



April 13, 2021

Senator Kate Lieber, Co Chair
Representative Rob Nosse, Co Chair
Joint Committee on Ways & Means Subcommittee on Human Services
Oregon State Capitol
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Co-Chairs Lieber and Nosse and Members of the Committee:

O4AD, the Oregon Association of Area Agencies on Aging and Disabilities, is pleased to submit testimony on behalf of SB 5529, the Oregon Department of Human Services budget bill for 2021-23. As with every sector of our state, human services have been hit hard by COVID this past year. However, for Oregon's seniors and people with disabilities, that impact has been exponential. More than 50% of deaths related to COVID in Oregon were a senior over the age of 60. Seniors have faced drastic social isolation, facilities that were ill equipped to handle this pandemic safely, loss of in-home visits from caregivers, family members and instability in resources. And our network lost the ability to check in on reports of abuse.

O4AD's members, Area Agencies on Aging, statewide have worked tirelessly to meet the urgent needs of our vulnerable citizens through this pandemic. This has included immediately redeveloping programs such as congregate meal sites to a mobile format, developing capacity for virtual case manager check-ins, facilitating PPE distribution to home care workers and meeting the spiraling increase in service requests during this time. This was only compounded by wildfires in the fall of 2020.

The wildfires required immediate action to not only safely evacuate our vulnerable citizens in the line of fire but follow up was necessary in order to help them recover from loss of homes, loss of belongings or delays in ability to return home. For an older adult or person with a disability, this may also mean a disruption in the services and supports that help them maintain their daily life. Our members were facilitating care for those on the Medicaid, Older Americans Act and OPI caseload throughout the fires - an incredible increase in overall workload for staff.

While Area Agencies on Aging staff have risen to the challenge - it is important to note that there has been no relief in terms of allocations or staffing. We have been asked to do more which means we have to do it with less. This is not a sustainable model for how we as a state prioritize service to our seniors and people with disabilities.

The 2021-23 ODHS budget allows us an opportunity to take the lessons learned and consider how to apply them going forward. COVID is still with us and will be for some time.

In consideration of the 2021-23 budget for ODHS, especially aging and people with disabilities, there is an opportunity to improve upon our work which was undertaken due to COVID and continue to improve how we serve our seniors and people with disabilities moving forward.



1. Maintain service levels and programs

The need for services is increasing across the state. We have had a doubling of seniors seeking meal/nutrition assistance, an increase in protective service reports - particularly as the state begins to reopen, an increase in the complexity and needs of in-home consumers, an increase in inquiries for services and an increase in demand for in-home care. Maintaining current service levels will offer some measure of stability for the upcoming biennium as we work to meet these needs.

2. Supporting our frontline staff

During the pandemic, case managers, eligibility specialists and adult protective services staff have not only risen to the challenges, but they have also surpassed expectations of their commitment to their clients. Continuing to provide services from the beginning of the 'lockdown' required a quick pivot to a virtual environment and ability to be more flexible and creative than ever before. Workers were required to make their home their office and respond to a very frightened and worried group of people. The risk of death is and was real for those we serve. Staff in Aging and People with Disabilities programs have been working with escalating needs for their clients and demands on their time due to the incredible amount of policies, procedures, reporting and other requirements added onto their work.

During the 2019 budget cycle, the Co-Chairs recommended an increase in workload related staffing. This would have added case managers to the network in order to meet needs and federal requirements. However, during the Special Session, 50% of the increase in workload related staffing was removed from the 2020-2021 fiscal year. This reduction came at a time when these positions were needed even more urgently than ever. **Restoration of this increase is an important priority for the aging and disability network.**

HB 2595 will require the Oregon Department of Human Services to update their workload modeling and reporting on a regular basis and use this updated information to inform budget decisions and requirements. This will also provide better and more accurate information to the Legislature as they deliberate on budget decisions. This bill is currently moving through the process.

3. Mental health support for seniors

Older adults are often an overlooked population when discussing mental health issues. Many issues that seniors struggle with are assumed to be 'because it's just a part of getting old' or 'dementia'. However, seniors struggle with the same mental health issues that any other age group does – depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies, bi-polar disease, schizophrenia, and more. Mental illness does not age discriminate. While Oregon has escalated their work around mental health for many groups – seniors have been largely left out. Direct support for mental health services have not been included in budgets or priorities. Very specifically, the ability of case managers to access mental health practitioners, to create programs that meet the unique needs of older adults and development of on-going support for those older adults with mental illness. This programming should be based on the experiences of those we serve and have flexibility.

4. Consider innovative investments that realize Oregon's goals in long term services and supports.

Oregon has a unique opportunity with the influx of Federal funding via the American Recovery Plan. These funds represent a chance to consider unmet needs in human services. While there will be many proposals for how to spend these funds, we



encourage Legislators, when looking at human services, to keep Oregon's goals of independence, dignity, choice and safety at the forefront of those decisions. We are in an unprecedented time and that requires innovation, creativity and meeting real needs.

Thank you for your consideration and we look forward to continuing to work with you throughout the budget development process.

Sincerely,

Randi Moore
Chair, O4AD
Oregon Cascades West
Council of Governments

Emily Farrell
Vice Chair, O4AD
Lane Council of
Governments

Phil Warnock
Executive Director, O4AD