May 14, 2019

The Honorable Suzanne Bonamici  
Chair  
Education & Labor Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2176 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable James Comer  
Ranking Member  
Education & Labor Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2176 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Bonamici and Ranking Member Comer:

AARP, on behalf of our nearly 38 million members and all older Americans nationwide, 
thanks you for holding this hearing entitled, “Examining the Older Americans Act: Promoting Independence and Dignity for Older Americans”, and for the opportunity to share our priorities for prompt reauthorization of the Older Americans Act (OAA).

AARP has a proud history of supporting the Older Americans Act. Building support for OAA was a top AARP legislative priority in the years leading up to OAA enactment in 1965, and continues to be a priority for the organization. Too often, advancing age and increasing frailty threaten the ability of older persons to remain in their own homes. The fear of having to enter a nursing home, with its associated loss of independence and threat of impoverishment, weighs heavily on the minds of many older persons and their family caregivers. According to AARP’s Home and Community Preferences Survey, the vast majority of adults age 50-plus—which more than 3 in 4 people—want to remain in their community for as long as possible. Helping people to live in their communities with independence and dignity, as they grow older, is a bedrock goal of OAA, and the Act has been successful in helping achieve this goal. We believe that older persons would best be served with an on-time reauthorization that maintains the critical service and information roles of OAA programs and that promotes greater responsiveness to the needs of older Americans.

Every year, OAA programs provide services for 11 million older adults. Those services include home care, congregate (group) and home-delivered meals, case management, family caregiver support, transportation, adult day care, legal services, elder abuse prevention, and job training and employment opportunities for low-income older adults.
Additionally, OAA Native American programs provide nutrition, supportive and caregiver services to older American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians. OAA programs are cost-effective investments that serve the needs of older Americans while deferring or eliminating the need for costly institutionalization.

Funding for OAA programs has not kept pace with inflation and increased demand. While the age 60 and older population has grown by 63 percent since 2001, OAA funding in FY 2019 is only 22 percent above the FY 2001 funding level. When adjusted for inflation, total OAA funding over this time period has declined by 16 percent. People age 80 and older are among the most likely to need help to live independently in their homes and communities, and the age 80-plus population is projected to increase by 54 percent from 2019 to 2030. Additionally, over the next decade, family caregivers will likely face greater strains as the number of family caregivers is not expected to keep up with the large number of older adults needing care, underscoring the need for greater investments in OAA programs. AARP is calling for funding at levels that will meet the needs of the growing older population. Additionally, while AARP is open to potential new initiatives that complement existing programs, we do not support major new initiatives or changes that will divert already inadequate resources from core OAA programs. We urge that current OAA activities not be sacrificed to pay for new programs.

Caregiving touches just about everyone. Most of us are, have been, or will be a family caregiver or will need help to live independently. The Title III-E National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP) provides grants to states and territories to fund a range of supports that directly address the needs of families in their caregiving role. NFCSP is working well. According to the Westat Outcome Evaluation of the National Family Caregiver Support Program, key among the evaluation’s finding are that NFCSP respite services are effective in reducing caregiver burden and that other caregiver support services—including education and skills training, support groups and counseling—increase caregiver confidence. The evaluation also demonstrates that NFCSP services help the caregiver to continue in their role for longer periods.

Our country relies on the contributions of family caregivers. An estimated 40 million family caregivers provide a staggering $470 billion annually in unpaid care to their loved ones—ranging from bathing and dressing to paying bills and transportation. According to the study, Home Alone Revisited: Family Caregivers Providing Complex Care, half of family caregivers perform medical and nursing tasks for individuals with challenges in physical, cognitive and behavioral health, often with little preparation or training. Family caregivers also often serve as care coordinators, navigating systems of care and different providers. By supporting family caregivers, we can help people stay at home, helping to delay or prevent more costly nursing home care and unnecessary hospitalizations. Increasing funding for NFCSP will also allow grantees the ability to more fully respond to local needs without having to shift resources from one caregiver population to another.

With primary consideration to enhancing support for caregivers, after reviewing data from evaluations of NFCSP, promising state practices and other relevant work in the
In the caregiving field, we identified an area to further strengthen the National Family Caregiver Support Program—providing assessments of caregivers’ needs as a support service. A critical component of supporting caregivers is understanding more deeply how caregivers move through their day-to-day lives, the unique challenges they face at specific parts of their journeys, and how programs can be better prepared and equipped to support them. Understanding the family caregiving situation is a critical step in the process for linking the family caregiver to the most appropriate support services (e.g., counseling, respite care etc.), as the circumstances of each caregiver are varied. Questions regarding the skills, abilities and knowledge of family caregivers can help to identify the tasks that are most problematic and stressful for the caregiver. This information, in turn, can lead to targeting support services more effectively and efficiently. Better targeting of support services can also help maintain the health and well-being of the caregiver, sustain their ability to provide care, produce better outcomes for their loved ones and prevent or delay nursing home placement. Assessing the needs of caregivers’ is also a more person- and family-centered approach. It is important we ensure that caregivers have the opportunity to have their needs assessed when they turn to the National Family Caregiver Support Program for help so they can receive the support services most beneficial to them.

The OAA mandate to provide legal services—which helps ensure legal help for some of the most critical problems of the neediest older Americans—remains extremely important, and should be retained. Without the mandate, the fundamental principle of access to justice may be denied to some older persons. AARP also continues to support retention of the targeting provisions of the Act, especially language that targets low-income seniors, seniors residing in rural areas and seniors from racial and ethnic groups that have experienced discrimination.

AARP welcomes the opportunity to work with you to build upon the success of OAA programs through the 2019 reauthorization process. If you have any additional questions, feel free to contact me or have your staff contact Nicole Burda on our Government Affairs team at nburda@aarp.org or 202-434-3779.

Sincerely,

David Certner
Legislative Counsel and Legislative Policy Director
Government Affairs