

Opening Statement
Senator Susan Collins
“The Older Americans Act: Protecting and Supporting Seniors as they Age”
May 8, 2019

Good afternoon. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the *Older Americans Act*. This landmark legislation represented a vision well ahead of its time. With reauthorization efforts currently underway, I am committed to ensuring that the *Older Americans Act* continues to match the goals we set to permit seniors to age with dignity, respect, and community.

The *Older Americans Act* focuses on the well-being and social needs of our seniors. Providing nutritious food, installing grab-bars, and giving rides cost far less than taking pills, undergoing surgeries, and moving to nursing homes. In Maine, the average cost of serving one senior Meals on Wheels is \$1,854 for an entire year. By contrast, a single day in a hospital is \$2,262, on average, and just ten days in a nursing home is approximately \$3,100. What we have learned from the past decade of public health research is that maintaining one’s health at home is efficient, cost-effective, and compassionate.

For 54 years, the *Older Americans Act* has targeted the social determinants of health, even before the field that links social and medical outcomes was fully recognized. The Act expires on September 30, so along with my colleagues I am working to sponsor its reauthorization. The bipartisan coalition includes our Ranking Member, Senator Casey, Senator Enzi, Senator Sanders, and HELP Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander and Ranking Member Patty Murray.

My chief goal is to get across the finish line, on time, a robust and bipartisan *Older Americans Act* that will strengthen support for its bread and butter programs, while providing more flexibility for states to meet local needs. I have focused on five priority areas as we draft our bill: family caregivers, nutrition, social isolation, transportation, and elder justice.

Last year, the National Family Caregiver Support Program served more than 700,000 caregivers. But with 10,000 Americans turning 65 each day, this program has not kept pace with our changing demographics, so I am working with my colleagues to increase the funding authorization. Senator Casey and I are also proposing to increase flexibility for states to better meet the needs of older adults in their communities, from those caring for their fellow seniors to those caring for their grandchildren.

Last year, through home-delivered nutrition programs, the *Older Americans Act* provided seniors across this country with 358 million meals. That includes meals to 4,600 seniors in the State of Maine. In many states, however, the need for Meals on Wheels is growing. In my state, for example, there is a chronic waitlist of 400 to 1,500 people, depending on the time of year. Increasing funding for this critical program to close the gap is another of my priorities.

In addition to reducing food insecurity, Meals on Wheels combats social isolation, too. Carol Kotal, a former data entry specialist from Portland, Maine, receives Meals on Wheels. She lives alone, and is unable to walk or stand for long periods. So when a volunteer comes by once a week with meals for her and a can of food for her cat, she is so grateful to see a friendly, familiar face. While increasing resources for this community-building program, I am also working on new policies specifically geared toward reducing social isolation.

One such solution is transportation to help seniors get to more community activities. What works in one place is different from what works in another – so I am working to build on a grant program that ranges from supporting public transit to on-demand and volunteer-based services for seniors. We also need new tools to help seniors obtain information about rides and bus routes more easily.

In rural Maine, transportation is a major barrier for our older Americans. Tailored options for seniors from rural to urban America will go a long way toward helping older Americans stay at home in their communities.

Finally, at the core of the *Older Americans Act* is respect for our seniors, and preventing neglect, exploitation, and abuse. States are spearheading initiatives to raise awareness, to train law enforcement officers and health care providers, and to support prevention efforts.

Elder abuse, however, remains far too prevalent. In this year's reauthorization, I am including a provision that would help to equip communities with the skills and resources they need to stem the tide of abuse. This has been a major focus of our Committee. Protecting seniors is a mark of a just society.

The *Older Americans Act* is a shining example of a federal policy that works. Every \$1 invested into the *Older Americans Act* generates \$3 to help seniors stay at home through low-cost, community-based services.

At today's hearing, we will hear from federal, state, and local administrators, as well as seniors, about how this bedrock system works, and what opportunities exist to build on its strengths as we extend and improve this important law.

By enriching the lives of seniors, the *Older Americans Act* improves the lives of all Americans. I now turn to Ranking Member Casey for his opening statement.

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