

AARP Oregon Testimony on Oregon Project Independence

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TO: House Committee on Human Services and Housing, Rep. Keny-Guyer, Chair

FROM: Jon Bartholomew, Government Relations Director, AARP Oregon

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the value and merits of Oregon Project Independence. AARP Oregon strongly supports OPI for numerous reasons. By this point, you have heard from others about what OPI does, and how it is a cost-effective tool to help older Oregonians live at home with independence, choice, and dignity.

I will reserve my comments to focus on the benefit of OPI on Oregon's approximately 470,000 family caregivers. OPI rightly prioritizes helping people living alone, and a majority of OPI consumers are single. However, a significant percentage of people served by OPI are living with others.

Family caregivers make it possible for older adults and people with disabilities of all ages to remain living in their homes and communities. They are informal caregivers who provide unpaid care to a relative or friend, often helping with activities of daily living such as eating and dressing. Family caregivers are the backbone of the long-term care system. In Oregon, approximately 470,000 family caregivers provide about 437 million hours of unpaid care each year with an estimated value of \$5.7 billion. Caregivers come from all walks of life, but 60% of caregivers are women with an average age of 49. In addition to their family caregiving responsibilities, 56% of caregivers work full time.

Oregon Project Independence allows for some of these caregivers to continue to work full time, bringing resources into the family to prevent them from falling into poverty, and becoming reliant on Medicaid. It also allows for the family members to retain health insurance through employers. Without OPI, some caregivers may need to leave the workplace to care for their loved one with more of their time, losing health insurance and financial resources in the process.

For many caregivers, the demands of caregiving can cause stress or loneliness, and may even cause a decline in their own health. Evidence shows that the stress of dementia care increases

caregivers' susceptibility to disease and health complications. Caregivers often report an increased incidence of emotional and physical difficulties in their personal life. Further, the longer a caregiver has been providing care, the more likely she or he is to report poor health.

Oregon Project Independence, while focused on the care recipient, can provide some respite for family caregivers. Respite is temporary, short-term care that provides relief from the extraordinary and intensive demands experienced by family caregivers. Research demonstrates that respite services reduce the stresses of caregiving and improve well-being for both family caregivers and the older adults for whom they provide care.

OPI covers services which offer temporary, substitute supports or living arrangements for care recipients which provide a brief period of relief for caregivers. Funds are extremely limited, wait lists exist based on priority, and respite is at the bottom of that priority list.

Oregon Project Independence also provides home modifications that allow people with mobility issues to remain in their own home for longer. Often, this relieves a significant burden on a family caregiver as well. For example, if grab bars and other accessibility devices are installed in a consumer's bathroom, it reduces the need for a caregiver to provide on-hand assistance, and protects the individual's independence and dignity.

AARP strongly supports retaining existing funding for Oregon Project Independence, but we also know that the current level of funding is already insufficient. Funds run out part way through the year, and many Area Agencies on Aging keep wait lists for consumers who request assistance. We know this is a particularly difficult budget cycle, so we respectfully urge the legislature to keep the funding at current service level. In the future, we would be glad to participate in discussions on how to increase funding for this program via increased state support or through federal matching funds.