

# **Preparing the Next Generation of Ohioans to Work with and on Behalf of Our Older Citizens**

## **Testimony: Ohio Senate Health Committee**

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### **Background**

In 2023, there were more than three times as many Ohioans aged 65 and older (18.0% of the population, or approximately 2.168 million people), compared to those under age 5 (approximately 6% of the population or 600,000 people; US Census Bureau, 2023). Ohio's growing aging population creates great opportunities. At the same time, it also poses challenges. Nationally, gerontological educators and practitioners are concerned about the current and impending workforce shortage to meet the health and social needs of older adults. This shortage is expected to increase in Ohio and nationally, given projected declines in the college-age population, due to decreasing trends in birth rates. In addition, many mid-career and older adults are interested in exploring new work and career opportunities. Clearly, we need creative strategies to encourage students of all ages to pursue aging-related careers to build the aging workforce in Ohio—both in jobs within what we think of as “the aging network,” but also beyond. This is the goal of the Ohio Scholars in Aging Program, one of many programs funded by the Ohio Department of Aging.

We would like to lend our support to the Director of the Ohio Department of Aging's requests to help us continue to serve our older adults.

Fully funding the request will help us continue to improve the quality of care and the quality of life of our older adults, particularly those living in Ohio's long term care facilities. Having a strong long-term care ombudsman program is vital to ensuring some of the most vulnerable people in our population's rights to live with dignity. Increasing the personal needs allowance from \$50 to \$100 per month will improve the ability of our Medicaid funded long-term care residents to be able to purchase goods and services to meet their needs. While this is not very much per month, and I would argue that this is a good start but should come with assurances of regular increases.

### **The Ohio Scholars in Aging Program**

The Ohio Scholars in Aging Program (Scholars Program) is a partnership between the Ohio Department of Aging (ODA) and the Ohio Association of Gerontology and Education (OAGE). OAGE is a non-profit, 501(c)(3), volunteer run, statewide membership organization. OAGE's mission is to promote aging education, research, and practice and professional development for students, faculty, practitioners, administrators, professionals, and Ohio's aging network. The Scholars Program is an important component of that mission.

The Scholars Program began in 2013. It is designed for students from any academic major/area of study who are enrolled in an associate, baccalaureate, graduate specialization, masters, doctoral or other advanced degree at an accredited educational institution in the state of Ohio. To participate in the Scholars Program, students have to be engaged in an aging-related clinical, internship, or practicum during the semester. The purpose of the program is to provide students (scholars) the opportunity to link their internship experiences to aging-related policy at the state level, learn about aging-related policy-making, establish professional contacts and gain valuable career knowledge and skills in the field of aging. The ultimate goal of the program is to encourage students to develop their aging-related knowledge and skills, and enter the workforce prepared to effectively serve Ohio's aging population. This is accomplished by attending sessions with ODA and aging-network program staff and legislators; spending a day with their local Area Agency on Aging; and preparing a poster about their internship experience at the annual OAGE conference on aging. During this semester-long process, scholars have professional mentor to guide them, and another mentor to help them prepare their poster.

ODA initially funded the Scholars Program, and across four successive Directors, ODA has increased the financial, marketing, and administrative support for the program. This includes a stipend and travel costs for each Scholar.

## **A Profile of the 2013-2024 Scholars in Aging**

### **Who they were:**

- 146 scholars representing 18 different academic institutions throughout Ohio (13 public, 5 private) have completed the Scholars in Aging Program.
  - This includes seven institutions in northeast Ohio, five in central Ohio, and two each in northwestern, southwestern Ohio, southeastern Ohio, which reflects the geographic distribution of academic institutions throughout the state.
- Scholars represented 46 different areas of study (e.g., social sciences such as gerontology, political science, psychology, sociology; environmental sciences; environmental design; long-term care administration; and health and allied health professions such as occupational and physical therapy, nursing, speech pathology and audiology).

- Most students were enrolled in a bachelor's program, followed by master's and doctoral programs; several students were pursuing an associate's degree.

### **Where the Scholars interned:**

- Given scholars' diverse areas of study and the degrees they were pursuing, their internships took place in a broad array of organizations with a total of 107 different organizations hosting scholars since the beginning of this program.
  - Approximately 25% interned in a community agency that focused on education, interaction and community building (e.g., a senior center or Alzheimer's Association chapter)
  - Approximately 25% interned in a residential care environment such as a continuing care retirement community, assisted living facility, or long-term care setting
  - Approximately 16% interned at a research organization
  - Approximately 11% interned in an area agency on aging
  - The remaining scholars interned in medical or allied health settings (10%), were in an Administrator-in-Training program to become a licensed nursing home administrator (5%), or in other aging-related services (e.g., information and referral, an ombudsman program, hospice, or aging-related curriculum development).

### **Where the alumni scholars are now (as of summer, 2024):**

- Of the 140 alumni scholars we were able to locate, 80% lived and worked in Ohio; the remainder had left the state.
- Of the 138 alumni scholars for whom we could find employment information (both those in Ohio and beyond), 51.5% worked exclusively with older adults, and an additional 33.3% worked with adults of all ages. Only 15.2% did not work with older adults. Of those who worked with older adults:
  - 24% worked in health care or medical settings, including hospitals (e.g., social workers, occupational therapists or other allied health professions)
  - 19.2% worked in community agencies that coordinated or provided programs and services for older adults (e.g., AAAs, direct services, information and referrals)
  - 6.7% were employed as aging-related researchers (either in academia or freestanding research centers)
  - 6.2% were licensed nursing home administrators
  - 4.8% worked in residential environments that provide social and health care services, including CCRCs, assisted living, nursing homes, etc.
  - less than 3% each worked in higher education, hospice, or an ombudsman program
  - 10% were still pursuing an educational degree
  - 2% were looking for employment

### **Looking to the Future**

Ultimately the goal of the Ohio Scholars in Aging Program is to build Ohio's aging network and the general workforce to meet the opportunities and challenges presented by an aging society. Alumni scholars are already well integrated into OAGE. They work on special projects, and serve on OAGE committees, and as board members. An alumni scholar is our President-Elect. These early career professional development activities contribute to growing Ohio's aging network. Beyond OAGE, alumni scholars who work in the aging network and aging-adjacent professions are positioned to mentor current and then hire more recent alumni scholars. It is our intention to continue to build the Ohio Scholars in Aging Program and leverage the alumni scholars to help build the workforce expertise and capacity necessary to provide the services that older adults deserve. This is just one example of many programs that are made possible by support from ODA.

Gerontological education and expertise are important. Our goals are to make Ohio the best place to learn, teach, conduct research, work; so that it may be the best place in the nation to age. Without a strong aging related workforce, we will not have the service providers and applied researchers to accomplish our goals. Legislation that discourages research, teaching, and lowers morale is counterproductive.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this bill and its importance to the aging related workforce, higher education system, quality of long-term care, and Ohio's Aging Network.