

Emerging risks to senior health—like [COVID-19](#)—mean there's no time like the present to boost support for the nation's 11 million seniors. With the reauthorization of the [Older Americans Act](#) (OAA) on March 12, seniors who experience vulnerability and food insecurity will be provided the services and support that they need.

The reauthorization was a part of a larger piece of legislation called the Supporting Older Americans Act of 2020. The bill included a 7% increase in authorized appropriate funds for the more than 5,000 community-based nutrition programs in the country, with an additional 6% increase in each of the next four years. The additional funding will help address the negative impacts of social isolation and malnutrition, while cutting down the waiting lists for senior nutrition programs. The bill will be in place for the next five years.

Originally passed in 1965, this groundbreaking legislation included provisions authorized grants to states for community planning and social services, research and development projects and personnel training in the field of aging. The [Administration on Aging](#) (AoA) was tasked with the administration of the grant programs and continues to serve as champion for seniors in the government.

Prior to the reauthorization in early March, the OAA had expired last September. Here's a little refresher as to what this piece of legislation provides and how it can improve the lives of seniors across the country.

What services does the Older Americans Act cover?

Perhaps the most well-known service provided by the OAA are the nutritious meals—with the bonus benefit of social contact—from [Meals on Wheels](#). The leadership organization that helps support more than 5,000 community-based programs in the United States has been under increased demand due to COVID-19.

With a significant number of seniors being asked to [stay home until further notice](#) and [a staggering statistic of American adults](#) over the age of 65 succumbing to COVID-19, Meals on Wheels programs have become even more of an essential service.

"Ensuring the health and safety of our nation's seniors remains our top priority," [said](#) Ellie Hollander, President and CEO, Meals on Wheels America. "It will take all of us doing our part to ensure no senior is forgotten during this unprecedented time, and I commend everyone who has stepped up thus far."

Beyond Meals on Wheels programs, the OAA funds the following senior-focused services:



Caregiver support: For the 11 million seniors who depend on family/informal caregivers, this is perhaps one of the most important services offered by the OAA. Chronic diseases that require complex medication management. Alzheimer’s, dementia and related cognitive disorders that cause difficult behaviors such as wandering or aggression. Caregiver burnout due to balancing kids, careers, and aging parents. These are among the challenges informal caregivers are facing at home (or in the home of their senior loved ones), and they are often the reason seniors are unable to stay home safely.

Job training: The [Senior Community Service Employment Program](#) (SCSEP), helps older adults—particularly those in rural areas who have been unemployed for an extended period of time—return to the workforce.



Senior centers: More than 60% of the country’s senior centers are “[designated focal points for the delivery of OAA services](#).” These serve as one-stop shops for social and recreational activities; educational, arts and intergenerational programs; public benefits counseling; health, fitness and wellness programs, and more.

Benefits enrollment: Low-income seniors with Medicare access may find additional financial support for food, healthcare and more through any of the nation’s 84 [Benefits Enrollment Centers](#) (BECs).



Health promotion: A number of [evidence-based programs](#)—tasked with supporting healthy lifestyles and promoting healthy behaviors—are supported by the OAA. With the goal of reducing the need for more costly medical interventions, at the heart of these programs are the seniors “living in medically underserved areas of the state and those who are of greatest economic need.”

Elder abuse prevention: Frail, isolated, community-based seniors are particularly vulnerable when it comes to elder abuse (financial, sexual, physical, and mental/emotional). The OAA authorizes elder rights services to address this vital need.



Transportation: From public transit to shared ride options, the OAA provides safe, ADA-compliant, reliable and predictable modes of transportation for seniors, including one-on-one assistance. The OAA also supports seniors who are able to set up their own transportation through awareness of/connections to available community services and resources.

Challenges and opportunities: The future of OAA

As nutrition is of primary concern among isolated, frail seniors, partnerships between private companies and public programs like Meals on Wheels has a direct impact on desirable health outcomes. According to this [Kaiser Health News](#) piece, “a single day in the hospital costs an average of around \$2,500...compared with \$2,828 to serve a senior Meals on Wheels for a year.”

To that end, the reauthorization bill's recommended increase totals 35% over the next five years, which is "significantly more than the total 6.8% increase over the previous three-year reauthorization."

While that seems like good news, funding has not kept pace with senior population growth and inflation, and senior hunger is a growing issue. Recent data from Feeding America estimated nearly 8% of Americans 60 and older went hungry in 2017, per the Kaiser Health News article.

Another challenge: These recommendations are not effective immediately. Final levels must be determined in appropriations committees. Given the impact of [COVID-19](#), an increase in reauthorization funding levels are more critical than ever—particularly for seniors at risk, and for seniors whose caregivers are also at risk.

In light of these challenges, many advocates for older adults believe the reauthorization doesn't go far enough to address the concerns of vulnerable community seniors. Still, at this time when anxiety is high and community resources are stretched to the max, the Older Americans Act remains a beacon of hope for today's seniors. And the investments for the future (though they may be moderate) represent a win—and something to build on—for the next generation of seniors.

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