



Leadership Council  
of Aging Organizations

***Katie Smith Sloan, Chair***

July 16, 2021

U.S. Senators and Representatives:

I write as chair of the Leadership Council of Aging Organizations to express LCAO's strong support for a Care Infrastructure package. Since 1980, LCAO has been the country's preeminent coalition representing older Americans. Comprised of 67 national nonprofit organization members, LCAO focuses on the well-being of America's older population and is committed to representing their interests in the policy-making arena. LCAO serves as a source of information about issues affecting older persons and provides leadership and vision as America meets the challenges and opportunities presented by its aging society.

#### **Home and Community-Based Services**

To fully recover from the devastating health and economic effects of the pandemic and "Build Back Better," we must center the needs of the older adults and people with disabilities who have been most directly harmed, as well as the direct care workers who were also at risk ensuring their clients had what they needed to navigate this crisis. That is why we applaud President Biden for moving forward with his promise to invest in Medicaid home- and community-based services (HCBS) by including the development of a Care Infrastructure in the American Jobs Plan. The \$400 billion investment in HCBS, as exemplified by the Better Care Better Jobs Act will expand access to the care and supports older adults and people with disabilities need to live safely at home and in the community while supporting and strengthening the direct care workforce by creating and improving HCBS jobs.

This funding is essential to ensuring states can expand and improve upon their HCBS programs, which have been in increased demand and under-resourced during the pandemic. With a dedicated, ongoing Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) increase, states will be able to rely on the down payment included in the American Rescue Plan to expand access and eligibility for HCBS. This historic investment must be made nationwide and focus the needs of people of color, older adults with limited income and wealth, and other marginalized communities to address the existing inequities that the pandemic highlighted. This means increasing access to HCBS across all states and all populations, including individuals with dementia and mental health conditions; eliminating waiting lists; making the Money Follows the Person program and HCBS spousal impoverishment protections permanent; and reaching those who have historically had no choice but to rely exclusively on unpaid family caregivers to age in place.

Finally, to further strengthen the investment in Medicaid HCBS, we urge the Biden Administration and Congress to work together to ensure Medicare enrollees can access the full range of Medicare home

health benefits they are entitled to receive. There is no justifiable public policy reason to force Medicare enrollees into poverty to be able to access care at home and in the community that Medicare can and should cover for all enrollees. By fully implementing the benefit and removing barriers, such as the “homebound” requirement, more individuals will be able to live safely in their own homes as they age.

### **Direct Care Workforce**

The pandemic has also shown us how poorly the U.S. has prepared to provide care to our aging society. The eldercare workforce is rightfully one of the targets of the Americans Jobs Plan and we support a range of proposals to boost the eldercare workforce, including better wages, benefits, and training. The LCAO has long supported both the Geriatrics Workforce Enhancement Program (GWEP) and Geriatrics Academic Career Awards (GACA) which play a critical role in the workforce training infrastructure. We support increased training for family caregivers, direct care workers, and health care professionals such as physicians, nurses, social workers, pharmacists, and psychologists and the career development of our next generation of geriatrics health professionals.

Equally important, access to HCBS cannot be expanded without adequate and long-overdue investment in the women, people of color and/or immigrants providing the care and services, who have been underpaid and undervalued for decades. Significant investments in the direct care workforce are critical to improving the quality of HCBS and ensuring that direct care jobs are high-quality jobs with family-sustaining wages and benefits. High turnover rates and worker shortages are directly connected to the quality of these jobs and, unless improved, there will not be the workforce necessary to ensure all those who require services are able to access them. That is why states must be required to use the FMAP both to expand service delivery and to create HCBS infrastructure that increases workforce compensation, training, and supports; guarantees workers the right to bargain collectively; and ensures that HCBS rates are adequate to support the workforce needed to deliver services.

### **Affordable Housing**

Today, more than 1.93 million very low income older adult renters pay more than half of their incomes toward rent, too often forcing them to choose between paying for rent, food, and medicine. By 2030, the Urban Institute projects there will be 5.5 million new older adult renters in the U.S. and, of these, 2.6 million will be Black older adult renter households.

President Biden’s American Jobs Plan includes \$213 billion for affordable housing. These are greatly needed resources, particularly for older adults as the supply of affordable senior housing is greatly outpaced by demand for it. Waiting lists for existing affordable senior housing are often two to five years long. Thankfully, HUD programs can help ensure that older adults can affordably live in quality homes. We support the American Jobs Plan’s affordable housing resources, particularly the \$2 billion sought for HUD’s Section 202 Supportive Housing for the Elderly program to expand the supply of affordable senior housing. The needed expansion of HCBS must come hand-in-hand with affordable places for older adults to live in the community.

Research has also shown that having a Service Coordinator in affordable senior housing communities decreases emergency room visits, shortens hospital stays, and improves primary care connections. We urge additional investments to ensure a Service Coordinator in the 55% of HUD-assisted affordable senior housing communities currently without one because of lack of funding.

## **Employment**

Nearly 2 million older adults have left the workforce during the pandemic. The labor force participation rate of workers aged 65 and older fell over 11 percent between February 2020 and February 2021 – the largest 12-month drop since the U.S. started tracking this data in 1948. As of March 2021, over 1.7 million workers aged 55 and older remain unemployed. More than half (54 percent) have experienced long-term unemployment of 27 weeks or more. The rate of long-term unemployed, as well as the average duration of unemployment, are significantly higher than those of younger workers. History shows that nearly one million older workers experiencing long-term unemployment are likely to receive lower wages once they find new work. Those who have exited the workforce and have opted to tap retirement payouts and benefits are risking financial insecurity for years to come.

We commend the Administration’s focus on workforce development in the Americans Jobs Plan. As Congress proceeds with infrastructure legislation that supports employment and training and takes its cues from the President’s American Jobs Plan and Congressional proposals, initiatives that specifically address the needs of older workers must be included. Older adults have been waiting over a decade for age discrimination in employment protections to be restored; the bipartisan Protecting Older Workers Against Discrimination Act (POWADA) passed by the House and now awaiting action by the Senate must be a component of addressing infrastructure needs across the country. Access to employment and training services should be expanded by significantly investing in the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) and explicitly establishing the eligibility of older workers with significant barriers to employment and long-term unemployment for current and new initiatives such as registered apprenticeships, sector-based training, and subsidized jobs programs. Federal efforts to spur job creation, whether focused on brick-and-mortar projects or technology, should be universally accessible, regardless of race, color, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, or health or disability status. A crucial lesson from the pandemic is that caregiver and family leave supports must be expanded for Americans across the lifespan.

## **Broadband**

Technology solutions ranging from telehealth to food delivery have provided much-needed services for older adults who can access high-speed internet without the barriers of location or income. However, according to the Pew Research Center, one fourth of all Americans still lack access to broadband. This problem is particularly acute among older adults, as a third of adults aged 65 and older report they never use the internet and almost half lack home broadband. The digital divide is even greater for older adults of color, and for those who are low-income, widowed, or lack more than a high school education. For example, Pew has found that 55 percent of black older adults do not go online, and 70 percent lack broadband at home. Recent research shows that smartphones have enabled more black and Hispanic individuals to go online, yet the older adult population continues to be the only group of which a clear majority do not own smartphones. On-line access can be crucially important for disproportionately socially isolated populations. While the pandemic may result in greater adoption of technology among older adults, physical access, affordability, and digital literacy remain obstacles.

As proposed in the American Jobs Plan, it is critical for affordable high-speed broadband infrastructure to reach unserved and underserved areas. Additional federal funding is crucial to expand broadband coverage nationally. Last year, LCAO endorsed the Emergency Broadband Connections Act to expand the

Federal Communications Commission Lifeline Program with increased funding for internet access and device subsidies and extend and streamline eligibility to more Americans in need and believe these proposals, such as further expanding access to the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB), should be included in infrastructure legislation currently being considered in Washington. Efforts to expand broadband availability and retrofit facilities that Americans rely on should include Aging Network entities such as senior centers, local senior nutrition programs, Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) and public housing like Section 202 facilities. Digital literacy training also should be supported with investments for these same trusted entities to help older adults and their caregivers obtain the tools and skills to utilize the internet successfully and safely.

### **Transportation**

In the American Rescue Plan, the Administration identifies transportation infrastructure as a priority to increase safety and equity. To reach these goals, we urge the Administration and Congress to consider expansion of transportation funding and options for older adults and people with disabilities and improve technical assistance and transportation coordination capacity for these populations. This includes dedicating resources to the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) 5310 program and the FTA's Technical Assistance and Standards Development Program. Further, LCAO urges partnership and investment through ACL's Older Americans Act, including Title III B, which funds transportation among other supportive services, as well as for programs that require vehicle fleets, such as meal programs.

### **Aging Network**

In any infrastructure legislation moving forward, we urge the Administration and Congress to build upon the existing Aging Network established by the Older Americans Act (OAA). This "infrastructure for aging" is the backbone of our nation's home and community supports system. It equips older adults and their caregivers with vital resources and essential services that include home care, congregate and home-delivered meals, case management, caregiver support, transportation, health promotion and disease prevention, legal services, elder abuse prevention, community service employment opportunities for older adults with low incomes, and the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program that plays a critical role in the care infrastructure by supporting residents of long-term care facilities. For 55 years, OAA programs have demonstrated a unique ability to provide these quality services while enhancing and protecting federal resources. As we build back better through the OAA, it is important to do so through an equity lens. Attention and resources must continue to be targeted to historically underserved populations, including Black, Hispanic, American Indian, AAPI, and LGBT older populations. To ensure that our nation's systems of infrastructure are effectively addressed and modernized in ways that meet the needs of all, including older adults, the Aging Network must be consulted, utilized, and resourced.

On behalf of the LCAO and its members, we urge you to include the array of investments outlined above to support older adults and the aging services network of programs, agencies, and organizations they rely on.

Sincerely,



Katie Smith Sloan, Chair