

I want to thank Rep. Troy for inviting me to speak today on these important issues. My name is Beth Kowalczyk and I am the Chief Policy Officer for the Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging. Ohio's Area Agencies on Aging and the many home and community-based services they offer can make it possible for all of us to live healthy, engaged and secure lives in our homes and communities as we age.

As we live longer and healthier lives, this presents new opportunities for our communities. It's up to us to figure out how to make the most of them. Now is the time to try out new ideas and innovative approaches to improve how our society supports older people and responds to aging. We are all aging, and this is important to all of us.

As we get older, we gather momentum through the build-up of experiences and insights. We gain the power of perspective. Our abilities move us forward toward more complex goals. Each of us contributes to the forward motion and progress of our communities. The energy that we build up as we get older is what powers us to move our communities forward.

These positive outcomes are possible but aren't guaranteed. Society has an opportunity to benefit from this momentum, but that will require changes to our policies, practices, and public structures. By 2025, more than 1 in 4 Ohioans will be age 60 and older. We need to enact policies and foster environments that help build our momentum to move our communities forward. That's why I'm here today – to share why it's so important to promote policies and legislation that seek to support and improve the lives of older adults, like the bills everyone is talking about today. For example, we can't thrive in our homes and communities as we age if we can't afford to stay there.

I want to also highlight a particular issue impacting older adults that is of great concern to our Association and should be to all of you as well. The home and community-based system that we rely on for supporting older adults, people with disabilities, and family caregivers is strained because of a specific workforce shortage that has been growing for many years and has only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Personal care is assistance with activities of daily living, which are basic activities necessary for independent living in the home, including personal hygiene, dressing, preparing food, transferring/mobility, and toilet care. Personal care services can also include homemaking, assisting with managing medications, and assistance with attending appointments. Personal care is essential care work that enables us to continue to live healthy, engaged and secure lives in our homes and communities as we age. Care work is critical to our social and economic wellbeing.

For many years care workers have struggled with limited compensation, benefits, training and job supports. Care jobs have remained poor quality jobs, impacting workers, employers, and individuals and their families. Care workers are leaving the field for jobs with better pay, benefits and job quality in other sectors.

As a result there are not enough care workers to meet the demand for these essential personal care services. AAAs report that thousands of individuals in home and community-based programs are waiting from months to up to two years for personal care services.

We have an opportunity right now with federal funding that can shore up and sustain this work. As a state we must come together across disciplines and departments to identify solutions that will address the existing need and determine what is required to build capacity long term. Policies that recognize care work as essential to our economy will benefit us all.

Older adults play vital, positive roles in our communities – as family members, friends, mentors, volunteers, civic leaders, members of the workforce, and more. Just as every person is unique, so too is how we age and how we choose to do it – and there is no “right” way. Policies that enable us to continue to be involved and included in our communities for as long as possible as we age ultimately benefits all of us and makes our communities stronger.

Thank you.