

# Alaska Commission on Aging FY2016 Policy Recommendations

## **Protect current services for seniors to maintain their health and well-being.**

**Issue:** As people age, they become more at risk for chronic diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease and related dementia, as well as other disabling conditions that will increase demand on Alaska's health care and long-term support services and personal resources to pay for those services. Core senior services include home-delivered meals, congregate meals, assisted transportation, adult day programs, care coordination, homemaker services, and respite for family caregivers. These services target the vulnerable elderly who are low-income and at-risk for institutional care. Community support services for seniors are significantly more cost effective than institutional care – costing one-half to one-fourth less than nursing home care. There will always be costs associated with serving vulnerable older Alaskans – either on the front-end with senior community-based long term support services, or on the back-end with emergency rooms, hospital admission, and nursing home care, however, serving our seniors appropriately at home and in the community has proven to be far less expensive than serving them prematurely through institutionalized care.

**Recommendation:** The Alaska Commission on Aging recommends no funding cuts to essential services for seniors. Alaska's strong system of senior home and community-based supports holds down the rising costs of long-term care.

## **Increase the availability of appropriate and affordable senior housing across the continuum of care using a variety of funding mechanisms that include public-private and public-public partnerships.**

**Issue:** Alaska faces a critical need for senior housing with supportive services across the continuum of care. Providing appropriate and affordable senior housing is an important strategy to sustain a healthy community and allow older Alaskans the means to maintain a high quality of life and meaningfully contribute to their families and communities. Integration of universal design features in all public and private housing is essential to support people as they age and to enable those with disabilities to remain safely in their homes. Funding is also needed for weatherization, energy upgrades and accessibility modifications to improve older housing stock where many seniors live. Where economically feasible, aging in place community models are needed that provide multiple levels of care within one campus to allow individuals to move between independent housing, supportive housing, assisted living, and skilled nursing as their needs for care change.

**Recommendation:** The Alaska Commission on Aging supports reinstatement of funding for the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation's (AHFC) FY2016 capital budget, Senior Citizen Housing Development Grant Fund to support planning, acquisition, new construction, accessibility modification, and rehabilitation costs to increase senior housing stock throughout Alaska. The Senior Citizen Housing Development Grant Fund is one of the few funding sources for senior housing and can be an important component to make projects possible. A growing number of Alaska seniors are planning to remain in the State as they age. They require well-designed, accessible, and affordable housing in order to age in place as they play an increasingly important economic role in the State's economy and all other aspects of life.

## **Improve capacity to serve persons with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ARD).**

**Issue:** As the senior population grows in Alaska, the number of elderly people with dementia will increase. Currently, an estimated 6,100 Alaskans age 65 and older may have Alzheimer's disease, which does not include seniors with related dementias or younger people with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. Because of the current eligibility requirements for the Medicaid waiver, some people with early to mid-stage dementia do not meet the level of care requirements to be served by the waiver although they need these services to live safely at home. These individuals need appropriate services such as cueing, supervision, and companion care to support them at home for as long as possible to hold down the need for higher

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cost care. Medicaid waiver eligibility for this vulnerable population could help solve a problem that has created stress and strain for many Alaskan families.

**Recommendation:** The Alaska Commission on Aging supports (1) implementation of the 1915(i) and (k) options to provide appropriate waiver services for persons with dementia and other cognitive impairments who need assistance but do not qualify for level of care and to refinance Personal Care Assistance services; (2) tailored dementia care adult day programs to address the person's need as they transition from lower stage to advanced stages of dementia; (3) training and supports for family caregivers to help them be successful in caring for loved ones at home for as long as possible; (4) an adequate amount of additional funding for senior grant programs that serve persons with dementia; and (5) implementation of the strategies identified in *Alaska's Roadmap to Address Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia*.

### **Support policies that promote protection of older Alaskans from financial exploitation and other forms of abuse.**

**Issue:** As the number of older Alaskans has continued to increase, so has the number of substantiated reports of harm to Adult Protective Services, the Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman, and the Office of Elder Fraud and Assistance. Elder abuse is a devastating and under-recognized problem that oftentimes goes unreported and can have life-threatening consequences for Alaska's elderly people.

**Recommendation:** The Alaska Commission on Aging supports HB 8 to reform Alaska's power of attorney statute (AS 14.26) by adopting provisions of the model 2006 Uniform Power of Attorney Act to strengthen Alaska's Power of Attorney (POA) law and promote greater protection for vulnerable seniors from financial abuse. Reforming Alaska's POA law is needed to provide greater protection for seniors, especially those who are incapacitated or lack the ability to monitor the actions of their designated decision-makers to whom they have given power of attorney.

### **Improve supports and training for family and other informal caregivers to enable them to care for their aging loved ones at home for as long as possible to prevent/delay higher cost skilled facility care.**

**Issue:** The need for long-term support services is increasing and will grow substantially as baby boomers age and become at risk for disabling and chronic health conditions. Long-term care is expensive in Alaska - \$66,000 on average annually for assisted living home care and more than \$240,000 for nursing home care (Genworth Financial 2014). Many families assume personal responsibility for providing care to their elderly loved ones at home, which is rewarding work and helps Alaska avoid paying for more costly skilled nursing care, but which often exerts heavy emotional, physical and financial toll on the caregiver, especially for those who care for loved ones with dementia. Research shows that investment in caregiver supports produces a positive return. Family caregivers who receive training and supports are better able to provide care at home longer than those who receive few or no supports. These services improve the quality of life for the caregiver and the person under their care and may provide a huge cost savings by preventing early nursing home placement.

**Recommendation:** The Alaska Commission on Aging supports

- (1) Additional funding for the National Family Caregiver Support Grant Program, administered by the Division of Senior and Disabilities Services Community Grant Program to provide training, respite, counseling and peer supports to increase the number of family and other informal caregivers serving older Alaskans;
- (2) Adoption of a family caregiver assessment tool to determine the health and well-being of the senior's family caregiver and identify the supports they may need to be better prepared for their caregiving role; and
- (3) Adopt policies that require hospitals and nursing homes to discuss the patient's plan of care with the patient and their designated caregiver prior to the patient's discharge and to instruct the designated caregiver by performing a live demonstration in all after-care tasks required. These additional efforts will help to ensure a successful transition, avoid costly hospital/nursing home readmissions, and promote health literacy for caregivers and seniors.

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