

Strengthening the Voice of Older Adults and the Aging Network: A Vision for the Reauthorized Older Americans Act

The term “advocacy” is found throughout the Older Americans Act (OAA), and virtually every program and funding stream created by the OAA requires that the entire aging network¹ advocate on behalf of older Americans. The charge begins at the very top, with the Administration on Aging (AoA) and its leadership, including the Assistant Secretary, tasked with serving “as the effective and visible advocate for older individuals.” (Title 2, Section 202)

At the most comprehensive level, advocacy is about creating positive change through strategies, actions, and solutions that attempt to influence decision-making. Advocacy can be a highly effective tool for drawing public attention to the needs of particular vulnerable groups, including the economically and socially vulnerable older Americans who are the priority populations targeted by the OAA.

But raising awareness is not the only goal of advocacy. Advocacy can positively impact program offerings, service delivery, and outcomes delivered under OAA programs, thereby improving the lives of seniors with the greatest economic and social need.

While the OAA abounds with multiple uses of the term “advocacy” and requirements to engage in advocacy activities, a precise definition and explanation of the scope of this term are noticeably absent in the “definitions” section of the Act. This has left room for confusion and misunderstanding about the scope and directives of the many advocacy mandates within the Act.

Dimensions and Principles of Advocacy under the OAA

There are three inextricably related dimensions that define the scope of advocacy in the OAA:

- **One-to-one advocacy** focuses on work to empower and improve access for individual vulnerable older Americans.

- **Systems advocacy** is directed toward the mechanisms that “make things happen” by removing barriers or improving access to specific programs or processes.
- **Policy advocacy** aims to impact broad guidelines and policies at the federal and state levels that would affect older Americans across the country.

We believe that there are also five principles that serve as the foundation for all three dimensions of advocacy in the context of the reauthorized Older Americans Act:

1. **Empower older Americans:** Vulnerable older Americans who are experiencing the greatest economic and social need—the priority group targeted by the Older Americans Act—must be empowered to advocate on their own behalf.
2. **Integrate advocacy provisions and functions:** Emphasizing the integration of the OAA’s advocacy provisions would make for far more effective advocacy, which would in turn result in better outcomes for older Americans.
3. **Education and training:** Ongoing training enables continuous growth of good advocates and is essential to an enduring, successful advocacy culture around aging issues.
4. **Accountability:** Thoughtful measures must tell the advocacy story of the aging network.
5. **Independence:** The independence of advocacy roles and responsibilities must be protected.

A Way Forward: Recommendations for OAA Reauthorization

OAA reauthorization presents a unique opportunity to make significant improvements to the advocacy provisions under the Act. The reauthorization should establish a structure that encourages all components within the aging network to collaborate and engage in increased advocacy to produce more robust and impactful person-centered, community-based poli-

¹ For more information on the aging network, visit the Administration on Aging website at www.aoa.gov.

cies, initiatives, and systems to effectively and efficiently improve the lives of older Americans. Specific recommendations for OAA reauthorization include:

1. **Define advocacy to help engage the aging network.** A comprehensive definition included in the definition section at the beginning of the OAA would provide much-needed guidance to individuals and organizations about their advocacy requirements. OAA reauthorization should include a definition of “advocacy” that integrates the three dimensions and five principles articulated above.
2. **Provide needed support for education and training on advocacy.** Informed advocacy is based upon a thorough understanding of the central role that advocacy plays in the OAA and enables the aging network to obtain the skills and knowledge needed to fulfill their obligations.
3. **Create advocacy reporting measures.** AoA should work with stakeholders to develop advocacy reporting measures that can be easily used by the aging network and are focused on outcomes as well as process elements. The goal must be to tell the story of advocacy being conducted throughout the aging network and how it improves the lives of older Americans with the greatest economic and social need.
4. **Impose oversight and enforcement of advocacy provisions.** Strengthening oversight will improve the aging network’s ability to engage in advocacy on behalf of and in partnership with older Americans.
5. **Strengthen legal assistance.** OAA reauthorization should emphasize better collaboration within the aging network and more strategic delivery mechanisms for legal assistance. This can be accomplished by promoting effective deployment of legal assistance resources, forming a National Advisory Group to advise AoA and elder legal services providers, and strengthening legal assistance delivery.

6. **Ensure that advocacy functions within the OAA are protected against undue interference.** The Act should include provisions similar to those for ombudsmen that make willful interference with official advocacy functions illegal and prohibit retaliation or reprisal against anyone who cooperates with it.
7. **Strengthen the transparency requirements for state units on aging and area agencies on aging annual and long-term plans and funding disbursements.** The Act should include language that specifically requires input from stakeholders, so they have a voice in the way funds are to be distributed, the priority levels that will be set on different issues, and generally how the aging network will be run in the state.

Conclusion

The Older Americans Act was intended to provide the supports needed to ensure that older Americans with the “greatest economic and social need” would be able to secure access to needed health care and find the path to a more economically secure and high-quality life. Advocacy assumes a critical role in that the efforts of all those in the aging network—from the Assistant Secretary to every local service provider—are and remain driven by a foundation of empowering older Americans and complimenting their choices through service delivery. Establishing such an aging network focus, along with strengthening advocacy provisions, would enable and grow meaningful collaborations and partnerships to promote the autonomy and dignity of each and every older American.

LEARN MORE

One Away Campaign for Elder Economic Security

OneAway.org

National Center for Benefits Outreach & Enrollment

CenterforBenefits.org

