

Policy Analysis Essay: Older Americans Act

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Abstract

In 1965, Congress created and successfully implemented the Older Americans Act, which is now more commonly known as the Supporting Older Americans Act. This is a federal program, used nation-wide, specifically designed to meet an array of social services needs that low-income older Americans often require (NHI, (n.d.)). These support services in place include congregate and home delivery of meals, specialized transportation services, employment and volunteer programs, adult day care, senior centers, and long-term care activities (Price-Carter, 2020). The Supporting Older Americans Act and all of its reauthorized programming efforts remain in effect until fiscal year 2024 when the act will again be up for reapproval. With its most recent approval in 2020, Congress also approved supplemental funding allocated for additional COVID-19 relief efforts (Price-Carter, 2020). Currently, over 11 million older Americans along with their caregivers continue to benefit from this program (NHI, (n.d.)).

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Brief Introduction to Social Issue

Older Americans are currently one of the most vulnerable communities in our modern-day society. This demographic of more than 54 million people faces a plethora of hardships during the last portion of their lifetimes (Giefer & King, 2021). One in six adults over the age of 65 receive governmental, need-based assistance. In terms of specific programs, about 86% of older adults are participating in the Social Security program (Giefer & King, 2021). There is also a massive percentage, roughly 93%, of older individuals who benefit from the Medicare program (Giefer & King, 2021). Also, around 9% of older adults receive some form of nutritional assistance. It is important to note these need-based assistance programs listed above only apply to those who meet specific requirements (Giefer & King, 2021).

Along with this, not everyone who can meet those certain requirements applies for assistance at all. There is also the fact that those who could qualify might not even receive any assistance due to the demand of need (Giefer & King, 2021). This is because governmental funding is fairly limited for each of these resources. It makes the average person wonder - what about those individuals who do not receive any social assistance programs, or who have enough in their savings accounts to sustain their basic needs? This brief introduction of the social issue at hand enforces the notion about how crucial it is to have social safety nets for older individuals who are also considered to be economically vulnerable (Giefer & King, 2021). This safety net is truly paramount to supporting our elder Americans. It is clear we need more supportive programs for the elderly who might fall through the cracks within our society.

Current Policy Provisions

Various policies are currently in place to address the basic, but distinct necessities of the elderly community. When assessing these policies, it represents, or aligns with the term adequate. Older adults make up a fairly large number of hospital stays, primary and home care visits, nursing home residents, etc. (Health and Aging, 2020). As we see a substantial increase in the elderly population, we will also see older patients who increasingly need a multitude of medical specialties. Our society will be shortly facing compelling obstacles within health and social service systems as a result (Health and Aging, 2020). There is currently a wide variety of diverse challenges in healthcare and wellness for the aging.

These efforts to assist with these challenges are seen within federal programs such as the Social Security Act, Medicare, and other nutrition assistance initiatives like the Supplemental and Nutrition Assistance Program, better known as SNAP. Furthermore, to receive Social Security, one must have an earning record, one also must be at least 62 years of age and have enough work credits, or have a disability (Ordp, (n.d.)). Medicare is accessible to individuals who are over 65, individuals with a disability, and individuals with End Stage Renal Disease (DCD, 2021). End Stage Renal Disease can be described as the final stage of chronic kidney disease (Johns Hopkins Medicine, (n.d.)). There are two parts to Medicare: Part A, which provides Hospital Insurance, and Part B, which provides Medicare Insurance to those who qualify (DCD, 2021).

There are also extremely specific criteria in place that one must meet to qualify for either Parts A or B (DCD, 2021). Regarding SNAP, one can be a recipient of this program if one's monthly gross income does not exceed the gross income limit allowed (IDHS, 2020). There are various other requirements to qualify for SNAP, and the whole process is fairly

complex (IDHS, 2020). It is interesting looking at the allowable income permitted for regular households because it is vastly different from a person who is over 60 or a person with disabilities. This is because their monthly income limits are quite higher compared to those who would solely fall under the traditional “household” category.

If one is over the age of 60 or has a disability, it is harder to receive SNAP, especially if one has already been barely getting by financially. This is precisely why we need a program like the Older Americans Act (OAA) that includes those of the elderly community who might fall between the cracks in our society. An example of how OAA would address this problem is reinstating the Meals on Wheels program. This would be a prime example of an OAA policy directly aiding older Americans facing food insecurity. As the population ages, the needs and the amount of disparity that already exists today will be even more prevalent and pronounced in the future (Health and Aging, 2020). Regarding all these programs, even more requirements are not listed online, or the explicitly stated ones are vague and unclear to most readers. This most likely contributes to why elderly people do not apply for benefits (Giefer & King, 2021).

Proposed Policy

As the population ages, one of the key policy issues for this community is the advancement of the Older Americans Act (NASW, 2016). This act has been in place for the past five decades but overtime the policy has expired and has been reauthorized (NASW, 2016). It allows for older adults to live a healthier and more productive way of life through living more independently within their homes and communities (NASW, 2016). There are a multitude of programs and services listed within the OAA, such as family caregiver support, the promotion of health and wellness, job training, long-term care, nutritional programs, and transportation (NASW, 2016). Most importantly, this act also includes programs to

acknowledge and to give additional attention to elder abuse, neglect, and even the exploitation of the elderly community. Therefore, the OAA has evolved and changed over several decades to best serve, aid, and enhance the overall well-being of the elderly community (NASW, 2016).

OAA funding has been severely lacking within the recent decade (NASW, 2016). This is due to a variety of reasons, but most notably because of both inflation and the increase in population growth of those over the age of 65 due to the aging baby boomer generation (NASW, 2016). Demographically, the elderly community is projected to grow as the general population ages (RHHub, 2019). Recently, there have also been cuts to discretionary programs such as this, reducing OAA funds even further (NASW, 2016). This is precisely why reinstatement and increased funding for the OAA is critical to support the basic needs of this specific, ever-expanding population (NASW, 2016).

Assessment of Players and Power

In 2015, the enactment of the Older Americans Act came across its 50th anniversary (NASW, 2016). However, five years after the 2011 expiration of the 2006 OOA reauthorization, the Older Americans Act Reauthorization Act of 2016 passed congress (NASW, 2016). With the approval of both chambers of congress, it was inevitably signed into law by President Barack Obama (NASW, 2016). This policy was formally reinstated on April 19th, 2016, and expired again in 2019. The OAA has been noted within the National Association of Social Workers top key policy issues (NASW 2016). The OAA was last reauthorized on March 25, 2020 (ACL, (n.d.)).

Regarding the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare's position, the nonprofit organizations themselves are concerned that congress may go back to the historic practice of underfunding this program (NCPSSM, 2021). Despite the rapidly growing elderly population, this is a very real possibility. The National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare urges the Biden Administration, along with congress, to fully fund the OAA (NCPSSM, 2021). There is the concern of basic inflation as well. This continuation of the program is essential because there are instances of eligible seniors potentially enduring waiting periods for various OAA services in a multitude of states (NCPSSM, 2021). Congress, the Biden Administration, and other governmental agents need to acknowledge this program has steadily declined over the past decade and needs attention (NCPSSM, 2021). Americans cannot have millions of older adults struggling due to the severe lack of funding.

Likelihood of Implementation

When addressing the overall likelihood of the OAA's implementation, it is unlikely this program will be reauthorized. Comparing the OAA to the Supporting Older Americans Act of 2020, there is an ample amount of overlap. However, even though the Supporting Older Americans Act covers a wide variety of different policies and programs, there are still aspects of the OAA that are not seen within this recent bill. Certain programs of importance written within the Older Americans Act are completely neglected and omitted from the Supporting Older Americans Act. This act has essentially been passed in order to replace the OAA (Phillips, 2020). The National Council of Ages exclaims: "The Supporting Older Americans Act of 2020 is a bipartisan, bicameral compromise on the 2020 reauthorization of the

Older Americans Act (OAA)” (Phillips, 2020). More extensive programs are necessary; not just for people over 60 or people with disabilities who might have the chance to qualify and receive the benefit. There is still a large percentage of elderly people struggling to survive and to make ends meet every single day.

Advocacy

There are various methods to advocate for an increase in services and programs, along with funding for the social issue at hand. Firstly, one can contact their legislators. It is important to truly understand and encourage other people to come to terms with the fact that advocacy itself does not always lead to change, but this change will only be introduced by those who represent us within the government. This can be done by any mode of communication such as writing a letter or email, making a phone call, or filling out a witness slip on the congressional website. There are many advocacy groups for initiatives such as this too. In addition, there are many full-fledged organizations dedicated to this cause that one can support. Each of these factors are important because together they empower individuals and could potentially influence future change.

The more people who advocate for a cause, the more likely lawmakers are going to take it into serious consideration to propose or pass a reauthorized bill. After all, the American people are the ones who hired them to advance and enact certain pieces of legislation. From a social work perspective, being up to date on the National Association of Social Workers and their own advocacy to members of congress and other regulatory agencies with the power and authority to influence policy change is an important method too (NASW, (n.d.)). There are statements and other sign-on letters that one can get involved with to continue promoting increased funding and access regarding the OAA (NASW, (n.d.)). One can also join the political action arm of NASW,

which is formally known as the Political Action for Candidate Election (NASW, (n.d.)). All of these advocacy methods are just one step forward in the right direction for change.

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