUAL ACCESS TO HOME CARE

- **Rate and Wage Increases:** \$20/hour wage for the direct care workforce with at least a 50% increase in the reimbursement rate for PASSPORT(Aging) and Ohio Home Care (Medicaid) home care providers, to ensure parity across programs for older adults and people with disabilities in parity with other parts of the care continuum.
- **Streamlined Housekeeping:** provide voucher or service for at least one housecleaning a month, laundry service and grocery delivery.
- **Provider Engagement Coach:** include at least an additional \$1 million per year, estimated \$40,000 per year per AAA, for Area Agencies on Aging to hire provider engagement coaches to link, assist and coach participants and providers (particularly participant-directed) to successful certification and timely delivery of home and community-based services.
- **Remove barriers:** remove potential recruitment barriers by excluding participant-directed providers (usually family or friends) from home care licensure requirement.
- **Support Area Agencies on Aging:** Area Agencies on Aging have administered the PASSPORT waiver for over 30 years. The cost of delivering services continues to increase and the need grows but resources have not been adjusted to enable the AAAs to meet the need. Review and adjust case management and operating funding based on current environmental factors and increased complex need.

2

SUPPORT OLDER ADULTS IN THE COMMUNITY

- **Adult Day Services:** support rate increases and initiatives to increase capacity.
- **Senior Community Services/Healthy Aging:** support additional funding outside of Medicaid to meet existing and future needs; to address wait lists; delay the need for Medicaid; and to enable the state to draw down additional Older Americans Act ARPA funding. Services can include addressing home repairs and modifications, benefits counseling, elder abuse supportive services, and AAA innovations.
- **Assisted Living Waiver Rate:** support rate increase to encourage more assisted living facilities to accept Medicaid reimbursement as an alternative to nursing home placement.
- **Ohio Housing Trust Fund/Affordable Housing initiatives:** support initiatives that increase access to affordable housing for older adults, home maintenance, and home modifications.
- **Adult Protective Services:** support proposed additional \$4 million per year to allow for each county to receive at least \$80,000 for staff and to support additional services.

OhioAGING

ADVOCACY COALITION



SFY 2024-2025 State Budget Blueprint

Home- and Community-Based Services

As we continue to encounter new opportunities for our communities and our state, older adults want to have the choice to age in their homes and communities. They want to remain engaged and connected. They want to be able to share their experiences and insights with families, neighbors, and the community. Supporting all Ohioans in this way as we age makes our communities, and our state, stronger.

The Ohio Aging Advocacy Coalition (OAAC), a coalition of older adult and caregiver advocacy organizations, is providing key principles and strategies to improve Ohio's overall system of home and community-based services and strengthen the workforce who serves older Ohioans.

Current state

Ohio's 2023-2026 State Plan on Aging identified key themes that emerged from three phases of stakeholder engagement with older adults, caregivers, and other key stakeholders.

They include the following:

- Vast life expectancy disparities exist.
- Housing, transportation, and other community challenges persist.
- While most older Ohioans can cover their basic needs, many are not financially prepared for life after work.
- Caregiver supports and workforce capacity are key issues facing older Ohioans.
- Older Ohioans face mounting challenges related to mental health and addiction.
- Chronic conditions remain a concern.
- Innovation and partnership are key strengths in Ohio's aging network.
- Workforce shortages and social isolation are top challenges exacerbated by COVID-19.

OAAC has identified key principles and solutions that are intended to begin to address the challenges faced by older Ohioans and the systems they rely on to support them as they age.

Governor's Budget:

The Governor's 2024-2025 executive budget proposes increased investments that are vital to supporting older Ohioans in the community.

These include an increase in direct care rates, with the intent to raise the wage to \$16/hour, in the Aging, Medicaid and Developmental Disability waivers; increased rates for the assisted living waiver, adult day services and home-delivered meals; increased funding for PASSPORT Administrative Agencies; increases in funding for the Senior Community Services program; new Healthy Aging grants; an increase to the Alzheimer's and Dementia Respite line item; technology modernization; and an Aging Economy Report.

The Coalition supports all these investments, as well as additional initiatives that are proposed here.

Key principles & solutions

- 1. Provide adequate Medicaid reimbursement.** Ensuring adequate payment for aging services is the best way to improve quality and ensure providers can hire the staff they need to serve Ohio's population of older adults.

Possible solutions:

Increase rates for Medicaid home- and community-based care providers and waiver programs to match inflation and provide professional caregivers a livable, family-sustaining wage. This includes PASSPORT, Assisted Living Waiver, Ohio Home Care, State Plan Home Health/Private Duty Nursing, the Program for All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE), and the Personal Needs Allowance. While the Governor's budget proposes a rate increase to support an average \$16/hour wage, the Coalition is advocating for a rate increase that supports at least \$20/hour for the direct care workforce, and parity and sustainability in how the rates are set.

Provide a mechanism for regular review of provider payment rates to ensure they do not drop so far from the true cost of care. This could include a rebasing structure similar to what is in place for skilled nursing facilities.

Increase resources for the home and community-based services supporting older adults outside of the Medicaid system through the Senior Community Services program, Healthy Aging Grants, and other initiatives.

- 2. Ensure older adults have choices in their care with proper support for both home and community-based options.** Older Ohioans deserve a system of long-term services and supports that offers different options to match different needs and lifestyle choices.

Possible solutions:

Provide work supports that will meet the needs of paid caregivers, including childcare, healthcare, transportation, and other supports, so that more older adults can remain in their homes. The coalition supports the Governor's initiative to create a state affordable housing tax credit to increase access to affordable housing, an increase in subsidized childcare eligibility, and the proposal to provide childcare scholarships for the direct care workforce. Direct care workers supporting older adults and people with disabilities should be eligible for childcare scholarships.

Address the benefit cliff so that individuals can receive pay increases in a way that does not impact their ability to remain employed due to loss of work supports.

Support the continued development of the Program for All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) in Ohio, a proven model that provides needed health care services to nursing home eligible Ohioans who rely on Medicaid and Medicare and wish to remain in their communities. This should include increasing PACE reimbursement and a regular review of PACE payment rates.

Create affordable assisted living opportunities for the Medicaid population so that individuals currently served in assisted living are not forced to move and individuals who do not need the full support of a skilled nursing facility have an affordable option to receive care.

Support the development of new or expanding adult day sites to provide respite to caregivers and offer Ohioans a more affordable home-based care option.

- 3. Support providers in building a workforce that is paid a livable, family-sustaining wage.** Ohio must support efforts to build a stronger direct care workforce to care for its growing population of older adults with care needs.

Possible solutions:

Align training and participation requirements across systems to allow mobility between aging, developmental disabilities, and mental health/addiction services.

Support tiered reimbursement or bonuses rewarding advanced training and certification among direct service providers. Provide a single point of entry for caregiving careers modeled on Wisconsin's WisCaregiver Careers program that includes free-of-cost State Tested Nurse Aide (STNA) training, retention bonuses, and dedicated communications support to increase awareness of the program. This can be scaled to provide opportunities for other workers in home- and community-based settings as well (personal care aides, home care aides).

Create and promote career ladders and lattices throughout a variety of roles serving older adults.

- 4. Increase housing security for older adults.** Improving Ohio's affordable housing network and options for maintaining existing homes can provide more older adults with safe, secure housing and reduce homelessness.

Possible solutions:

Create a state low-income housing tax credit to incentivize development in the affordable housing sector and provide more older adults with affordable housing. The coalition supports the Governor's proposal to create a state low-income housing tax credit to increase affordable housing access in Ohio.

Increase investment in the Ohio Housing Trust fund to support affordable housing and home modification and repairs.

Provide property tax relief to older adults through expanding the Homestead Exemption, which allows low-income older adults and permanently and totally disabled Ohioans to reduce their property tax bills by shielding some of the market value of their homes from taxation.

- 5. Invest in innovative care models and care coordination.** Investment in innovative care models can help older adults maintain their independence, make more effective use of the workforce, and provide more affordable care options. Improving care coordination for individuals living in the community can prevent the need for costlier institutional care.

Possible solutions:

Increase investment in home-based care options such as PACE, affordable assisted living, and adult day services.

Enhance participant-directed services through a streamlined application process, use of provider engagement coaches, competitive wages, and Area Agency on Aging supports.

Explore strategic investments in new technology, such as: artificial intelligence (AI), remote monitoring, technology that simplifies transfers and other physical tasks, and apps that promote mental health and wellness among residents and staff. Develop a provider portal similar to AddnAide (developed by the Council on Aging of Southwestern Ohio) to facilitate matching of providers to individuals that need services.

Explore streamlining services, such as housekeeping, so that older adults can receive services more quickly.

- 6. Protect older adults from abuse, neglect, and a lack of services, and support greater health outcomes through nutrition.** Ohioans deserve safety, security, and good health as they age in their communities.

Possible solutions:

Continue momentum for an Ohio free of older adult abuse, neglect, and exploitation with additional state investment to strengthen Adult Protective Services. The coalition supports the Governor's proposal to increase investment in Adult Protective Services in Ohio with an additional \$4 million per year.

Support an increase to the Alzheimer's Respite Line Item, which has not received an increase for many years despite the number of people being diagnosed with Alzheimer's and other dementia is growing rapidly. The Coalition supports the Governor's proposal to increase the line item with an additional \$2 million per year.

Create a state food assistance supplement for older adults to address increased food insecurity and the loss of SNAP Emergency Allotments for older adults.