

NY State Plan on Aging covering the period 2012-2015

May 4, 2011

Beltrone Senior Center

Good afternoon, my name is Maria Alvarez and I am the Executive Director of NY StateWide Action Council, Inc. On behalf of NY StateWide Senior Action Council, thank you for the opportunity to share comments on the draft NY State Plan on Aging covering the period 2012-2015.

Our Board very much appreciates the strong historical relationship StateWide has had with NYSOFA as we advance issues of concerns regarding preserving the dignity and advancing the welfare of older New Yorkers. Our Board met in April and we had an opportunity to discuss priority issues, in so doing I was prepared to discuss our recommendations with you. However, I do wish that there was more notice so that the community across the state would have had an opportunity to review the recently posted draft plan and provide input before the cut off date of May 13th. I do hope that you can extend the time to receive input prior to the finalization of the Plan.

Goal 1:

Empower older New Yorkers, their families, and other consumers to make informed decisions about, and be able to easily access, existing health and long term care options.

Through state legislative funding administered by NYSOFA, StateWide provides information and assistance to older New Yorkers who have questions about their rights when encountering the medical care system and counseling to those with questions about making informed choices regarding Medicare and prescription drug coverage.

We appreciate the state legislature's restoration of funding to the NY Connects Program. This program is a good beginning in integrating services for seniors considering all of the cuts to services that have occurred at local county levels. Clearly, more funding is needed for direct service programs in the AAA's.

It is unfortunate that with the onslaught of baby boomer aging into the senior cohort, local budget cuts have resulted in a reduction in staff when, in fact, more will be needed to provide direct services.

While the senior centers have provided many services, they are under heavy attack and are literally fighting for survival. Senior centers are a vital part of the community support older New Yorkers rely upon for information, benefits, assistance, nutrition, and socialization. They need not only to be maintained, but improved and enhanced for the next generation.

With the changes in this year's state budget to the EPIC program, we expect that more individuals, couples and caregivers will have questions that will need to be addressed and enhanced counseling during the open enrollment period so that they select a Medicare plan that matches their needs. We therefore recommend that coordination and training of the HIICAP and MCCAP providers continue to be of high quality and that additional resources be dedicated to outreach to consumers.

Additionally, budget shortfalls have caused local governments to reduce funding for area agencies on aging. In NYC, the potential impact of these reductions threatens the valuable case management services that are a gateway to many necessary programs that are the foundation of independent living.

GOAL 2:

Enable Older New Yorkers to remain in their own homes with high quality of life for as long as possible through the provision of home and community-based services, including supports for family caregivers.

Most older New Yorkers express a strong desire to age in their own home or in their familiar community. StateWide's membership is committed to the concept of ensuring that seniors are able to remain in their communities through supports such as long term care, case management, housing and energy programs, nutritional services, transportation, and congregate services in their neighborhoods. These measures not only improve the quality of life of seniors, but are far more cost effective than the alternative of institutionalization.

StateWide is very interested in participating in the Community Supports Navigator project and believe that a volunteer model program can supplement the demonstration that NYSOFA is performing with select area agencies on aging. We recommend that funding be secured to ensure that a statewide approach using a peer to peer approach can also be demonstrated.

StateWide members are also proponents of Consumer Directed Services. It is our experience that seniors are much better cared for and more comfortable when a family member or caregiver of their choice is providing the care.

Additionally, budget shortfalls have caused local governments to reduce funding that supplement the federal and state formula for nutrition services. We are concerned when there are waiting lists for home delivered meals and equally concerned in those areas where the providers are not accepting names on a waiting list due to shortage of case management services or budget reductions that don't keep pace with meal costs.

GOAL 3:

Empower older New Yorkers to stay active and healthy through Older Americans Act Services and the new prevention benefits under Medicare

StateWide values programming that promotes wellness. When seniors are active they stay healthy longer and are able to continue to provide countless volunteer hours of service to their communities.

During these uncertain economic times, older New Yorkers are frequently living close to the edge. Rather than enjoying leisure time and volunteering, many must continue to work in some capacity. The Older American Community Service Employment Program and the Senior Corps provide opportunities that should be expanded based on a higher income threshold.

GOAL 4:

Ensure the rights of older New Yorkers and Prevent their abuse, neglect and exploitation.

StateWide works hard to advocate protection of vulnerable seniors, whether they are in an institutional setting, a home setting, or facing exploitation by scammers or those closer to home.

Goal 5:

Refine current management and operational practices to achieve greater efficiency and an effective management structure throughout the Aging Network in New York State.

StateWide has partnered with Wider Opportunities for Women and the University of Massachusetts Boston to collect data that describes the economic conditions of New York's older population. We are now translating research into action and recommend that the federal and state governments use 200% of the federal poverty level as a closer approximation of economic security rather than 100% of FPL, to shape planning as well as eligibility for service delivery.

We further recommend that special attention focus on traditionally underserved populations, who are the rapidly growing cohort in the baby boom generation. We know that older New Yorkers who are racial and ethnic minorities are often the

most impoverished and in need of services that are linguistically and culturally appropriate. We encourage NYSOFA to provide special consideration in targeting services to these populations.

For the remainder of our testimony, I would like to focus on those recommendations that cut across all five goals and relate to the economic security of older New Yorkers.

The 2012-2016 State Plan presents an opportunity to improve these programs through the use of an innovative economic security framework and tools to shape policies and programs to promote the economic well-being of elders and their families.

We are urging the federal government, and in these remarks, requesting that the state likewise define economic security as having the income, resources and services and supports necessary to meet all basic needs, including housing, health care, transportation, food, miscellaneous essentials, and, when necessary, long term care. We believe more realistic tools are needed to assess elders' economic needs and well-being.

We urge you to define "economic need" as having an income at or below 200% of the federal poverty line. In so doing, the State will meet the goals of the Older Americans Act to direct services to those with the greatest economic and social need, including older adults with low-incomes, by focusing on those with incomes that fall short of economic security.

In fact, the outdated Federal Poverty Level (FPL) measures deprivation as opposed to economic security. Drawing from publicly available national and state data sources, the Elder Index provides county-by-county data on the real cost-of-living for elders (age 65+) living in the community. The Elder Index incorporates the cost of housing, health care, transportation, food and other basic needs, including add-on costs for home and community-based long-term care. The Elder Index is specific to household size, geographic area and life circumstances. We believe that using the Elder Index can break down barriers to enrollment in public support

programs, and truly reflect a standard of living that new Yorkers deserve to attain and maintain.

In New York State, it takes the average single older New Yorker who rents, a total of \$24,516 to be able to live in the community – if he or she is healthy. An elderly couple who rent would have to have an income \$34,008 a year. Since a quarter of the senior population subsists on just \$10,830 in annual Social Security benefits, we know that the programs and entitlements and benefits are crucial to keeping them in the community.

For services related to Title I: Measure “economic need” as having an income at or below 200% of the federal poverty line. Meet the Act’s goal of directing services to those with the greatest economic and social need, including older adults with low-incomes, by focusing on those with incomes that fall short of economic security.

- At the state level, we urge NYSOFA to be an advocate among agencies and promote that programs administered by both NYSOFA and other agencies account for elders’ true expenses when providing heating and cooling assistance, food assistance, and SSI.

We urge that the Governor’s Advisory Committee on Aging or any subsequent Council on Aging created by virtue of the SAGE Commission’s work, act to unify a standard of economic security for older New Yorkers across governmental programs that reflects WOW’s Elder Economic Security Standard Index. The Committee or Council should be charged with creating an inventory of all state programs aimed at reducing poverty and increasing the economic security of older adults; unifying and coordinating the activities of agencies administering such programs; analyzing state program effectiveness against a goal of economic security that draws on a concrete measure, using a methodology such as WOW’s Elder Economic Security Standard Index; and recommending and drafting the

necessary regulatory and legislative changes to increase economic security of vulnerable and economically disadvantaged older adults.

For Services related to Title III: We urge NYSOFA to use a locally determined measure of economic security to measure economic need and target services in the state and area plans.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these topics in more detail.

Thank you very much for your time.