



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR BILL WALKER

Department of Health and Social Services

ALASKA COMMISSION ON AGING

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May 17, 2017

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

Regarding: Support for Restored Federal Funding of the State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP) and the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP)

Dear Senator Murkowski:

Thank you for your support of the FFY2017 appropriations funding passed by Congress on May 1 that included increased funding for many Older American Act programs such as senior meals, transportation, home- and community-based supportive services, elder protection as well as increased base funding for Alzheimer's research conducted by the National Institutes of Health. These services help older people to live safely and comfortably in their homes and communities for as long as possible, which is where most prefer to be.

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA and the "Commission") is very concerned about the \$5 million reduction in federal funding for the State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP) and the \$34 million reduction for the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP). The Commission respectfully requests your support of restored funding for SHIP (\$52.1 million) and SCSEP (\$434 million) up to the FFY2016 levels in the FFY2018 Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations bill. We are writing to share how these reductions may impact programs serving older Alaskans.

Alaska and our nation have witnessed unprecedented growth in our older adult populations. Alaska's population of people age 65 and older, who number 78,980 and growing at an annual rate of 6.25%, is projected to increase more than 50% by 2030 (Department of Labor and Workforce Development 2017, Research and Analysis). Alaska's growth rate of the 65+ population is more than twice the national growth rate for this population as averaged over the last ten years (Administration on Community Living, Profile of Older Americans 2016). At a time when the senior population is booming, we should be increasing funding for programs that assist older people to better understand their health care options and to prepare them with job training for those who want to return to work. A reduction in funding for these programs will negatively impact the health and economic well-being of vulnerable older Alaskans and seniors nationwide.

Alaska's Medicare Information Office (AMIO) administers the SHIP program statewide and provides personalized health benefits information to an increasing number of Alaskan Medicare beneficiaries. In 2016, AMIO reported 8,549 client contacts of which 29% served beneficiaries with incomes below 150% federal poverty level; 11% served beneficiaries with disabilities; and 7% served beneficiaries who speak English as a second language. In addition, the AMIO staff and volunteers also conducted 602 public outreach events that included mailings, radio interviews, television, webinars, and other informational presentations.

The AMIO, supported by a small staff and many trained volunteers, is funded 100% with federal SHIP dollars. In 2016, Alaska volunteers donated 2,000 hours - valued over \$47,000 at an estimated hourly rate of \$23.56 - assisting Medicare beneficiaries. Reducing funding is expected to impact personalized counseling services to 88,129 Alaskan Medicare beneficiaries that may result in increased out-of-pocket costs for Alaskans and depletion of resources for sustaining qualified volunteers who assist Medicare beneficiaries at senior centers located in Kenai, Mat-Su, Fairbanks, Anchorage as well as the Southeast Alaska Independent Living Center (SAIL) in Juneau. Without the statewide Medicare Information Office providing one-on-one personalized counseling, Alaskan Medicare beneficiaries will need to contact the national call center for assistance with their complaints, billing issues, appeals, enrollment, and related Medicare concerns. Unfortunately, the national call center is not equipped to respond to Alaska's health care challenges that include remote pharmacies, health centers, and travel logistics that require complex problem-solving work and can be a life-saver for Alaska's vulnerable citizens.

The Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) is a crucial component in the service delivery for older adults that allow seniors to stay independent, engaged in their communities, and to enjoy a higher quality of life. In Alaska, SCSEP, administered by the Department of Labor and Workforce Development, is known as the Mature Alaskans Seeking Skills Training (MAAST) program. The MASST program provides training and part-time paid work experience opportunities for low-income individuals 55 years of age and older with two or more barriers to employment and who have a desire to enter or re-enter the workforce. The program's statutory goals are to foster individual economic self-sufficiency, to provide community service opportunities, and to increase participation in unsubsidized employment.

In SFY2016, the MAAST program reports that it provided job training and volunteer placement for 218 (unduplicated) seniors age 55 years and older in 76 host sites at local nonprofits and government programs including social services, senior centers, housing, food banks, faith based services, education centers, and other community organizations. Last year, MASST participants provided nearly 110,859 staffing hours, valued at more than \$2 million, which included 62,012 hours serving the elderly at senior programs. According to the MASST program, reduced funding may result in job loss for some older workers with significant employment barriers as 39% reside in rural areas; more than 21% are veterans; nearly 31% are homeless or at risk of homelessness; more than 40% are individuals with disabilities; and nearly 23% are age 65 and older. For those who are able to secure an unsubsidized job, almost 68% remain on the job one year after exiting the program.

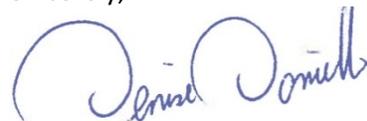
Thank you for your leadership and support of appropriate funding for programs serving older Alaskans! As always, please feel free to contact our office for further information by email (denise.daniello@alaska.gov) or phone (907-465-4879).

Sincerely,



David Blacketer
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,



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907-465-4879

Cc: Val Davidson, Commissioner
Department of Health and Social Services

Heidi Drygas, Commissioner
Department of Labor & Workforce Development