



THE STATE  
of ALASKA  
GOVERNOR BILL WALKER

## Department of Health and Social Services

ALASKA COMMISSION ON AGING

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October 23, 2017

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski  
United States Senate  
709 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington D.C. 20510

Regarding: Support for Federal Funding of Programs Serving Older Alaskans

Dear Senator Murkowski:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA and "the Commission") is writing in response to the FFY2018 federal funding budget bills for Older Americans Act and other programs serving seniors that recently passed the full House and Senate Appropriations Committee. Based on our understanding, the Senate and the House differ in their proposed funding recommendations for selected programs. The Commission encourages Alaska's Congressional delegation to work toward achieving a bipartisan, full-year funding bill compromise by the time the current continuing resolution expires on December 8 at levels that meet at minimum the FFY2017 appropriation amounts in order to ensure access to appropriate services that promote health and safety for the growing numbers of older adults in Alaska and nationwide.

Alaska and the U.S. have witnessed unprecedented growth in our older adult populations. Alaska's population of people age 60 and older, who number 125,886, represent 17% of our State's total population and is projected to increase at an annual rate between 5% to 6% before leveling off in 2035. In addition, the population of elderly Alaskans age 85 and older is projected to grow 135% over the next twenty years. Elderly adults are most at risk for developing chronic health conditions, physical disabilities, and cognitive impairments such as Alzheimer's disease and related dementias. At a time when the older adult population is booming, the Commission believes that we should protect funding for programs that assist older people to live safely and comfortably in their homes and communities for as long as possible, which is where most seniors prefer to be. Investment in these services lessens the need for spending on higher cost care. We are concerned that reduced funding for the State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP), the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP), the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Corporation for National and Community Service Programs, and the HUD 202 Supportive Housing for the Elderly/ HUD Section 811 Housing for Persons with Disabilities will negatively impact the health and well-being of vulnerable older adults.

Respectfully, we ask for your support of the following recommendations in the final FFY2018 funding bill for programs that serve older Alaskans and older Americans:

- Work to incorporate additional funding for all Older American Act (OAA) Title III programs (senior meals, transportation, disease prevention and health promotion activities, and family caregiver support services) to meet the funding levels approved unanimously in the 2016 Older Americans Act reauthorization bill. In addition, please support increased funding for OAA Title VI programs that

provide comparable nutrition and support services to tribal organizations that serve Alaska Natives and Native Americans as Native Elder populations are increasing as well.

- Maintain funding for OAA Title VII services at FFY2017 levels that protect the basic rights and benefits of vulnerable older people through the Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman, Adult Protective Services, and the legal assistance development program.
- Adopt the Senate-proposed level for the State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP) at \$47.1 million, the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) at \$400 million, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) at \$73,612 million, and the Corporation for National and Community Service programs (Foster Grandparents, Senior Companion, and the Retired Senior Volunteer Program) at \$202.1 million as all of these programs were subject to cuts or elimination in the House-passed funding bill.
- Protect funding for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) (\$3,390 million) at least at the FFY17 levels as this program is invaluable to older people and other low-income Alaskans for heating assistance, which is especially important during Alaska's long and cold winters. Proposed funding for this critical program was eliminated in the Administration's FFY2018 budget. State funding for the Alaska Heating Assistance Program was removed in FY2016. In FY2016, 3,060 Alaskan households with an elderly member received heating assistance through LIHEAP.
- Maintain funding for the HUD Section 202 Supportive Housing for the Elderly and the Section 811 Housing for Persons with Disabilities at current proposed levels by the House and Senate (\$573 million and \$147 million, respectively). These are important programs to meet the pressing demand for senior and accessible housing in Alaska and nationwide.
- Preserve the increase in base funding of \$414 million for Alzheimer's research in the National Institutes of Health budget. This funding is needed in order to prevent and effectively treat Alzheimer's disease.

The Alaska Commission on Aging is committed to ensuring the dignity and independence of all older Alaskans. In Alaska, the federally funded programs described above help seniors to live independently and safely at home and in the community, obtain personalized assistance to navigate Medicare and other benefits, find jobs to make ends meet, volunteer in the community, and avoid abuse and exploitation. Below are a few examples that illustrate the importance of these programs for Alaska seniors:

- Senior community based grant-funded services, many of which rely on OAA federal funding served 27,091 seniors at an annual cost of \$435 per senior. These core programs are administered by the Division of Senior and Disabilities Services, Department of Health and Social Services.
- Alaska Medicare Information Office (AMIO), which provides one-on-one education and outreach/education to assist Alaska's Medicare beneficiaries navigate prescription drug plans, Medigap supplemental insurance plans, and other assistance served a total of 15,033 Medicare beneficiaries in FY2017 through client counseling and outreach/education events (possible duplicated count). Of the 7,956 client contacts who received individualized counseling, AMIO reports 31% have incomes below 150% federal poverty level; 11% are disabled; and 10% speak English as a second language. The AMIO is supported 100% with SHIP federal funding and utilizes volunteers to extend their one-on-one efforts and training events. The AMIO is administered by the Division of Senior and Disabilities Services.
- Mature Alaskans Seeking Skills Training Program (MASST), a program within the Department of Labor and Workforce Development, utilizes SCSEP funding to provide vocational training and part-time paid placement for low-income seniors age 55 and older who experience two or more barriers to employment and have a desire to re-enter the workforce. In FY2017, the MASST program provided job training and placement to 234 seniors at 107 community host sites of which 20% are veterans, 31% are homeless or at risk of being homeless, 37% have disabilities, and 25% are age 65 and older. Of those

served, almost 65% were able to secure an unsubsidized job after completing the program and 68% remained on the job one year after exiting the program.

The Commission greatly appreciates your leadership and support of appropriate funding for programs serving older Alaskans! As always, please feel free to contact our office for further information by email ([denise.daniello@alaska.gov](mailto:denise.daniello@alaska.gov)) or phone (907-465-4879).

Sincerely,



David Blacketer  
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,



Denise Daniello  
ACoA Executive Director

Cc: Valerie Nurr'araaluk Davidson, Commissioner  
Department of Health and Social Services

Heidi Drygas, Commissioner  
Department of Labor & Workforce Development