



Elder Rights Advocacy

2011 Older Americans Act Reauthorization

Background

The current Older Americans Act (OAA) contains a robust foundation, including directives to the aging network to be visible advocates for and with older people by working to strengthen their rights on a person-to-person basis, by redressing systems barriers and also to promote their autonomy and dignity, expand access to benefits, and defend their rights. This foundation begins with the Assistant Secretary and extends to all within the aging network under the Act.

In reality, however, the level of advocacy being engaged in varies widely from state-to-state, city-to-city and office-to-office. In some areas skilled advocates work with and on behalf of their clients regularly, while in others areas OAA-funded providers believe that they are constrained from engaging in any form of advocacy at all. The inconsistencies shortchange seniors with respect to the one-to-one, systems and policy level advocacy they deserve and should expect from the aging network.

Current Status

A significant problem with the current OAA legislation is that the advocacy mandates are not universally well-understood, leaving room for significant differences of interpretation by providers across the country. Additionally, there is little oversight or guidance from AoA regarding the statute's numerous advocacy mandates. Moreover, the current OAA does not expressly encourage engagement of older Americans themselves as advocates for their own needs, and thereby misses out on a unique opportunity for civic engagement by and with the target population.

Opportunities in the Older Americans Act Reauthorization

NCOA views the upcoming Older Americans Act reauthorization as an opportunity to better integrate the current advocacy provisions within the law, but also to infuse new responsibilities throughout the act. We believe this is the time to provide the tools necessary to make everyone—from the administration, to providers, to seniors themselves—into powerful advocates.

We believe that there are four main concepts that should be infused throughout the reauthorized OAA. Including these concepts within the 2011 reauthorization will help to build a more robust advocacy foundation to engage older Americans and the aging network in advocacy efforts that should, given the present construct of the Act, be a key underpinning of the aging network's efforts to offer services to improve the lives and assert the rights of older Americans.

- **Integration:** There are currently many provisions contained within in the OAA that place clear responsibilities upon the aging network to be advocates with and for the older Americans they serve. We believe that to be truly effective, these advocacy mandates need to be integrated so that the multiplicity of advocacy efforts required by the Act by all

components of the network leverage each other. There should be tightened and explicit requirements for all parties within the aging network who receive OAA money to be advocates for and with those whom they serve. Empowering older Americans who receive services should be a hallmark of the aging network. Moreover the provisions of the Act that require collaboration and partnerships with other networks working with similar populations, including SHIPs, legal services, and Protection & Advocacy, should be acknowledged and enforced to offer seamless advocacy for populations with the greatest economic or social need.

- **Education & Training:** To bolster the advocacy requirements throughout the Act, the aging network and older Americans need abundant opportunities to learn more about their responsibilities and also how to carry them out. The reauthorization should include resources and specific directives for education of issues requiring advocacy and for training on effective advocacy methods, including online reference materials, and a means by which experienced advocates are incentivized to share their knowledge with those newer to the field.

It is more than time to empower seniors themselves to stand up for their own rights and make their voices heard to effect positive change for themselves and especially for others living in poverty or social isolation. Strong mandates should be in place to encourage older people—especially those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable—to raise their voices so that their views are incorporated into the solutions developed by policymakers.

- **Independence:** To foster a strong advocacy environment, it is important to create an environment of independence and transparency, in which advocacy in all its dimensions is free from interference. Meaningful advocacy requires people to have the freedom to feel safe raising one's voice and being heard.
- **Accountability:** A strong culture of accountability is essential to ensure that the advocacy mandates of the Act are not merely words on a page. We recommend a strong system of outcomes and process measures with robust oversight and enforcement be introduced to ensure that everyone—from the Assistant Secretary on down—is an effective advocate for people under the Older Americans Act.

Summary

We start the path to a clear advocacy foundation for all OAA functionality from a position of strength, as the Act has always contained provisions representing a strong advocacy focus. NCOA is committed in the 2011 and subsequent reauthorizations to building upon that foundation and developing a robust nation-wide advocacy culture that works for each individual and for the collective dignity, independence and economic security of all older Americans. We believe that adopting the four concepts laid out above as the underpinnings of reauthorization will lead to a more effective OAA that will be empowered to have a meaningful positive impact on the lives of older people. We envision reauthorization leading to the aging network and older Americans joined together leveraging strengths to improve the lives of all older Americans, especially those who are vulnerable, living in poverty with the greatest economic or social need.