

2021 Appropriations Committee Budget Hearing
February 16, 2021
Testimony of Secretary Robert Torres
Pennsylvania Department of Aging
State Fiscal Year 2021-2022 Budget

Chairman Saylor, Chairman Bradford, and members of the House Appropriations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present and discuss the merits of Governor Wolf's proposed Fiscal Year 2021-2022 Budget for the Pennsylvania Department of Aging.

The department is looking ahead to what we, our aging network, and partners can accomplish for older Pennsylvanians during Fiscal Year 2021-2022. We have laid important groundwork for the future with our new four-year State Plan on Aging that became effective October 1, 2020. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, we have worked together to innovate and improve the quality of services and programs we provide. We are committed to serving, protecting, and empowering older adults, of all backgrounds, in order to enable them to live their lives with dignity, purpose, and fulfillment.

Since the first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed in the commonwealth, the department, Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs), and local providers have worked to make sure that the needs of Pennsylvania's seniors are being met, including nutrition, medication, social engagement, personal care and other essential supports and services. Through it all, the department has been holding weekly calls with AAAs to share updates, provide technical support, receive feedback, and ensure that critical information and services have continued to reach older adults during the pandemic.

One of the department's primary responsibilities is protecting Pennsylvania's older adults from abuse, neglect, abandonment, and exploitation. We have continued to strengthen our protective services (PS) function by improving operation of our statewide protective services hotline and supporting the AAA network to ensure PS cases are handled timely, accurately, and efficiently. We have increased the number of available trainings for PS staff, which allows for smaller class sizes with notably more participation and improved scores on knowledge assessments. We have enhanced quality assurance monitoring by providing automated custom reports to all AAAs in order to ensure timely follow-up on reports of alleged abuse and that older adults receive the necessary interventions.

The department recently had the Protective Services Program workflow analyzed and obtained recommendations to improve automation, capture data in a standardized manner and enhance analytical and reporting capabilities. This effort will complement work we have done to encourage AAAs to join a health information exchange to share consumer care plan information and receive medical information from health care professionals or facilities to better serve their consumers' needs.

One area of growing concern has been the rise in financial exploitation of older adults. In response to Governor Wolf's Executive Order on protecting vulnerable populations, the department conducted a study to assess the impact of financial exploitation on Pennsylvania

seniors and released our findings in September 2020. The report revealed the magnitude of the problem in the reviewed sample of financial exploitation cases reported during the fiscal year 2017-2018. With an average loss of \$39,395 per case, the pilot sample was extrapolated to demonstrate that, given that there were 1,488 cases of substantiated abuse during fiscal year 2017-2018, older Pennsylvanians statewide suffered an estimated \$58 million dollar loss during that year. Further, given the severe underreporting of this crime – as few as only one (1) in 44 cases may ever be reported – the estimated loss for the entire state may have been as high as \$2.5 billion.

In response to the study recommendations, the department convened an Older Adult Financial Exploitation Task Force of state agencies and stakeholder groups representing various sectors, including aging, banking, law enforcement, legal, financial, and medical fields. The Task Force is meeting over the next few months to develop practical community solutions to help reduce and prevent financial exploitation of older adults. The feedback from our first two meetings has been positive and we look forward to completing this collaborative effort and implementing recommendations that will further protect vulnerable older adults.

Unfortunately, long awaited and much-needed updates to the Older Adults Protective Services Act (OAPSA) did not make it to the finish line in 2020. As a result, this remains one of the department's top legislative priorities for this legislative session. The updates we support will help to address the rise of financial exploitation as a form of elder abuse and would address changes in the direct care workforce and facilities that serve older adults who currently are not covered in OAPSA. We are committed to working with the General Assembly to achieve passage of these crucial updates.

Our Senior Community Centers (SCCs) help facilitate the social, emotional, and physical well-being of older Pennsylvanians. SCCs have faced challenging times during the pandemic, with many of them operating at limited hours, virtually, or not at all. Given these extraordinary circumstances, we decided to deviate from our traditional SCC competitive grant process for 2021 and disburse \$2 million in grant funding to the 52 AAAs to allocate equally among all of their eligible centers. SCCs have flexibility to use the funding for a variety of initiatives, such as COVID-19 mitigation efforts, technology purchases to support virtual programming, and capital improvements and renovations. This approach helps the centers strengthen their overall ability to persevere and prepare to welcome participants back.

The department continues to focus on supporting older adults who are serving as unpaid caregivers, including the increasing number of grandparents raising grandchildren. During this legislative session, we hope to work together with the General Assembly to enhance and increase the flexibilities of the Pennsylvania Caregiver Support Program, which provides resources and assistance to caregivers with the purpose of alleviating stress as well as enhancing their well-being and the caregiving relationship. Through the Caregiver Support Program, caregivers are afforded the opportunity to receive vital supports and services such as care management, benefits counseling, caregiver education and training, and financial reimbursement of approved, caregiver-related expenses, such as respite or consumable supplies. Our proposal would increase access to services and allow for greater flexibility in program administration. This initiative is

supported by the Alzheimer's Association, AARP Pennsylvania, and the Pennsylvania Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

One of the emerging issues listed in our State Plan on Aging, highlighted by the forced social distancing of the pandemic, is access to technology. The department has moved forward with partnerships and grant opportunities to help support the connection to technologies that older adults have informed us they want and need. Pennsylvania's Link to Aging and Disability Resources is using CARES Act funding to increase supports for older adults, including assistive technology to access telehealth services, receive check-in calls, and reduce social isolation. Our Office of Long-Term Care Ombudsman is building on a number of initiatives, including the establishment of a Virtual Family Council, a biweekly online gathering for family and friends who are unable to visit loved ones living in long-term care facilities; use of Padbot robots to reach residents in long-term care facilities where visitations have been restricted; and expansion of a pilot partnership with AARP to help more nursing home residents connect with the outside world by bringing smartphones and tablets into facilities across the state.

Addressing social isolation has been a priority for the department, never more so than during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Pennsylvania Council on Aging has launched an online health and wellness guide, titled Strengthening Older Lives Online, also known as SOLO. The goal of the interactive guide and corresponding peer-led training sessions is to cultivate a healthy mind, body, and spirit amidst the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The department also piloted a program with Slippery Rock University to connect students from the Recreational Therapy for Older Adults and Aging and the Older Person classes with 100 older adults in Mercer and Butler counties. These are examples of how we have adapted to better support older adults in their everyday lives during the pandemic and beyond.

Our PACE and PACENET pharmaceutical benefits continue to earn their reputation as two of the most effective and efficient programs in the commonwealth, providing prescribed medications to qualified low income individuals, conducting education and outreach to help eligible older adults get medications and other benefits, and helping to curb inappropriate drug use. We will again look to the General Assembly to renew the PACE/PACENET cost of living adjustment (COLA) moratorium set to expire December 31, 2021. Renewing the moratorium will prevent more than 17,500 older adults from becoming ineligible for these benefits because of the Social Security COLA.

As Pennsylvania's older adult population continues to grow and become more diverse, it is important for the department and AAAs to consider the implications that racial discrimination, systemic inequities, and the resulting health disparities have on individuals as they age. As we have witnessed, health disparities have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we are working to provide training and educational opportunities to our staff on issues like unconscious bias, diversity and inclusion, cultural competence, and the impact of trauma on aging in order to more effectively outreach and be responsive to the needs of diverse older adults.

The department also continues to create a Pennsylvania that is friendly to LGBTQ older adults by acting on recommendations from our 2018 LGBTQ Aging Summit. This has included

creating partnerships with advocacy organizations, seeking and including LGBTQ input in the development of our State Plan, and providing comprehensive cultural competency SAGECare training for department employees, which earned us a Platinum Level Certification. Once trainings are completed throughout the aging network, Pennsylvania would become the first state to achieve this level of training for both the State Unit on Aging and its AAAs.

The department continues to address the impact of dementia on older adults and their families. With support from Pennsylvania's Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Task Force, other state agencies, and stakeholders, we are working to respond to the anticipated increase in Alzheimer's Disease and other dementias. The 2020 Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Forum covered racial disparities and inequities in early detection, diagnosis, and treatment of dementia. We have also expanded our efforts through a partnership with the Jewish Healthcare Foundation to create a dementia-friendly Pennsylvania by collaborating with national and statewide partners to support training, build awareness, and promote action among community stakeholders. As a result, 5,596 individuals in Pennsylvania, including employees of businesses that embraced this training, have been trained to become a Dementia Friend or a Dementia Champion who helps to train others. There are currently 221 Dementia Champions in 46 counties with a goal of training Champions in the remaining 21 counties this year.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss Governor Wolf's proposed Fiscal Year 2021-2022 Budget for the Pennsylvania Department of Aging. I look forward to working with the General Assembly to ensure Pennsylvania's older adults receive the services they need to live healthy, fulfilling lives.