

Testimony of Denise Niese
Executive Director, Wood County Committee on Aging, Inc.
before the Ohio Senate Health Committee
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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Antonio, and Members of the Ohio Senate Health Committee, on behalf of the Ohio Association of Senior Centers and older adults served by senior centers throughout Ohio, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Committee on the important issue of funding for programs and services for older adults throughout Ohio. I am Denise Niese, Executive Director of the Wood County Committee on Aging, Inc. (WCCOA), a non-profit organization whose mission is to provide older adults with services and programs which empower them to remain independent and improve the quality of their lives. Our service area is located in Ohio Senate District 2, represented by State Senator Theresa Gavarone; Ohio House District 75, Representative Haraz Ghanbari and Ohio House District 44, Representative Elgin Rogers, Jr.

As a direct service provider at the local level, Senior Centers work closely with our local Area Agency on Aging to provide comprehensive and coordinated services for older individuals as defined in the Area Plans. While entities such as WCCOA are in the local communities delivering programs and services, we look to the Area Agency for information and technical assistance to best serve our client base.

Without a doubt, State funding in Ohio has been instrumental in the creation of a wide array of programs and services intended to enhance the well-being of older adults. State funding is needed now more than ever before as the “graying of the population” is most evident with 10,000 Baby Boomers turning 65 each day.

When analyzing the Ohio Department of Aging’s (ODA) budget request, we were pleased that HB 33 contains provisions that will improve the quality of life for Ohio’s Aging Population.

We support the Ohio Department of Aging budget request and in particular the proposed Healthy Aging Grants intended for local communities distributed through the Boards of County Commissioners. This is a proven effective model for tailoring aging services to local needs, as evident by the popular locally supported Senior Levies across the State. Many of which are operated by Senior Centers. Ohio Senior Centers are integral components of the state’s Aging network by providing direct services that help older adults remain in their own homes. Ohio’s Senior Centers are integral components of the state’s aging network by providing direct services that help older adults remain in their own homes. Senior Centers are the boots on the ground, locally based, delivering nutrition, transportation, evidenced based, minor home modifications and support services for older Ohioans.

Operating Budgets

For historical reference of the growth of federal and state funding, in 1977, the operating budget of the Wood County Committee on Aging, Inc., was \$42,089, which included \$25,928 in State, Federal and local General Revenue funds (61.6% of the total budget). The first award of Federal Older Americans Act Title III dollars was made in 1977 to Senior Centers across the state, including WCCOA via the then Ohio Commission on Aging (under the leadership of Martin Janis) and the then newly designated Area Office on Aging of Northwestern Ohio. This funded supportive services and nutrition at two locations in Wood County (Bowling Green and Rossford). In 2023, State and Federal funds awarded to the WCCOA are \$355,834.25 (or 8.5%) of our total projected revenues of \$4,153,625.). Local funding support has clearly surpassed Federal dollars and is again evidence of an effective model for tailoring aging services to local needs, much like the proposed Health Aging Grants proposed by ODA.

In Wood County, federal funds, which are administered through our local Area Agency on Aging, support congregate meals (C-1), home-delivered meals (C-2) \$333,332.25 and Minor Home Repair \$22,500.

The remaining 91.5% of our operating budget is comprised of the following sources:

- 76% Senior Services Levy (.7 mil county-wide property tax passed 11/2011 by 69.32% of vote)
- 8.4% Program Income (donations for meals)
- 4% Medicaid Waiver contract for home-delivered meals
- 3.1% Cost Share contributions, program fees, sponsorships, private grants, and other miscellaneous income
- It should also be recognized that a total of 266 unduplicated community members (and another 78 BGSU students) provide more than 12,500 hours of service (equivalent of almost 6 full time staff). Based on the valuation provided by the *Independent Sector* at a rate of \$25.43 per hour, these volunteer services are valued at \$316,578.07. We could not operate our programs and services without their commitment and dedication.

As you can see, the majority of funding for programs and services in Wood County, Ohio, is local. This is reflective for all senior centers throughout the State.

The federal Older Americans Act allows for States, local Area Agencies on Aging, and providers to have the flexibility to develop and implement programs and services that meet the needs of our local constituency. The credibility that these regulations provide enables providers to demonstrate the effectiveness and accountability of these services to our Board of County Commissioners and to the voters of each County, who have supported County-wide senior services property tax levies since 1986.

One of the most positive aspects of a multipurpose senior center is the ability to provide the “*front door*” for services for older adults in their community. Senior Centers are an inviting presence where older adults find a “one stop shop” for services and resources. In a non-threatening, non-institutional environment, we can assist with a multitude of issues and concerns. If staff cannot solve the situation directly, we can assist in connecting the senior (or their family and/or caregiver) with the appropriate entity.

The flexibility to collaborate with businesses, corporations, K-12 schools (including career centers), institutions of higher learning, and other community organizations allows us to expand our programs and services to meet the needs of our constituency. Senior Centers are constantly exploring our options to meet the needs of our older adults while being frugal with our resources.

At our local level these offerings and collaborations can include programming such as:

- **Delay the Disease*** - “Delay the Disease” is a fitness program designed to empower people with Parkinson’s Disease (PD) by optimizing their physical function and helping to delay the progression of symptoms.
- **Matter of Balance*** – Matter of Balance emphasizes practical strategies to reduce fear of falling and increase activity levels. Participants learn to view falls and fear of falling as controllable, set realistic goals to increase activity, change their environment to reduce fall risk factors, and exercise to increase strength and balance.
- **Club Fit** – This is a local initiative which meets the needs of older adults who want to remain healthy and flexible through a 1-hour exercise session which focuses on flexibility with light weight training. *This offering is a collaboration between many senior centers and local nursing facilities. The facilities provide their Physical Therapist/Occupational Therapist to lead the exercise. As an outreach effort for the rehab units of these facilities, these sessions are offered at no cost to the participants.*
- **Chronic Disease Self-Management – Diabetes*** - Subjects covered include: 1) techniques to deal with the symptoms of diabetes, fatigue, pain, hyper/hypoglycemia, stress, and emotional problems such as depression, anger, fear and frustration; 2) appropriate exercise for maintaining and improving strength and endurance; 3) healthy eating; 4) appropriate use of medication; and 5) working more effectively with health care providers. Participants will make weekly action plans, share experiences, and help each other to solve problems they encounter in creating and carrying out their self-management program.
- **Healthy IDEAS*** - Healthy IDEAS is a depression self-management program that includes screening and assessment, education for clients and family caregivers, referral and linkages to appropriate health professionals, and behavioral activation. *This program was developed by Baylor College of Medicine and was made available through grant funding provided by the Toledo Community Foundation to the Wood County Committee on Aging.*
- **Project LifeSaver** - is an active response to the problem of locating people who may not be able to find their way home – before they become victims. The average rescue time is less than 30 minutes. A lost person with any kind of dementia or a developmental disability is unaware of his or her situation. They do not call out for help and do not respond to people calling out to them. The Project Lifesaver team is trained to approach a person with Alzheimer’s disease or a developmental disability, gain their trust, and put them at ease for the trip home. *This is a collaborative project with the Wood County Sheriff’s Office.*
- **Durable Medical Equipment Loans** – WCCOA has a variety of assistance equipment available for loan to 60+ residents of Wood County. Available equipment may include, but is not limited to: Grab Bars, Bed and Toilet Rails, Commodes, Canes and Quad Canes, Walkers, Crutches, Wheelchairs (6 week loan limit), Shower Seats, Kitchen Seats, Transfer Boards, Stepstools, Portable Ramps, There is no charge for the use of this equipment, but we do accept monetary donations.
- **OSHIIP** – Provides information and assistance specifically for those enrolled or eligible for Medicare. We will answer your questions about any of the following matters: Medicare health coverage for seniors and for people under age 65 with disabilities, Medicare prescription drug plans, Medicare Advantage Plans (example: HMOs and PPOs), Medicare supplemental insurance, Financial assistance programs for people with limited income, and Long-term care insurance.
- **Non-Emergency Medical Transportation / Escort** - The Title IIIB funds are used to supplement local funds for transportation of older adults to medical appointments, grocery

shopping and into their local Senior Center. The level of assistance is in keeping with the need and choice of the older adult.

- **Minor Home Repair** - Performance of home repairs to enable individuals to remain in their own homes when they are unable to perform such tasks themselves because of physical or mental impairment, lack of necessary skills or of the prohibitive costs of such repairs. Such tasks as repairing a leaky roof, steps or ramps, installing handrails, painting, etc. would be included in this service. These tasks require skilled or semi-skilled personnel.

*Denotes an evidence-based program

Local Efforts which enable expansion of services

Nutrition services are by far the largest program operated by the Senior Centers. And it continues to grow in participants for both the congregate and home-delivered meal services. We are able to continue to meet the demand through use of volunteers to assist in the delivery of meals.

Senior Center kitchens fall under the licensure of the local Health Department. Many Senior Centers are also inspected and licensed by the Ohio Department of Agriculture. With the Ohio Department of Agriculture licensure and inspection, including compliance with the Seafood HACCP requirement in order to serve dishes such as tuna salad and tuna noodle casserole, many are also licensed to prepare, package and freeze meals. When compared to commercially prepared meals, locally produced meals are lower in sodium and can be made at a lower unit cost.

For a point of reference, in 2022, the Wood County Committee on Aging served more than 215,600 meals to 3764 unduplicated older adults throughout the County. It should be noted that 2364 of these people are home-delivered meal clients (who received over 156,000 meals, 72% of the total served). The cost of this type of supportive service in the home versus placement in a long-term care facility provides significant saving for all Ohio taxpayers.

Eligibility for services: the client must be 60 years of age or over, live in Wood County and be considered "homebound" (meaning they do not leave the house under normal circumstances or without assistance from others). A spouse of an eligible client may also be on our meal program as a caregiver.

Once WCCOA takes a new HDM start, we begin delivering the meals within 2 business days. We are able to begin services sooner if there is an emergency. We also collect from the client any pertinent directions and/or descriptions of the house or what door to use for the driver delivering the meals.

In addition to receiving a hot lunch Monday through Friday, each client also benefits from a mid-day safety check from our home-delivered meal drivers. In many instances, in our rural County, the home-delivered meal driver is their only face-to-face contact with someone on a regular basis.

Real Life Impact

The support of the Older Americans Act has a significant impact on the lives of the older adults served by the Wood County Committee on Aging. We measure impact with established standards and measurements for services and annual monitoring conducted by the Area Agency on Aging, and pre- and post-testing that we conduct for the evidence-based programs. We also use other methods, such as the client satisfaction evaluations and questionnaires completed by the participants to measure impact and client satisfaction. We also have tools to survey for programming ideas and for modifications. There are multiple layers of assessment for programs and services provided by multipurpose senior centers.

Following is a real life example of how we are making a difference in the lives of our most vulnerable clients (this article is taken from the BG Independent News):

POSTED BY: JAN LARSON MCLAUGHLIN FEBRUARY 10, 2021
By JAN LARSON McLAUGHLIN
BG Independent News

Angie Bradford sensed there was something wrong when she tried to deliver a meal to a senior citizen in Troy Township and found the door locked.

Bradford, director of food services for the Wood County Committee on Aging, was subbing on a Meals on Wheels route in the northeastern part of the county on Feb. 3, when she came to the home of the 77-year-old woman.

Having delivered meals to the home a couple times before, Bradford was surprised that the door was locked this time. She knocked and called for the woman inside, then heard stumbling in the house.

"I heard her moving around, but it sounded like she was having a difficult time," Bradford said.

Then she heard the woman say, "I can't get my legs to work," Bradford said.

Eventually, the woman made it to the door.

"As soon as she opened the door, I could smell the gas," Bradford said.

Bradford went inside and saw that a burner on the gas stove was on, but was not lit. She immediately opened windows in the manufactured home and called 911.

The woman told Bradford that she had been sleeping on the couch and wondered why she couldn't get up. She surmised that when she reached for something in a cupboard over the stove, she inadvertently turned on the burner.

After the incident, Bradford got a thank you letter along with a check for \$77 from the woman.

"She is 77 years old, and is thankful to continue to live on another day, and hopefully more years to come," a friend of the woman wrote in the letter, explaining the \$77 donation.

Meals on Wheels staff don't accept donations, so Bradford passed it onto the Wood County Committee on Aging.

"I was just doing my job," she said.

"I called her yesterday to thank you," and to remind the woman to get a carbon monoxide detector, Bradford said.

Wood County Committee on Aging Executive Director Denise Niese said this incident emphasizes the value of Meals on Wheels – far beyond the meals themselves.

"That's why daily home meals are so important," Niese said. The staff delivering meals make sure they have visible or audible contact with the client when they drop off the food.

"Kudos to Angie," Niese said.

Eric Myers, president of the Wood County Committee on Aging Board, said the result shows how "good policies and good staff work."

If not for the home visit, the board could have been reading the woman's obituary, instead of her thank you letter, one board member said.

Many senior agencies have trimmed back their meal deliveries to once a week during the pandemic, Niese said. That just wasn't enough for the Wood County Senior Center, she added.

"It's essential," she said. "Our board has committed to do this as long as we can. It's more than a meal. It may be the only face someone sees on a given day."

"It's absolutely one of the most important services we offer – just that few minutes with someone delivering a meal" said Jason Miller, human resources manager for the WCCOA.

Especially during the pandemic, many seniors are very isolated for their own safety. So staff delivering meals can check for essentials, like whether or not the furnace is working or the walks are shoveled.

"That's the importance of the daily visits," Niese said.

Summary

As you diligently work to prepare a balanced budget for the next biennium, I would encourage you to strive to maintain the programs and services which are an integral part of the daily lives for community-based older adults throughout Ohio.

In honoring the legacy of legislators who have had the foresight to support services to Ohio's community-based older adult population, I encourage you to focus on opportunities for seed money for direct service programs. This concept will allow service providers to leverage foundation and local dollars to further develop services to meet the needs of the older adults in their communities, without increasing administrative overhead costs.

As this committee concludes the budget process which will affect seniors and their families throughout our State, I hope to inspire you to consider the legacy that you will impart to the senior citizens of today and those that will age into our programs over the life of this budget.

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chairman Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and Members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee, I urge you to support the Department of Aging budget to continue this investment and enhance it through the Healthy Aging Grants.

Thank you for your dedication to the older adults of our State.