

House Aging and Older Adult Services Committee Hearing

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Older Adult Protective Services

Provided by

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Chairman Hennessey, Chairman Samuelson, Members of the House Aging and Older Services Committee, Committee Staff Members and Guests:

I am Rebecca May Cole, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of Area Agencies on Aging (P4A). Since the mid 1970's, P4A has been the statewide advocacy, policy, professional development and membership support organization for all 52 of the State's Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs).

It is my pleasure to appear before you today to discuss Pennsylvania's Older Adult Protective Services Program. On November 26, 1988, AAAs were granted the legal authority to act under the state's Older Adult Protective Services Act (OAPSA). This legislation designated AAAs as the intake, investigative, service planning and lead service-providing entities for the Commonwealth's 60-plus population, whenever situations of abuse, neglect, exploitation and abandonment were reported. Since that time, AAAs have faithfully undertaken their assigned intent with great care and unquestioned fidelity.

It is commendable that, under its leadership, this Committee has introduced House Bill 2549, which addresses compliance with the Peake vs. Commonwealth Court ruling and invites a modernization of the Older Adult Protective Services Act. I wish to also acknowledge the effort and attention given by the staffs of this Committee on gathering input from stakeholders and considering how this latest attempt to revise OAPSA will impact our state's seniors and the Area Agencies on Aging.

You have just heard from Fred Shrimp, long time AAA Director for the Lycoming/Clinton STEP AAA and out-going chair for P4A's Protective Services/Guardianship Committee. He spoke about specific provisions of the bill from the viewpoint of the AAAs who have faithfully served as the local 'boots on the ground' for all 67 counties of our Commonwealth. As evidenced by Fred's testimony and through P4A, AAAs have given their perspectives on what will work best for vulnerable seniors, based upon the historical experience gained as they have served as the Commonwealth's protectors of our most at-risk seniors during these past three decades.

Since the inception of the OAPSA law, the State's AAAs have used their legislative responsibilities extended under the Older Adult Protective Services Act judiciously, only as a last resort and when absolutely necessary. As you well know, AAAs are regularly contacted by various sources about the well-being of an older person. In the vast majority of these instances, it is concluded, after careful evaluation, that other less intrusive options of care are appropriate. This philosophical approach affords seniors access to the strength and breadth of one of the most diverse, comprehensive aging service delivery systems that exist within our nation.

In the last several years, our State has experienced tremendous growth in its 60-plus population. We have also seen a steady development of a better informed and more educated community when it comes to understanding and protecting the needs and rights of its seniors. These two factors have principally caused a significant increase in referrals to AAAs.

Over these last five years alone, referrals for older adult protective services investigations have increased by 57% (totaling over 40,000 reports in 2017-2018) and substantiated reports of abuse and neglect have spiked by some 41%. At the same time, funding to AAAs for investigations and related service activities have remained flat and unresponsive to this expansion. Quite simply, the challenge for AAAs has been finding sufficient resources necessary to meet all of the mandates for the Older Adult Protective Services given the demands of the community and the necessity to fund other program and services valued by those they serve.

Sadly, the costs for services have continued to rise disproportionately to the cost of living and critical staffing shortages have plagued AAAs at all areas of service delivery. Additionally, AAAs are seeing that the case situations coming through their Older Adult Protective Services system are much more complex, requiring additional man hours for investigation, care planning, the resolution of harmful conditions and the necessity for more focused community resources.

Some financial relief was provided by the Governor and the Legislature during this fiscal year, when \$ 2.17 million for the Older Adult Protective Services program was included in the final State budget for AAAs. While P4A and the AAAs truly appreciate this new money, a survey of the AAAs conducted in the spring of 2018 showed that the actual need of AAAs for satisfying their duties under Older Adult Protective Services is closer to \$ 8 million. For this reason, the funds AAAs received this year can only be seen as just a starting point. To effectively meet the needs of the community as they realistically exist, P4A and the AAAs call on both the administration and the members of this honorable committee, as leading advocates for our seniors, to collaborate with the entire State legislature in assuring that final funding AAAs receive for the Older Adult Protective Services during this upcoming fiscal year will address the documented unmet need of at least \$ 6 million additional dedicated dollars. We believe that one of the most important objectives for our Commonwealth is ensuring that our State's seniors can remain safe and protected in their communities in all instances, no matter the cost and regardless of the setting or location of where they will age in place.

Understanding that both the administration and our State legislature is faced with receiving and justifying a variety of human service funding requests in any given fiscal year, please know that 28 AAAs would use this added funding to replace financial resources that were diverted from other important programs such as senior centers, adult day centers home care, home-delivered and congregate meals; 34 would hire more older adult protective services workers; 10 would hire more OAPSA supervisors; 17 would train more staff; 13 would hire or contract for legal services; 16 would hire or contract for forensic accountants in financial exploitation cases and others would apply funds for supportive service expenses like Court fees for guardianship; behavioral health services and emergency housing.

Finally, I believe it most fitting to use today's hearing as an occasion to recognize the dedication and passion demonstrated by the staff of our Agencies on Aging who are part of the statewide older adult protective services structure. These professionals who perform as caseworkers, casework supervisors, administrators, clerical, fiscal staff and contracted specialists covering all of the communities of this great and vast Commonwealth work tirelessly to uphold the requirements of the Older Adult Protective Services Act and preserve the safety and welfare of our seniors. Let us never forget the job they do is highly demanding and emotionally taxing; yet gratifying in its overall benefit. Those immediately on the front lines to the at-risk consumer know their call for assistance requires a response, 24 hours a day, 7 days of the week, and 365 days of the year. Their commitment is most noteworthy and we as a Commonwealth must continue to ensure they have the totality of resources and technical skills necessary to fulfill their chosen call. Given what is expected, they need the complete array of tools to do their job thoroughly and well.

In closing, I'd like to reaffirm that P4A and all of its AAA members are willing and able to assist the administration and the General Assembly in finding the most suitable legislative, financial and operational securities that our most vulnerable citizens expect and deserve here in Pennsylvania. I thank you for your consideration and ongoing support for those seniors who all too often are regarded as faceless and unable to speak on their own behalf.