

2022 House Appropriations Committee Budget Hearing
February 15, 2022
Testimony of Secretary Robert Torres
Pennsylvania Department of Aging
State Fiscal Year 2022-2023 Budget

Chairman Saylor, Chairman Bradford, and members of the House Appropriations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present and discuss the importance of Governor Wolf's proposed Fiscal Year 2022-2023 Budget for the Department of Aging and the older adults we serve.

The department is looking forward to what 2022 will bring as we continue to work together to strengthen supports and services to older Pennsylvanians. Despite ongoing challenges with COVID-19, we have worked to innovate and improve the quality of services and programs we provide. Reflecting back on 2021, I would like to share some of the successes we achieved that will help us continue putting older Pennsylvanians first.

In December, the General Assembly passed two bills that renewed the Pharmaceutical Assistance Contract for the Elderly (PACE) program and the Pharmaceutical Assistance Contract for the Elderly Needs Enhancement Tier (PACENET) cost-of-living moratorium and expanded income eligibility this year. The expansion will allow 100,000 older Pennsylvanians to become eligible to enroll in the program.

House Bill 291, sponsored by Representative Labs, now Act 92 of 2021, extended the cost-of-living moratorium to December 31, 2023. It was originally set to expire on December 31, 2021. This extension will allow enrollees to maintain their PACE/PACENET benefits despite disqualifying increases in their overall income due to Social Security cost-of-living adjustments.

House Bill 1260, sponsored by Representatives Thomas and Samuelson, now Act 94 of 2021, expanded the eligibility limits for PACENET by \$6,000:

- Singles: from \$27,500 to \$33,500
- Married: from \$35,500 to \$41,500

PACE and PACENET currently serves more than 250,000 older Pennsylvanians and we anticipate an additional 20,000 older adults will enroll once the new income limits go into effect February 21, 2022.

The growth of Pennsylvania's older adult population heightens our collective responsibility to ensure that the supply of vital support services remain intact and evolves to meet the increasing demand. The PACE and PACENET programs play an important role in supporting older Pennsylvanians and keeping them healthy while offering tremendous savings for their prescription medications. I want to thank Representatives Labs, Thomas, and Samuelson for their support of the PACE and PACENET programs and for their advocacy on these important pieces of legislation.

The Department of Aging also worked with the General Assembly on expanding eligibility to Pennsylvania's Caregiver Support Program (CSP). This program provides support to caregivers – including caregivers of older adults, grandparents raising grandchildren, and older caregivers of adults living with a disability – to alleviate stress, promote well-being, and to help sustain a healthy ongoing caregiving relationship.

House Bill 464, sponsored by Representative Boback, now Act 20 of 2021, aligns Pennsylvania's Family Caregiver Support Act with the federal National Family CSP of the Older Americans Act. Act 20 updates

terminology around Alzheimer's disease and related disorders, clarifies eligibility criteria for program participants, and removes administrative barriers that prevented caregivers from enrolling or receiving enhanced benefits. I thank Representative Boback for her dedication to caregivers. Given the increasing population of grandparents caring for grandchildren, this support is especially important to the population we collectively serve.

The CSP legislation – along with the two PACE bills – were two of the Department's top legislative priorities for the 2021-22 legislative session, and I am pleased that all three bills became law.

Throughout 2021, the Department established new partnerships and expanded our impact to better meet the needs of older adults. Last winter, our PA Link helpline and PACE call center served as resources for older adults to get assistance with scheduling vaccination appointments. PACE also focused its efforts on vaccine appointments for homebound individuals and scheduling PACE and PACENET recipients at Walmart vaccine clinics. Approximately 30,000 individuals were helped with these services.

Last summer, the departments of Aging and Agriculture began working together to enroll older adults into the Department of Agriculture's newly rebranded PA Senior Food Box Program. Our PACE call center proactively contacts and enrolls eligible seniors into the program. This partnership has led to more than 10,000 new seniors benefiting from the shelf stable nutritious foods available through the Senior Food Box Program. We hope to further increase enrollment in 2022 and help serve even more older adults in need.

Since piloting an intergenerational program at Slippery Rock University in the fall of 2020, the Department's Intergenerational University Connections Program has expanded across the commonwealth to four additional universities including Penn State Harrisburg, West Chester University, Widener University and most recently, Penn State Scranton. Undergraduate and graduate students earning degrees in programs such as social work, behavioral sciences, gerontology, public health, and recreational therapy complete service-learning projects, within the scope of their faculty-assigned course work, by engaging with an older Pennsylvanian weekly, either over the phone or virtually. The increased risk of social isolation among seniors, as a result of the pandemic, put this program on a fast track. It has given many older participants a renewed sense of purpose, while also giving students confidence, new perspective, and wisdom from the interactions with their older partners. The program has also helped promote careers in the aging field. Within its first year, the Intergenerational University Connections Program has positively impacted the lives of 500 students and older adults.

The Shared Housing and Resource Exchange or SHARE program continues to grow as an affordable housing option for adults of all ages. Started in 2017 as a pilot, SHARE brings together home hosts, primarily older adults who have extra room in their home, with home seekers who are looking for housing in exchange for rent, help around the house, or a combination of both. It has been especially helpful in counties where housing for older adults is already a challenge. The program is currently available in Pike, Wayne, Monroe, Venango, Crawford, Adams, Union, and Snyder counties, with planning underway for expansion into additional counties. As more older adults prefer to remain in their home and community, the Department is dedicated and focused on continuing to expand the program and educate the public on the benefits of SHARE.

The Department also partners with the Pennsylvania Association of Area Agencies on Aging (P4A) to offer the Elder Cottage Housing Opportunity (ECHO). Elder cottages are small, individually manufactured residences for older adults that are temporarily placed on the side or backyard of a host family

residence, typically relatives or close friends. The arrangement provides independence and privacy for the older adult along with easy access to family or friends who can provide assistance. During 2021, ECHO expanded to Centre, Fayette, and Lackawanna counties and the Huntingdon/Bedford/Fulton service area. Together with P4A, our department applied for funding through the Pennsylvania Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement Fund (PHARE) provided by the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency (PHFA) to further expand ECHO and keep older adults in their communities. Awards are expected to be announced this summer.

The Older Adult Financial Exploitation Task Force continued to meet throughout 2021. Task Force members from 14 state agencies and related offices and 20 stakeholder groups engaged in discussions to better understand financial exploitation, heard from family members of older adults who were victims of financial exploitation, discussed barriers to reporting financial exploitation, and conducted case reviews to identify potential risk and prevention measures. In June, the Task Force issued 15 recommendations covering four categories including: Education, Training, Operations and Procedures, and Legislation. The Task Force continues to meet and collaborate with various sub-groups working to implement the recommendations.

While we celebrate our accomplishments of 2021, there is still more work to be done, especially in the area of protecting older adults from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and abandonment. For 2022, our top legislative priority, which the Department has been advocating for throughout several legislative sessions, is a package of long-awaited, much-needed updates to the Older Adults Protective Services Act (OAPSA). We are hoping it will become law before the legislative session ends on November 30, 2022. In 2015, *Peake v. Commonwealth* struck down lifetime employment bans in OAPSA as unconstitutional due to the lack of appeal or redress for an aggrieved applicant. The Department looks forward to working with the General Assembly to better protect older adults by bringing OAPSA into compliance with the 2015 Commonwealth Court decision, as well as updating the criminal background check process to ensure caregivers are properly vetted, addressing changes in the direct care workforce and the facilities that serve older adults, and the substantial rise of financial exploitation as a form of elder abuse.

Given the increase in the reporting, investigation, and oversight of elder abuse cases, the Governor's budget proposes a \$667,000 increase for complement to strengthen and support the Department's Bureau of Protective Services. This complement increase will help meet the increased demand for and oversight of these services that help protect older Pennsylvanians from injury, violence, abuse, neglect, exploitation, and abandonment.

I would also like to express support for the Governor's proposal to increase the Personal Care Home supplementary payment by \$50 million. This is a vital investment that will help stabilize the industry and improve the services provided to residents. The State Long Term Care Ombudsman, Margaret Barajas, has advocated for increases to the supplemental payments for several years, as her role requires her to investigate resident complaints and advocate for residents in long term care settings, including personal care homes.

As we continue working to meet the diverse needs of older Pennsylvanians, I thank the General Assembly for your support and dedication to Pennsylvania's over 3.4 million older adults. The Department has a lot of exciting opportunities ahead and we know with the support of the entire aging network, our community partners, and the legislature we will make 2022 a year of action and advancement for older adults.