



Otsego County  
**OFFICE for the AGING**



**NY Connects**  
Your Link to Long Term  
Services and Supports

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**2021 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Human Services  
February 9, 2021**

**Written Testimony of  
Tamie Reed, Director  
Otsego County Office for the Aging**

Good afternoon, distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly standing committees. My name is Tamie Reed and I am the Director of Otsego County Office for the Aging. Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding the Executive budget proposal that specifically impacts older adults in our state.

Otsego County Office for the Aging is one of 59 county-based Area Agencies on Aging across the state tasked with providing services and supports to help older adults and their caregivers remain living independently in their homes and communities, with dignity and choice. Those of you with aging family members know all too well, how important this autonomy is in maintaining quality of life as we age.

Our office provides an array of programs, services and supports to individuals 60 years of age and older, their families, friends and informal supports to achieve our mission. These services are invaluable and include home delivered and congregate meals, case management, personal care and homemaking services, legal services, personal emergency response systems, health insurance information and counseling, caregiver respite and support, information and assistance, nutrition education and counseling, health promotion and wellness, home modifications, transportation and benefits and application assistance. In addition, our NY Connects program helps families of people with disabilities of all ages, navigate the very complex and often confusing system of long term services and supports in partnership with community organizations as part of our No Wrong Door system.

Otsego County is experiencing significant growth in the aging population, much like the majority of rural counties within the state. Informal support networks such as churches, civic groups, extended families and neighborhoods have deteriorated, leaving more older adults with a limited and often fragile support system. The needs of these older adults are becoming much greater and more complex, requiring increased coordination of services and care. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these needs and placed greater demand on the aging network to respond efficiently and effectively.

When our communities were shut down in March due to the pandemic, our office immediately went into action to respond to the huge influx of needs from community seniors. Increased demand for home delivered meals, shopping assistance, prescription deliveries and accurate information about COVID-19 meant that our staff kept working

even harder while others were sent home. I can tell you the past nine months have been some of the proudest moments in my career because of how well we responded during this unprecedented time. That was possible because the services we provide *each and every day work!*

Our staff implemented sanitizing practices and safety protocol and made sure that seniors were still safely transported to their medical appointments; shopping was provided and groceries and prescriptions were delivered to homes; isolated seniors received regular and ongoing contact to prevent loneliness, fear and depression; and Otsego County Office for the Aging continued to do what we do best, as part of a strong and united network of aging providers across the state.

To immediately and directly address concerns of isolation and loneliness, we partnered with a local senior center to develop a telephone reassurance program "Seniors Talking with Seniors"; distributed information continuously to keep seniors informed and connected both through electronic avenues as well as printed and mailed newsletters, newspaper and radio ads; worked with local teachers, principals and parents to develop an intergenerational Pen Pal Project and card writing campaign distributing letters, cards and artwork to over 350 seniors living in the community and local facilities; distributed animatronic companion pets and delivered nearly 290 Shoeboxes for Seniors which were created, filled and donated by community members during the holidays.

The staff in our organization and across the 59 AAAs work tirelessly because they are dedicated to our mission and see the fear, grit and pride of these residents. Residents who have raised families, worked the land, taught our children and invested in our communities. They ask for little and take no more than necessary, offering gratitude for whatever can be offered to help them remain at home, connected to their community and aging in place.

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 done for older residents of this state, ultimately keeping residents out of expensive and understaffed long term care facilities and saving significant Medicaid dollars.

Our strengths as a network are helping individuals and families first and foremost, but we are also an important part of meeting state goals and priorities including becoming the healthiest state in the country, delivering on the Triple Aim, meeting the Olmstead Plan priorities, reducing future Medicaid costs, reducing preventable hospital readmissions and improving the overall well-being of our older population. Our network is also able to serve older adults at a fraction of the cost of Medicaid funded services because we are able to intervene earlier, we do not require a physician's order to access services in a high-cost medical model, and because we provide holistic care in a person-centered way by coordinating services that we oversee and work with other systems if additional supports are needed. Further, the services we provide do not require an individual to impoverish themselves and spend all their assets, effectively diminishing their positive impact on the local and state economy.

Our network is one of the few that can, and does, address the social determinates of health, preventing inappropriate utilization of skilled nursing facilities and emergency departments, and preventing spend down to Medicaid. Social determinates of health (individual behaviors and social and environmental factors) are responsible for 60% or more of all health care expenditures, yet interventions to address them comprise only 3% of national health expenditures, with 97% going to medical services. While health care will always be important, the heavy lift to assure that care plans and post-discharge services and supports are in place are the responsibility of our network. We are a central part of the success, or failure of the health care industry and the personal success of individuals and families.

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, we respectfully request an additional \$27 million to ensure older New Yorkers don't continue to wait for basic needs such as a home delivered meal and transportation to critical medical appointments including the need to access the COVID vaccine.

I cannot stress enough how aging service providers are providing a significant cost savings to the Medicaid system but are not being fully utilized within the existing long term care system as we could be. The Offices for the Aging and their partners are able to provide quality services and supports to older individuals and their network of caregivers, at a much lower cost than the medical model and it does so by looking at the entire person. Investments in aging services are vitally important to the economic security of the state, and they need to be a priority rather than an afterthought. I respectfully ask that the Legislature continue to invest in our network and incentivize the network through proactive policy and statutory changes. I thank you for your time and support, and I look forward to working with you on these issues.