
Written Testimony of Crystal Collette, Director at the Lewis County Office for the Aging

2023 Human Services Budget Hearing

Greetings distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly, my name is Crystal Collette and I am the Director of the Lewis County Office for the Aging. I appreciate the opportunity to submit written testimony as a response to the proposed Executive Budget for Aging Services.

The Lewis County Office for the Aging (LCOFA) is one of 59 county Offices for the Aging in our state. This network of providers delivers holistic support to older adults and their caregivers and works to focus on dignity through person-centered planning. These services and supports, in turn, improve the overall health and independence of older adults. The aging network does more than any other arm of our government to reduce demand on Medicaid funded services.

As you know, the Lewis County population of people over the age of 60 will steadily grow over the next 20 years. In fact, older adult make up the only demographic projected to increase in population in Lewis County over the next 20 years. There needs to be significant investment in aging services in Lewis County to support this valued segment of our population.

The most urgent need for people as they age in our community is home care services. Supports such as housekeeping, assistance with personal care, and respite for caregivers provide the safety net necessary to age in the home despite limitations from chronic health conditions. On December 31, 2022 more clients were on the waiting list for home care services than were being served in Lewis County. The Licensed Home Care Agency that the LCOFA contracts with (the only LHCA providing service at the time in our community) had been unable to hire staff as we moved through the pandemic resulting in a 39% decrease in the number of hours of service LCOFA had been able to provide to the community. An aide could make more working at Walmart overnight than they could providing care in an older adults home.

Pay increases of \$3.00 an hour allocated for home workers in last year's budget have not materialized, as many workers in the North Country have not seen an increase from their employers.

As our clients languish on waiting lists they are spending down their personal funds on private home care. This is working to impoverish them and bring them closer to Medicaid eligibility and placement in a nursing home. Statewide we know that approximately 7% of our network's clients on homecare waiting lists qualify for Medicaid before we can find an aide to provide care. Families and caregivers call our office daily baffled that there is not care or respite as they navigate meeting their loved ones needs at home. For the older adult, factors such as inconsistent meals and poor personal care lead to increased risk of a visit to the emergency room and hospitalization. And, our network knows that 10% of these clients will end up placed in a nursing home contributing to Medicaid costs. We need your investment to keep these older adults home.

After much advocacy, and support from the Lewis County Board of Legislators, a new Licensed Home Care Agency has initiated services in Lewis County in 2023. This has required a 31% increase in the contracted hourly rate and a redesign of our typical partnership. As of today, two aides, who are in close communication with our Case Managers, are working full time in the homes of older adults; the investment has worked. LCOFA needs an increase in state funding to continue to innovate how we serve the remainder of older adults on the waiting list for home care services.

Since 2019, the Lewis County Office for the Aging Nutrition program has increased service by 31%. We ensure community members in the most remote parts of our County receive three hot meals and two frozen meals each week. The contractor that we have partnered with for over 40 years to run the program is a small, family-owned business that delivers 175 meals a day and serves another 75 at our six community dining sites. This small business has experienced that same inflation of operational costs for food, packaging, and fuel as every family and business in our nation. The proposed 2.5% COLA increase does not demonstrate a commitment to ensuring LCOFA can meet the demands of older adults in Lewis County. The human services COLA needs to be increased from 2.5% to 8.5% in the Executive Budget proposal.

The continued investment in NYSOFA's cutting edge initiatives such as GetSetUp, Joy for All Companion Pets, and Trualta support the wellbeing of older New Yorkers and the leadership of NYSOFA. Thank you

for this. Investing in NYSOFA is the first step to supporting the infrastructure for a successful Master Plan on Aging. Please consider enhancing the NYSOFA budget and fully funding the Fair Pay for Home Care Act.

Thank you for your time and your support of the 59 Offices for the Aging, our network of community partners, and NYSOFA.