

The Older Americans Act: Aging Well Since 1965



“The Older Americans Act clearly affirms our Nation’s sense of responsibility toward the well-being of all of our older citizens. But even more, the results of this act will help us to expand our opportunities for enriching the lives of all of our citizens in this country, now and in the years to come.”

– President Lyndon B. Johnson

The 1960s were a time of vast social and political change. In July 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed three landmark pieces of legislation that together have shaped the lives of generations of American elders – Medicare, Medicaid, and the Older Americans Act (OAA). Medicare and Medicaid extended health insurance coverage to millions of Americans. The OAA, meanwhile, created the foundation for a system of services and supports that enables millions of older adults in this country to continue to live independently as they age. In addition, the OAA established authority for grants to states for community planning and social services, research and development projects, and training personnel in the field of aging. This multiplied its potential to positively affect the lives of older adults. Perhaps most importantly, the law outlined a vision for maintaining older Americans’ dignity and sustaining their connections to their homes and communities – principles that continue to guide OAA programs to this day.

Today, OAA-funded programs play a vital role in helping to maintain the health and

well-being of millions of seniors age 60 and older. In fact, OAA services reach one in five older adults. As a result of successive amendments to the original law, special emphasis is placed on serving the most vulnerable among the older population – people with low income, members of minority groups, those at risk for institutionalization, people living in rural areas, and those with limited English proficiency.

Over the years, Congress has amended the Act several times, creating the infrastructure we now know as the ‘national aging services network.’ At present, the network consists of 56 state units on aging, over 600 area agencies on aging, and over 260 tribal organizations representing more than 400 tribes. Further, the network is supported by tens of thousands of service providers and volunteers. This system allows state, tribal, and local entities the flexibility to provide the evidence-based interventions that best meet the needs of their specific communities.

While many older adults receive support under other federal programs, such

as Medicare or Medicaid, the OAA is the primary vehicle for providing social and nutrition services to Americans over 60 and their caregivers. To maximize the impact of the OAA, grants are designed to leverage and complement other funding from states and communities. States and local entities are required to support OAA programs with cash and in-kind matching resources, and older adults give of their time and contribute funding on a voluntary basis toward the expansion of the services they receive.

One Act; Many Services

The key services funded by the OAA include connecting people with information about available resources and assistance accessing those resources; homemaker and personal care services; home-delivered and congregate meals; caregiver support; preventive health services; job training; transportation; legal assistance; pension counseling; and elder abuse prevention activities.

Title III of the OAA accounts for the largest portion of OAA funding. It authorizes four programs: **Supportive services and Senior Centers** are central to helping older adults remain independent in their own homes and communities. These include services to help older people access supports, such as transportation and case management, as well as home- and community-based long-term services and supports like personal care and adult day care services.

Through outreach, information, and referrals, agencies in the aging network connect

older Americans and their families with available resources in their communities.

Transportation services assist elders who can no longer drive – or may not own a vehicle – to conduct essential shopping and travel to medical appointments, senior centers, and other places around their communities. These services can assist with running the everyday errands that most of us take for granted.

Home-care services assist seniors with chores and personal care. This kind of help can make a critical difference for some of the most vulnerable older Americans, many of whom are over 75 years old and have chronic health conditions.

Nutrition services are the oldest, largest, and best-known of all OAA programs. These services aim to prevent and end hunger, malnutrition, and food insecurity in a variety of ways. Volunteers deliver meals and check on the well-being of people who are homebound. Senior centers, adult day centers, and other locations serve meals to groups of older adults. All meals are nutritionally balanced and comply with USDA guidelines. The OAA also funds nutrition education and counseling.

In addition to reducing senior hunger, these services offer opportunities for social interaction that can enhance quality of life and improve health. Further, OAA nutrition services can delay the onset of health conditions that result from poor diet.

Caregiver support programs provide important information, counseling, support

TITLE I	TITLE II	TITLE III	TITLE IV	TITLE V	TITLE VI	TITLE VII
Declaration of Objectives	Administration on Aging	Grants for State and Community Programs on Aging	Activities for Health, Independence, and Longevity	Community Service Senior Opportunities Act	Grants for Native Americans	Vulnerable Elder Rights Protection Activities

groups, training, and respite care to assist family caregivers. Family members or other informal, unpaid caregivers are the people most likely to serve as caregivers to older adults. When these caregivers become overwhelmed by the physical and emotional burden of caregiving, their older loved ones are at increased risk of institutionalization. The National Family Caregiver Support Program helps caregivers of all ages balance caregiving with other responsibilities, which helps ensure more adults can remain in their homes and communities. The program also provides a range of services and supports to grandparents and other relatives raising children.

Disease prevention and health promotion, a small but vital OAA program supports states in their efforts to engage in evidence-based interventions and various outreach activities in community venues. Specific activities vary widely, but include chronic disease self-management, falls prevention, medication management, fitness activities, mental health supports, and other interventions effective in enhancing health.

Title V of the OAA authorizes community service employment and training opportunities.¹ The [Community Service Employment Program](#), which is administered by the Department of Labor, receives almost 25 percent of total OAA funding. It helps low-income, unemployed adults over the age of 55 find part-time jobs. Many of those jobs are in local senior centers, schools,

¹ The Department of Labor administers funding and program operations for the Title V Community Service Employment Program. All other titles are administered by the Administration on Aging.

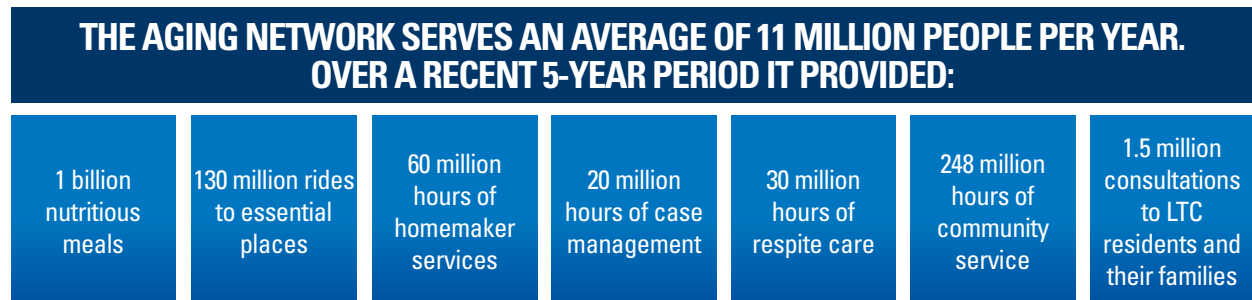
and libraries, providing a way for people receiving the services to contribute to their communities.

[Title VI](#) provides funding for culturally appropriate nutrition, caregiver, and supportive services to meet the needs of American Indian, Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian elders.

[Title VII](#) authorizes state programs to protect the rights of vulnerable elders. Research shows that more than 10 percent of older adults are abused, neglected, or exploited annually. Elder abuse prevention activities are coordinated with legal assistance programs and adult protective services systems to prevent various types of mistreatment, including physical and emotional abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation. In addition, [Long-term Care Ombudsmen](#) advocate for residents who live in nursing homes and assisted living facilities and resolve problems when they arise. They also educate consumers about how to find a facility and get quality care.

Aging with Dignity and Independence

People enjoy a better quality of life when they are able to live at home. Community living also makes financial sense. The average cost of a shared room in a nursing home is almost \$75,000 per year, and residential facilities for people with disabilities can cost three times that. When people cannot afford these costs, Medicaid is the primary payer.



In contrast, the supportive services provided under the OAA can enable people to remain in their homes and completely avoid or delay these more expensive services. In fact, more than 85 percent of people who use OAA-funded services say that this assistance helped them to remain independent in their homes and communities.

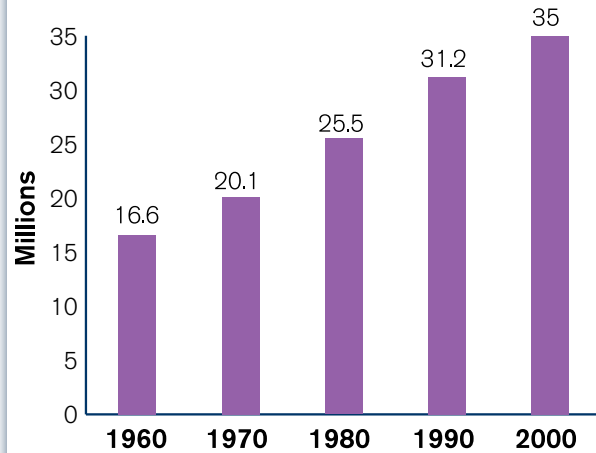
In recent years, efforts have been made to streamline access to long-term services and supports for both older adults and people with disabilities. In 2006, the OAA was amended to support the implementation of [Aging and Disability Resource Centers](#) (ADRCs) in all states. The goal of the ADRCs is to ensure that people seeking assistance encounter “no wrong door” to the system. To that end, the ADRCs serve as a visible and trusted entry point, helping people find information and providing one-on-one, person-centered counseling to help them access the long-term services and support they need, based on each individual’s needs, preferences and goals.

Aging Well into the Future

The OAA established the [Administration on Aging](#) (AoA) to manage OAA programs and to serve as the central coordination point for federal efforts to help seniors. Today, AoA is part of the Administration for Community Living, which was created in 2012 around one core idea – that older adults and people with disabilities should be able to live independently and participate fully in their communities. AoA works with local, state, and federal agencies and other organizations toward a common goal of increasing access to services and

supports to enable full community participation throughout life.

OLDER ADULT POPULATION IN THE U.S.



2014 CENSUS PROJECTION FOR 2015: 47.8 MILLION

As the largest generation in U.S. history – “Baby Boomers” born between 1946 and 1964 – ages into eligibility for OAA programs, the relationships and partnerships fostered over the past 50 years provide a foundation for ensuring that all older adults have the opportunity to age with dignity, purpose, and respect.

Through the AoA and the aging network, the nation helps realize the vision President Johnson articulated for the OAA: to clearly affirm “our Nation’s sense of responsibility toward the well-being of all of our older citizens” and “expand our opportunities for enriching the lives of all of our citizens in this country, now and in the years to come.”²

² Lyndon B. Johnson: “Remarks at the Signing of the Older Americans Act.” July 14, 1965. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27079>.

