

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 12, 2021

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
Committee on Health, Education,
Labor, and Pensions
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Burr
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education,
Labor, and Pensions
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bernard Sanders
Chairman
Committee on the Budget
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lindsey Graham
Ranking Member
Committee on the Budget
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chair Murray, Ranking Member Burr, Chairman Sanders, and Ranking Member Graham:

As Congress considers additional relief in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we urge you to prioritize nutrition programs and vaccine support for homebound and socially isolated older adults. Specifically, we request that the next COVID-19 relief package include \$1.4 billion in funding for Older Americans Act (OAA) programs, including \$750 million for OAA Title III-C Nutrition Services, which critically support the delivery of nutritious meals to older adults throughout the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to disproportionately impact older adults. With the closure of congregate meal sites, the steep increase in newly homebound older adults, and the need for targeted vaccination dissemination efforts, there is now a higher demand for OAA Programs, such as home-delivered meals and other community-based supportive services. According to the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a), 93 percent of Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) have reported serving more clients since the pandemic began, and 69 percent of AAAs saw an increase in demand for their supportive services. In addition, 91 percent of Meals on Wheels America members report serving more home-delivered meals than they were before the pandemic, with the average program serving 59 percent more meals in November 2020 compared to March 1, 2020. Virtually all programs have seen the cost of providing services increase, including food, labor, safety supplies, and 29 percent say they would need to double their home-delivered nutrition budgets to meet the existing need in their communities. According to a January n4a survey, a majority of AAAs have expanded nutrition and supportive services by more than 50 percent, with a significant number seeing much higher increases. Of other programs seeing significant growth by AAAs, the most common nationwide are social isolation prevention and mitigation programs; grocery provision and shopping services; in-home supportive services; and information and referral support.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the Consolidated Appropriations Act were

important steps in responding to the increased demand for OAA programs, but additional funding is needed to continue providing vital services to seniors across the country. Even prior to the pandemic, an estimated 5.3 million (more than 7 percent) older adults experienced food insecurity and more than 17.4 million (24 percent) lived alone, putting them at greater risk of being socially isolated and/or lonely. In addition, COVID-19 has also magnified existing disparities for low-income older adults, which underscores the need for funding and programming to be appropriately targeted to those with the greatest need. Ensuring nutrition and supportive services reach communities of color, including those with disproportionately high infection and death rates, is extremely important as we work to address COVID-19 related racial and economic disparities.

Additionally, OAA service providers have been longstanding, trusted sources of information and referrals for older adults and their caregivers. This network and the partnerships that exist are critically important as state and local COVID-19 vaccine efforts are underway and vulnerable older adults need assistance navigating systems to secure vaccinations. While Aging Network providers have taken on this additional work that will remain vital until our vaccination goals are reached, they have done so without the support of extra federal resources. In the absence of such targeted supplemental funding, specifically designating \$480 million for OAA Title III-B Supportive Services, providers will not be able to continue offering the level of assistance needed to achieve the widespread vaccination of older adults.

Many older adults remain unable to safely access congregate meals and engage in other social activities outside of the home during this time. We urge you to build on Congress' past support for senior meal delivery by including \$1.444 billion in funding for OAA programs, including \$750 million for OAA Title III-C Nutrition Services, in the next COVID-19 relief bill for senior nutrition and other targeted efforts to address social isolation. We also urge you to prioritize emergency resources for vaccination support and outreach to the hard-to-reach older adults, as well as sufficient supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) needed for OAA service providers, older adults, and their caregivers.

Sincerely,



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

/s/

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

/s/

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

/s/

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

/s/
Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

/s/
Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator

/s/
Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

/s/
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

/s/
Jack Reed
United States Senator

/s/
Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

/s/
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

/s/
Tina Smith
United States Senator

/s/
Jacky Rosen
United States Senator

/s/
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

/s/
Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

/s/
Joe Manchin III
United States Senator