



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
AGING

House Appropriations Committee
Pennsylvania Department of Aging

Written Testimony of
Secretary Jason Kavulich
February 22, 2024

Introduction

Chairman Harris, Chairman Grove, and members of the House Appropriations Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the importance and impact of Governor Shapiro's proposed Fiscal Year 2024-2025 Budget for the Department of Aging. Both the Department and the Administration's commitment to older Pennsylvanians and the administration of Aging Programs and Services are reflected in the proposed budget. The Department is requesting an increased investment of PA Lottery funding to support older adults, most of whom live on fixed incomes, to remain in their homes and communities as they age with the dignity and respect they deserve. This investment is needed to build and strengthen the infrastructure of services and supports the Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) Network provides as we prepare to serve the rapidly growing older adult population in Pennsylvania.

Older Pennsylvanians bring value, depth of knowledge, and experience to our lives, our communities, and our Commonwealth. We value the richness that older adults bring to our communities. To support their needs as they age, the Department of Aging and Pennsylvania's 52 AAAs work to administer a network of services and supports for older adults in Pennsylvania through every aspect of daily living. Through this network of services, older adults can receive nutritious meals, access to transportation and innovative housing solutions, and support for caregivers. Older adults may also receive services at home through the OPTIONS Program, which helps them find the best Medicare plan for them and provides information and referrals to support services through the PA Link- The department's online resource-navigation system. This network also includes 485 senior community centers that help combat social isolation and loneliness as they welcome older adults to meals, social activities, and connections to support services. Further, if needed older Pennsylvanians can receive support against abuse, neglect, and exploitation as more than 35,000 reports of suspected elder abuse are investigated each year, and those living in long-term care facilities can receive advocacy and support through the Office of Long-Term Care Ombudsman. Finally, the Department's PACE program provides life-sustaining medications to 199,360 older adults at low- or no cost. We are here for all older Pennsylvanians, regardless of income, to help them navigate their challenges.

The Department also collaborates extensively with other agencies to promote and facilitate access to other state programs that benefit older adults. One example is the Governor and the General Assembly's successful expansion of the Property Tax Rent Rebate Program, which, starting last month, dramatically increased the income eligibility and the maximum rebate amount. With 175,000 additional Pennsylvanians now eligible, we continue to work with the Department of Revenue to ensure that older

adults learn about the program and get the hands-on help they need to apply. We have worked closely with the Department of Agriculture to build enrollment in the Senior Food Box Program, and coordinated with the Department of Human Services on supporting older adults facing Medicaid redeterminations and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) reductions throughout the ending of the Public Health Emergency and into the future.

We recognize the importance of collaboration and will continue to coordinate and partner with state agencies, building new partnerships and strengthening existing ones because only together can we make real progress for Pennsylvania's older adults.

Governor's Budget Proposal

The Department appreciates Governor Shapiro's recognition of the needs of a growing older population in Pennsylvania, and the Department supports the historic, thoughtful investments outlined in the proposed 2024-2025 Budget. I believe it is important to highlight a few specific elements and how they will benefit older adults throughout the Commonwealth.

Department of Aging Goals – Aging Our Way, PA

Since May 2023, we have been developing a master plan for older adults following Governor Josh Shapiro's signing of an Executive Order directing the department to lead the project. Designed with the input of more than 10,000 Commonwealth residents and stakeholders, including legislative aging committee leadership, *Aging Our Way, PA* will help transform service delivery to create the age-friendly Commonwealth that all Pennsylvanians deserve now and in the future.

The intensive process to create *Aging Our Way, PA*, considered the entirety of state, county, local, and federal policies and programs and private industry practices that directly or indirectly affect older adults. Our team and stakeholders examined many policies, programs, and needs related to health, transportation, housing, community living, workforce, nutrition, home and community-based services, and specific projects such as age-friendly communities.

During the latter months of 2023, we listened. Thousands of Pennsylvanians voiced or submitted their input by attending one of the hundreds of community meetings, multiple virtual sessions, providing written and online comments, or calling the department directly. The energy and urgency of the need for a comprehensive infrastructure and service delivery roadmap for older adults was seen and heard in packed rooms in every county and corner of the state. We are proud of the hard work of the AAAs and grateful for the support of legislative leaders, advocates, and our sister agencies throughout this process.

Governor Josh Shapiro set a February 1, 2024, deadline for *Aging Our Way, PA's* plan completion. Our Department is proud to note that a final draft was delivered on time to the Governor for review. Earlier this month, the plan was released for a public review and comment period lasting 30 days. The public comment period will be used to obtain a final round of input to this plan.

The Department is requesting an \$11.7 million investment to begin implementation of *Aging Our Way, PA*.

Year one activities will focus on creating a more inclusive and accessible environment for older Pennsylvanians and building a system of support for older adults and caregivers that may reduce the need for more costly care. This includes coordinating and evaluating service access, disparities in language, and cultural barriers and ensuring that older adults are prepared for emergencies.

To further support caregivers, we aim to develop a statewide Caregiver Toolkit, equipping them with essential resources and guidance. We will also undertake a comprehensive refresh of the PA Link program, involving mapping key contact points and redesigning a local and statewide No Wrong Door system.

Investing in the Aging Network

Governor Shapiro has proposed an additional \$10 million in PENNCARE funding to support AAAs in building infrastructure and stabilizing the Aging Network workforce and delivery systems. These stabilizing resources, disbursed throughout the state to the 52 AAAs, will help Pennsylvania meet the growing older adult population's increased demand for services. This funding to the AAA network will provide the opportunity to attract providers and recruit and retain staff, utilize adult day services to their full potential, and prevent the elimination of services. As Pennsylvania continues to face staff shortages in many sectors, this additional funding will enable AAAs to compete and invest in their local communities by hiring workers that will assist older adults to age in place instead of moving into more expensive long-term care.

Aging Affordably in Home Settings of Choice

Governor Shapiro has proposed \$5.2 million to help with providing accessible and affordable housing to older adults, funding will be distributed to AAAs to pursue and build upon innovative housing solution models such as the Elder Cottage Housing Opportunity (ECHO) program, the Shared Housing and Resource Exchange (SHARE) program, and the Domiciliary Care (Dom Care) program, or partner with other local organizations on other community-based initiatives.

Through the *Aging Our Way*, PA listening sessions held in all 67 counties, we heard from 54% of older adult attendees that affordability around housing and property taxes are issues that impact their ability to age in place. Although many older adults wish to remain living in their homes and communities and age in place for as long as possible, serious challenges exist, such as the rising cost of living that places a strain on fixed incomes, the need for and costs associated with in-home care and limited availability of affordable care settings such as personal care homes or assisted living residences. Older adults have told us they want more options.

Addressing Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders

The proposed budget requests \$1.9 million to support the establishment of an Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Division within the Department to better support this growing vulnerable population and their caregivers.

In 2020, there were 280,000 older Pennsylvanians living with Alzheimer's disease or related dementias, and that number is projected to increase to 320,000 by 2025.

In 2022, about 404,000 caregivers in Pennsylvania carry the burden and stress of taking care of their family members with Alzheimer's, which is unpaid care of 642 million hours and uncompensated care of about \$10 billion.

This new division will align with the work the Department is already doing in this space and support this vulnerable population and their families and caregivers. The Department would be able to focus dedicated resources on developing materials, providing education and outreach related to cognitive decline, and providing support to individuals and their caregivers impacted by Alzheimer's disease and related disorders. The Department will continue collaborations with the National Alzheimer's Disease Research Centers located at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Pennsylvania to educate medical professionals, stakeholders, and the general public on ADRD. The Department would continue to spearhead interagency coordination to continue to update and advance the Alzheimer's State Plan as it looks to reinvent the ADRD Task Force.

We appreciate your support and dedication to Pennsylvania's more than 3.4 million older adults and the Fiscal Year 2024-2025 Budget. This will support and enhance services for older Pennsylvanians in your district and across the Commonwealth.