



National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs

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Paul Downey Testimony

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Senate Special Committee on Aging Hearing-2011 Reauthorization of the Older Americans Act

Senator Udall:

It is my pleasure to testify today at this important hearing. I commend your interest in wanting to improve the Older Americans Act, particularly the nutrition program. It is also a pleasure to participate with our nation's outstanding Assistant Secretary for Aging, Kathy Greenlee.

I come today wearing two hats. I am President of the National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs -- NANASP. I am also President and CEO of Senior Community Centers of San Diego with 15 years in the Older Americans Act aging network.

You have a particular interest in programs and activities which promote wellness and foster disease prevention among older Americans. That is precisely what we are doing in San Diego.

Senior Community Centers serves 1,700 meals a day, 365 days per year to predominately low-income seniors, many of whom live on less than \$200 after rent. The link between nutritious meals, health, independence and, frankly, their ability to simply survive is undeniable.

This year, in a unique partnership with visionary philanthropists, private and public partnership and collaborations with more than 25 community agencies, we opened the Gary and Mary West Senior Wellness Center. We firmly believe that it represents a model that can be replicated throughout the country – in both rural and urban settings.

Our congregate meal numbers at the Gary and Mary West Senior Wellness Center have increased each month – to almost 700 meals daily. Nutrition is the core service around which we provide case management, life-long learning and civic engagement. We then leverage our community partnerships to provide an array of additional services – at no cost to us or our clients. Our partners include Sharp Healthcare, the largest healthcare provider in San Diego County, and the College of Health and Human Services at San Diego State University. About 30 SDSU students representing five different disciplines – social work, gerontology, nursing, public health, and speech and language -- and their professors are outstationed at the Wellness Center. Our seniors receive more services, students learn about working with the elderly and professors have research opportunities.

This is what Older Americans Act dollars were intended to do -- leverage other resources beyond merely providing a meal at locations where seniors gather each day. The next reauthorization must strengthen our ability -- at the local level -- to do this kind of leveraging. This can be accomplished by letting those in the aging network closest to the senior determine what is best in each of our communities.

Let me be more specific. The nutrition program must continue its requirement that meals meet RDA requirements -- especially since 73 percent of participants are at high nutritional risk; 62 percent of homebound seniors receive half or more of their daily food intake from the meal.

However, how this is achieved needs more flexibility. We anticipate a doubling of our minority elderly population in less than 20 years. To keep nutrition programs relevant to them, we must offer food choices that reflect greater cultural sensitivity.

We have boomers in our programs and more will follow. They need different menu options and approaches to serving meals to keep these programs relevant.

One modification we could make to benefit all participants is to allow greater use of fresh foods and vegetables. We have too many obstacles in too many places now keeping that from happening. As you can imagine, the interpretation of what can be accepted varies significantly from state to state and even county to county. I encountered this first-hand recently when I tried to accept a reoccurring donation of fresh fish from a sports fishing consortium. State and local regulations -- which the Older Americans Act says we must comply with -- created such onerous impediments that we had to decline the fish. We must have a system where laws at all levels of government work together -- consistently and fairly -- to encourage donations of fresh food and vegetables.

My NANASP views parallel my local views. We support greater flexibility at the local level on whether more funds are provided to congregate or home delivered meals.

For nutrition programs to deliver the outcomes they do, they must be adequately funded. That does not always mean more money. In this case it is about making sure that dollars intended for nutrition stay in nutrition. Today nearly \$40 million in funds from the congregate nutrition program go into non-nutrition programs within the Older Americans Act. There may have been a need for that before but we don't believe there still is when we have rising demand in our programs.

We appreciate your support of the 2009 stimulus bill which provided an urgently needed \$100 million in funds for the nutrition programs. Our programs faced rising food and energy costs and loss of volunteers. These funds helped avert disaster -- but the need remains and we need to see funding levels for FY 2011 as close to this level as possible.

NANASP also supports strengthening the Disease prevention and Health Promotion program in the Older Americans Act going forward. We call for Congress to either transfer this program outright into the nutrition program or set aside funding for evidence based nutrition programs which help in prevention and promotion.

Finally and with special recognition to our rural seniors, we must bolster funding for transportation services which are so essential to the nutrition programs.

NANASP has enjoyed working with the Administration on Aging in the early stages of the reauthorization process and looks forward to working especially with you Senator Udall and your colleagues on the Special Committee on Aging to achieve a successful, innovative and forward moving Older Americans Act.

Please direct further questions to:

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