



# Opening Statement

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & LABOR

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The Hon. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott • Chairman

## **Opening Statement of Chair Suzanne Bonamici (OR-1)**

Subcommittee on Civil Rights & Human Services Protections Hearing

*Examining the Older Americans Act: Promoting Independence and Dignity for Older Americans*

2175 Rayburn House Office Building

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We are here today to examine the Older Americans Act, a critically important pillar of our efforts to improve the quality of life for older Americans and their families.

In 1965, Congress passed the Older Americans Act, or O-A-A, to provide basic supports to aging Americans. Since then, Congress has repeatedly updated and strengthened OAA in a bipartisan manner to fulfill its mission of helping more Americans live independently and age with dignity. OAA programs have been consistently successful, which has led to a gradual expansion of the services it provides. The Act now supports a range of community-based programs that target assistance to those who need it most.

Of the many vital OAA programs, one of the most recognized is nutrition assistance offered through both congregate meal sites and home-delivered programs such as Meals on Wheels. OAA's nutrition assistance programs provide more than 900,000 healthy meals to older Americans each day. OAA also supports elder justice activities and funds programs to prevent elder abuse. Additionally, the Act offers community service employment opportunities to low-income seniors, allowing them to access part-time work that both supports them economically and provides purpose and social engagement. OAA also provides family caregivers with much-needed training, respite, and support. And based on my own experience caring for my 90-year-old mother, who has Alzheimer's, I can particularly appreciate the importance of the National Family Caregiver Support Program.

Collectively, OAA programs serve about 11 million older adults – 3 million of whom regularly look to OAA services for basic needs. Importantly, OAA programs work together to make sure that aging adults retain independence and avoid costly institutionalized care for as long as possible.

Despite the success of the Older Americans Act, in recent years our investment has not kept pace with inflation and has not recognized the rising number of older Americans and challenges they continue to face.

Although the population of Americans age 60 and over has grown more than 60 percent since 2001, OAA funding has only grown by roughly 20 percent. And, accounting for inflation, OAA funding has steadily declined by 16 percent.

This disinvestment has weakened OAA programs at a time of growing demand for the services they provide. Nearly one in ten Americans over the age of 65 lives in poverty, and they are not getting the support they need. A 2015 Government Accountability Office study found that 83 percent of food insecure, low-income older Americans did not receive any meal services. And two in three older Americans who struggle with daily activities received limited or no home-based care.

As the number of older Americans continues to increase, Congress must strengthen our support for OAA's proven, long-standing programs. We must recommit to providing basic services and compassionate care to vulnerable members of our communities.

Not only is this the right thing to do, but the economics also make sense. OAA allows older Americans to delay or altogether avoid costlier care by promoting healthy behaviors, such as chronic disease management, and by providing the supportive services that allow seniors to age in place.

That is the responsibility and the opportunity facing this Committee and the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress. We are in a position to advance a reauthorization of the Older Americans Act that will allow millions of Americans across the country to age with dignity.

This hearing is an important first step. Today, we will discuss the challenges facing older Americans, what OAA programs look like across the country, and how the OAA supports millions of seniors and their families. Today we are also continuing the law's tradition of strong bipartisan support. I was honored to be involved in the 2016 reauthorization when both the House and Senate unanimously supported the legislation. I look forward to once again working with Ranking Member Comer, Ranking Member Foxx, Chairman Scott, and all my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to advance a robust Older Americans Act reauthorization bill this year.

Thank you to the distinguished witnesses for being here today. I look forward to this discussion and now yield to the Ranking Member, Mr. Comer, for the purpose of an opening statement.