



Chautauqua County Office for the Aging

Paul M. Wendel, Jr.
County Executive

Dr. Mary Ann Spanos
Director

Written Testimony of Dr. Mary Ann Spanos
Director: Chautauqua County Office for Aging Services

Budget Hearing on Human Services
2/9/2021

Good afternoon, distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly standing committees, my name is Dr. Mary Ann Spanos and I am the Director of the Chautauqua County Office for Aging Services,(OFAS). I am also a member of the Association on Aging in NY (AgingNY) and the Vice-President of the board of directors for the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (N4A). I appreciate the opportunity to submit written testimony related to the portion of the Executive budget proposal that affects the older adults that I represent.

Chautauqua County OFAS is one of the 59 county-based Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) whom work daily to provide services and supports to older residents and their families. Each county AAA is unique in how they provide services to their community, but we are all united in our mission of promoting independence, preserving dignity, and advocating on the behalf of older adults in our communities and their families. To fulfill this mission we work collaboratively with a network of local service providers (including homecare agencies, MOW, restaurants, hospitals, pharmacies, legal aide, housing providers, senior centers, and more) to ensure that all older NYers have access to programs and services that allow them to “age in place” at home through the end of life. Now during a pandemic, home is not only the least expensive place to age but it is also the safest place to be.

The mission of our local Area Agencies on Aging is shared with New York State Office for the Aging: to assist older New Yorkers and their families to live autonomous and fulfilling lives. We provide a myriad of programs, services, and supports to individuals 60 years of age and older, their families, and caregivers to achieve this mission. These services include case management, home delivered and congregate meals, personal care to assist with bathing, toileting, dressing, shopping, meal preparation, legal services, personal emergency response systems, health insurance information and counseling, respite, social adult day services, information and assistance services, nutrition education and counseling, health promotion and wellness, evidenced based interventions, home modifications, transportation, caregiver supports, benefits and application assistance and access to long term services and supports through our local NY Connects no wrong door system.

As stated by our AgingNY executive director, Becky Preve, in her remarks the evidence is clear on how much our older population contributes both financially and by their volunteer and civic engagement to keeping New York State a strong economy and leader in the country. However, without investments in the services and supports older adults need to age successfully, we will either drive them to other states or force them into facility care. Once in a facility, their wealth will evaporate almost overnight and they become a drain rather than an asset to NY’s economy. The data cited in the “Longevity Economy” and other publications makes it abundantly clear that NYS must make it a priority to make NY a place where people want to remain as they age. The return on investment, by ensuring we provide appropriate services and supports through our AAA network makes sense from an economic standpoint since by

doing so we empower older NYers to continue their societal contributions through federal and state tax payments as well as support to local small businesses and charitable organizations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted and highlighted the need for services and supports throughout NYS. My AAA, like others, were tasked with ensuring services to all individuals over the age of 60 to keep them safe and healthy. Like my colleagues across NY, our senior centers shut down, our social adult day programs suspended, and food insecurity and supply demand skyrocketed. We rose to the challenge by ramping up and transforming food services, providing technology assistance for on-line shopping, and checking on isolated seniors too afraid to venture out. We had to transform almost overnight as needs emerged with no one but AAAs to fill the gap. Our local network of connections to other charitable organizations as well as service providers made sure that we worked “smarter” so coordination happened locally not duplication of effort. We continue to attend regular zoom meetings convened by our local chapter of the United Way to flow of information between the government agencies and community-based charitable organizations to ensure emerging local needs are addressed.

In addition to calls to thousands of seniors to check on their welfare during the beginning of the pandemic, my staff transformed existing services and created new services to help our local community. We took charge of feeding all those over 60 to ensure our food pantries and soup kitchens were not overrun. We transformed the existing MOW delivery to ensure COVID protocols and social distancing so our drivers would not become infected nor spread infection from one client to another. We also developed a 7-day food drop program for our DOH to serve people in quarantine and a new delivery system through our local sheriff department to ensure COVID positive clients were kept separate from our MOW system. Congregate meal attendees were offered a meal drop service and people too afraid to go to the store were offered shopping assistance. This allowed people without computer access to use their own funds or SNAP benefit to buy food and have it delivered to their home with technical support from OFAS staff. We then worked with local organizations to deliver food orders when delivery from some grocery stores was not available or because SNAP (food stamps) cannot pay for delivery. We became aware of a situation where Friendship Dairy had an excess of product due to shut down of the cruise-line industry. We made sure this donation was funneled to all local food providers to ensure it was used rather than wasted. We developed a farm to senior table program working with local growers to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to seniors via a drive-by distribution. We strengthened our relationships with senior housing, getting all housing managers on a listserv so we could communicate and provide technical assistance to aid them during this time. NYS Office for the Aging helped us to procure PPE and sanitizer that we made available to housing units as well as community based organizations, our subcontractors, and clients. In addition to providing food services to our DOH for those in quarantine, we have supported them in many others ways to ensure we had a unified message and understanding of local government efforts in this pandemic. As we begin the vaccination roll-out,

OFAS is fielding all calls to the county about vaccinations so that DOH can focus on their work. We have returned over 3,000 call in the last few weeks and hundreds more come in every day. OFAs role in the vaccination roll out is essential. We are the only agency putting people on a list and providing technical assistance to obtain a vaccination appointment for the 65+ most of whom lack the computer skills or on-line presence to get an appointment. Our network has borne the burden of COVID-19 on the aging population with fortitude and resilience. It is imperative that this is recognized, and that we receive the funding necessary to continue to provide the highest level of care for our population. It is crucial that state government understand and appreciate the work that is being done for older residents.

I would like to thank the Legislature for supporting the \$15 million investment for the past three years to address the waitlists for OFA services across NY. In Chautauqua County, “Unmet Needs” funding reduced my waitlist from 450 people and three years in length to just over 200 people waiting and 12-18 months in length. We have tried to prioritize people who are 90+ but there are almost too many of those to do that. The services provided include but are not limited to personal care levels I & II, home-delivered meals, case management, nutrition counseling, transportation, personal emergency response systems, and home modifications. We are thrilled that the \$15 million investment is maintained in this year’s Executive Budget Proposal but need you all to understand that this alone will not eliminate the waiting lists because overall our funding has not kept pace with the growth of the senior population. That is why the 59 NY AAAs, including mine, have reported an additional 10,000+ individuals who are waiting for services right now. Another issue we are running up against is the inequity in pay for homecare workers, which has exacerbated the shortage of in-home care aides. The consumer directed program has helped by allowing us to pay family members, but it is still not enough. I implore you to not only find a way to increase wages for these critical front-line workers, but also reform the regulations around annual training and background checks that have created high overhead costs at the local level so increases are not passed on the front line workers. If NYS provided a universal on-line training and background check system for LICSA’s, more money could go to the workers rather than each agency having to develop their own training. This would also prevent having to spend funds duplicating training and background checks when aides move from one agency to another or work for multiple agencies. In addition, if the state provided these things it would reduce the costs of overhead for the whole system and improve core competency among personal care aides across the state. NY has already has the resources to do this through the SUNY system and the State Police.

Like many in our network, my AAA has taken advantage of the business opportunity created by the Affordable Care Act to diversify our funding sources by contracting with health care and insurance providers for services as well as expanding private pay service options for those who can afford the services. The profits from these initiatives are reinvested to provide more services on a sliding scale to

those who are unable afford the service on their own. NYSOFA has been critical to providing the technical assistance and guidance for the 59 AAAs to pursue these revenue streams and begin reducing the funding burden on state and local governments. Investing in NYSOFA administered services is a sound investment that has unequivocally proven to reduce future Medicaid costs by reducing nursing home admissions and spend-down to community Medicaid/MLTC.

In order to address the current unmet need and other issues highlighted by AgingNY, I join my colleague of AAA Directors in asking that you consider the following recommendations for this year's aging budget:

- Provide \$27 million to address the reported waiting lists identified by the Area Agencies on Aging and their community-based partners
- Restore funding for the Lifespan of Greater Rochester and the NYS Coalition on Elder Abuse - \$340,000
- Increase funding for the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program - \$5 million
- Invest in technology services to combat social isolation and loneliness – \$5 million

I thank you for your time and attention today. I look forward working with all of you all to make NY into the best place to live and grow old.