



Advocacy. Action. Answers on Aging.

Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging

250 East Broad Street, Suite 220
Columbus, OH 43215
(614) 481-3511
www.ohioaging.org

TESTIMONY BEFORE OHIO HOUSE CHILDREN & HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

Beth Kowalczyk, Chief Executive Officer kowalczyk@ohioaging.org
Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging
February 19, 2025

Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the Children and Human Services Committee, I am Beth Kowalczyk, Chief Executive Officer for the Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

Area Agencies on Aging were established in the 1970s by the Older Americans Act to respond to the needs of adults aged 60 and older in every local community. There are over 600 Area Agencies on Aging across the country. The Older Americans Act grants Area Agencies on Aging the flexibility to ensure that communities' local needs and preferences are considered, and that the resulting delivery system is tailored to local communities. By providing options that allow older adults to choose the home and community-based services, programming, and living arrangements that suit them best, Area Agencies on Aging make it possible for older adults to thrive in their homes and communities and this makes our communities stronger.



Ohio's 12 Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) have over 40 years of experience serving our communities, and over 30 years operating the PASSPORT HCBS waiver program. They administer and provide case management for the PASSPORT, Assisted Living, and Ohio Home Care waiver programs, waiver service coordination for MyCare Ohio, and administer Older Americans Act and Senior Community Services programs as well as a variety of county levies and other federal, state and local programs. The Area Agencies on Aging answer an estimated 300,000 requests for

information and referrals annually, and experienced screeners and assessors evaluate individual and family needs and link older Ohioans to cost-effective in-home and community-based programs where they live. They have been the champions of promoting and expanding the use of home and community-based services for over 40 years, saving the state an estimated \$12 billion in institutional care.

Budget Priorities

We support the Governor's proposed budget investments supporting older adults and the Aging Network. All Ohioans deserve the right to live healthy, engaged and secure lives, and to be able to age with dignity and autonomy.

Provider Rates: Increased reimbursement rates for providers in the last biennial budget have led to increased wages and benefits for direct care workers, better hiring and retention rates, reduced wait lists and more consumers receiving the services they need. The sustainability and regular review of these rates moving forward will be crucial to continue to strengthen and build the capacity of the aging network so all Ohioans can continue to choose how they live as they age. We support a mechanism by which the state regularly reviews provider payment rates to ensure access to services and more closely reflects the true cost of care.

Personal Needs Allowance: We also support the Department of Aging's proposed increase in the nursing facility and Assisted Living personal needs allowance (PNA) from \$50 per month to \$100 per month. This increase will help individuals pay for personal and ancillary expenses not covered by Medicaid like toiletries, haircuts, and clothing; and social and recreational activities like going out to eat with family members, trips to the movies or other items or services that must be purchased by the individual. Increasing the PNA reduces financial stress and allows individuals to better manage their care needs and more fully participate in community activities.

Housing: We are also encouraged that the Governor's budget supports investments in housing development in rural and border counties. Improving Ohio's affordable housing network and options for maintaining existing homes can provide more older adults with safe, secure housing and reduce homelessness. In addition to the investments proposed by the governor, we encourage the General

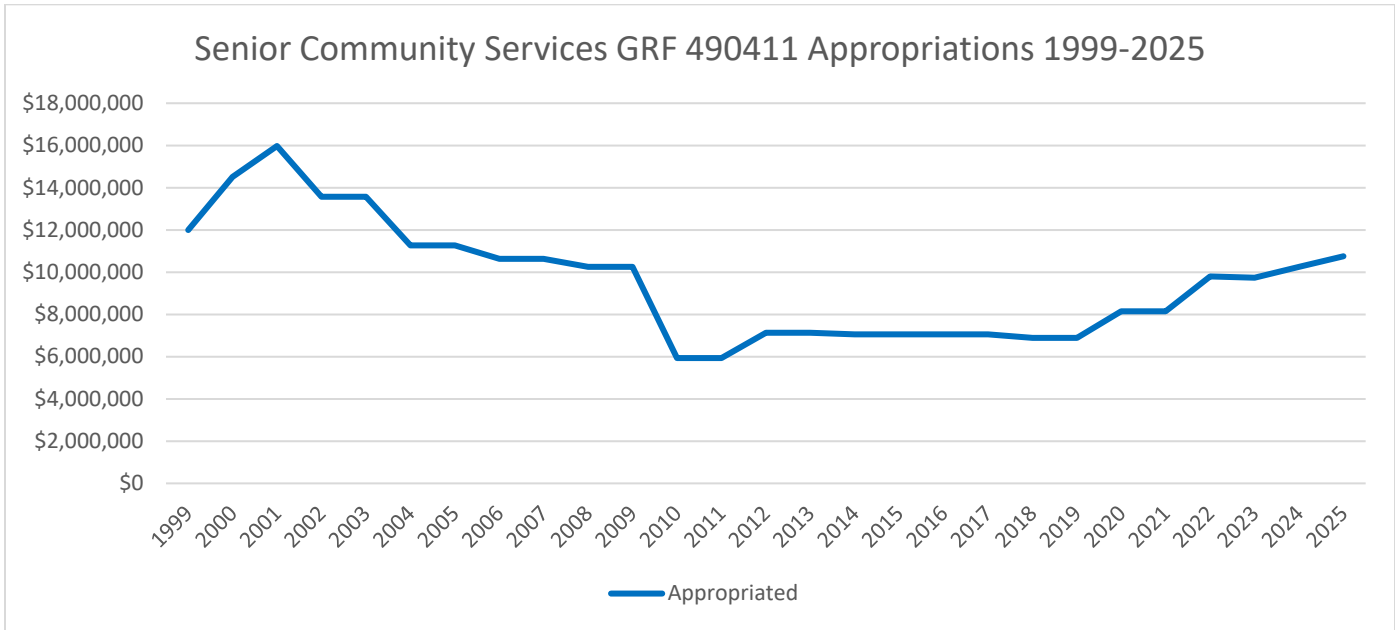
Assembly to consider increasing investment in the Ohio Housing Trust Fund (OHTF) to support affordable housing and home modification and repairs, and provide property tax relief to older adults that targets relief to those most in need and affords financial flexibility for Ohioans to age in their own homes.

Waiver Programs: PASSPORT and Assisted Living are Medicaid Home and Community –Based (HCBS) waiver programs that have successfully enabled thousands of older Ohioans to thrive in their homes and communities each year. We support the Governor’s request for sustained support for the PASSPORT and Assisted Living waivers, and the Area Agencies on Aging that administer them.

Healthy Aging -> Senior Community Services Program: To continue upon the profound outcomes of the Healthy Aging grants and meet the growing need, **we request that the General Assembly invest in older adults and local communities by increasing the Senior Community Services Program by \$10 million per fiscal year.**

The federally funded Older Americans Act, and the state’s Senior Community Services program (the state match for the Older Americans Act), are the primary programs outside of Medicaid administered by the Area Agencies on Aging that support healthy aging for Ohioans. These programs fund lower cost and less intensive interventions that can enable older Ohioans to remain in their homes and communities and delay their need for more costly Medicaid services and nursing home placement. Unfortunately, funding levels for the OAA and Senior Community Services program have simply not kept up with the need and gaps remain.

During the last budget, the Administration and General Assembly committed \$40 million in one-time state ARPA funding to temporarily fill those gaps through Healthy Aging Grants, which were flexible, community-based grants. We appreciated the significant investment, which had a tremendous impact, but it also demonstrated that there is still a great ongoing need for services that one-time funds cannot meet.



At its peak in the early 2000’s the Senior Community Services Program was funded at \$16 million per year but was cut severely during the recession. While funding has gradually been restored, with workforce challenges, the rising cost of providing services and increasing numbers of older adults with more complex needs, modest funding increases have not filled the gaps that remain.

The Senior Community Services Program provides flexible, community-driven funding to Area Agencies on Aging for non-Medicaid services like home modifications and repairs, transportation, meals, housing assistance, personal care, and other types of supports that prevent social isolation. The service priority is determined by an Area Agency on Aging regional needs assessment, with highest priority given to low-income, high need, and cognitively impaired individuals 60 years of age and over.



With additional funding, Area Agency on Aging, PSA 2 would eliminate current waiting lists, expand home repair funding and serve three times as many older adults as they did in 2024 (over 200 individuals vs. 60), expand care coordination programming (personal care, home delivered meals, and self-directed services) and serve three times as many older adults as they did in 2024 (over 2000 vs. 612).

Lower cost and less intensive interventions funded through Senior Community Services:

- Delay and divert from enrollment in Medicaid and in more costly nursing home care,
- Reduce waiting lists for services,

- Enhance health and wellness programming,
- Support family caregivers, and
- Create structures that effectively prevent and address elder abuse and neglect.

Funding services for older adults isn't just an investment in care—it's an economic driver. It supports local organizations and small businesses that employ thousands of workers, from direct care staff to meal providers and transportation services. This funding keeps older adults healthier and independent, reducing costly hospitalizations and nursing home stays. It also strengthens local economies by generating jobs, business growth, and tax revenue. Increasing state funding will expand these benefits, ensuring both older adults and our communities thrive.

Our association looks forward to continued conversations about these priorities. With your support, we can all work together to make Ohio the best state in the nation in which to age.



***The Central Ohio Area Agency on Aging** would expand current services, especially meals, to meet demand and rising costs for providers and continue to invest in their housing programs to reduce instances of eviction, foreclosure, and displacement due to unexpected financial hardship.*



***The Council on Aging of Southwestern Ohio** would be able to serve an additional 400 individuals' behavioral health needs, provide an additional 100 individuals and their families with respite care, serve an additional 250 individuals with home delivered meals and Adult Day services.*