



THE STATE  
of **ALASKA**  
GOVERNOR BILL WALKER

Department of  
Health and Social Services

ALASKA COMMISSION ON AGING

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June 21, 2016

The Honorable Dan Sullivan  
United States Senate  
702 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Sent by Fax: 202-224-6501

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

Dear Senator Sullivan:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) is in full support of restored federal funding for the State Health Assistance Program (SHIP) and the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP). While we greatly appreciate that the Senate Committee on Appropriations approved the FY2017 appropriations package for the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education and related agencies that included increased funding for many Older American Act programs such as senior nutrition, transportation, and Elder Protection activities in addition to Alzheimer's research, we are gravely concerned about the \$34 million reduction to the SCSEP and elimination of all federal funding for SHIP. We are writing to share how actions by the Senate Committee on Appropriations may impact these programs serving older Alaskans, pending passage of this budget item by the House Committee on Appropriations and Congress.

Alaska and our nation have witnessed unprecedented growth in our older adult populations. Alaska's population of people age 65 and older, who number 74,853 and growing at an annual rate of 6.87%, is projected to more than double by 2030 to 152,740 (Department of Labor and Workforce Development 2015, Research and Analysis). Alaska's growth rate of the 65+ population is more than 2.5 times the national growth rate for this population as averaged over the last ten years (American Community Survey). At a time when the older adult population is booming, we should be increasing funding for programs and supports that assist these individuals to better understand their health care options and engage in employment. Defunding these critical programs will negatively impact the health and well-being of older Alaskans and seniors nationwide.

Alaska's Medicare Information Office (AMIO) administers the SHIP program statewide and is serving an increasing number of Alaskans. In SFY2015, AMIO provided information and counseling to 8,582 Alaskan Medicare beneficiaries of whom thousands are disabled and low-income, 17,000 are younger than 65 with cognitive and behavioral disabilities, including returning soldiers, and 7% speak English as a second language. In SFY2015, the AMIO staff and volunteers conducted 487 public outreach events that included mailings, radio interviews, television, webinars, and other informational presentations. During the recent Open Enrollment Season, Alaskans who contacted the AMIO saved an average of \$1,700 per person on unnecessary costs by

providing a personalized drug-plan-comparison and helping them to switch to a more cost effective Part D plan for 2016 (Alaska Medicare Information Office, June 2016).

The AMIO, supported by a small staff and many trained volunteers, is funded 100% with federal SHIP dollars. The elimination of federal funding may result in the need to cut their two sole staff positions as well as their grantees which train volunteers and provide services to Medicare beneficiaries at senior centers located in Kenai, Mat-Su, Fairbanks, and Anchorage in addition to 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 for 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 allows seniors to stay independent, engaged in their communities, and 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.

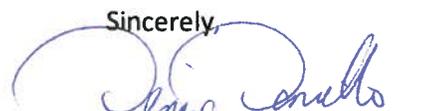
In SFY2015, the MAAST program reports providing job training and volunteer placement for 296 (unduplicated) seniors of age 55 years and older in 72 host sites of whom 178 worked in service to the general community and 133 who worked in service to the elderly community (some counts duplicated). The program exceeded its SFY2015 goal of twenty-five percent of participants placed into unsubsidized employment – in fact, almost 59% of those placed into unsubsidized employment were still employed in those jobs one year later. The average earnings were \$22,000 for those finding employment. Moreover, the MASST program is working to develop community partnerships and job training to assist older adults who are ex-offenders re-entering society as well as those who are experiencing homelessness. According to the MASST program coordinator, the potential loss of \$147,688 in federal funding will result in 12 fewer MASST participant positions and 12,000 hours of less community service/training (Mature Alaskans Seeking Skills Training Program, June 2016).

Thank you for your leadership and support of funding for programs serving older adults! As always, please feel free to contact our office for further information.

Sincerely,

  
Mary E. Shields  
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,

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

Heidi Drygas, Commissioner  
Department of Labor & Workforce Development