



**Remarks by New York State Office for the Aging Director Greg Olsen
Older New Yorkers' Day 2022
November 4, 2022**

Good afternoon. I am Greg Olsen, Director of the New York State Office for the Aging. I thank you for joining us today as we celebrate Older Americans Month and Older New Yorkers' Day – our time to celebrate the amazing contributions of older New Yorkers to their families and communities, their place of work, the care they provide to loved ones and the service they give to organizations every day.

I thank all who have helped make this event possible: the 59 county-based Area Agencies on Aging who do incredible, core work serving older adults each day and who nominated this year's slate of honorees; the over 1,200 community organizations in our network who partner with county agencies to deliver critical network supports; the Association on Aging in New York for its steadfast leadership and advocacy on behalf of this front-line system of community-based providers; my exceptional staff here at the New York State Office for the Aging; and so many others – most especially the volunteers we are recognizing today.

On behalf of NYSOFA and our community partners, I thank Governor Kathy Hochul for her unprecedented support of the aging services network. Her leadership is strengthening New York's role as the most age-friendly state in the nation.

NYSOFA is proud to carry out her administration's vision to support older adults and New Yorkers of all ages through a comprehensive approach that is bringing together state agency partners and stakeholders to create opportunities for New Yorkers of all ages.

To all of our honorees, Governor Hochul sends her profound gratitude for the work that you do and your service to all New Yorkers. Earlier this year, the Governor signed a proclamation designating May as Older Americans Month. In issuing the proclamation, she said: "New York's older adults inspire us with their life experiences, guidance, and decades of contribution that make our state a better place." She added: "We honor these contributions and further our pledge to continue providing for New York's older adults, helping enable them to maintain independence and quality of life as they age." Today, during Older New Yorkers' Day, we continue in this important tradition of honoring your contributions and fulfilling our pledge to New York's 4.6 million older adults.

When Older Americans Month was established in 1963, only 17 million living Americans had reached their 65th birthday. About a third of older Americans lived in poverty and there were few programs to meet their needs. Interest in older Americans and their concerns was growing. A meeting in April 1963 between President John F. Kennedy and members of the National Council of Senior Citizens led to designating May as “Senior Citizens Month,” the prelude to “Older Americans Month.”

Historically, Older Americans Month has been a time to acknowledge the contributions of past and current older persons to our country, in particular those who defended our country. Every President since Kennedy has issued a formal proclamation during or before the month of May asking that the entire nation pay tribute in some way to older persons in their communities. Older Americans Month is celebrated across the country through ceremonies, events, fairs, and other such activities.

In New York each year, we go a step further and we do something very unique, working with our 59 county office for the aging partners and the Association on Aging in New York: we honor exceptional individuals, nominated by the counties, who demonstrate through their actions the spirit of civic engagement, volunteerism and selflessness.

For decades, older adults have been portrayed as frail, needy, and costly to the health and social services systems – in other words, the message has been that “older adults take more than they give.” This is a misnomer to say the least. Individuals of all ages sometimes need assistance, but older adults en masse consider themselves healthy, remain active and engaged and are a very important part of the local, regional, state and national economies as well as the ability of community organizations to operate. Further, they give a tremendous amount of their time to hundreds of civic groups and organizations that are critical in delivering direct services and supporting local agencies. Older adults are committed to improving their communities and helping their neighbors. That is what defines us as New Yorkers. It is what makes us proud to be New Yorkers and to follow in the example that you set.

I would like to express profound gratitude to those across the state who have served to protect our great nation. In addition to those in active service, 63% of our state’s veterans are age 60 or over and we recognize as part of our slate of honorees today six Army Veterans, two national guard members, one marine and one air force veteran.

Let us pause and pay our respects to those men and women, past and present who have served and serve in our armed forces and thank them for their sacrifices defending our way of life and those who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

The 2022 theme of Older Americans Month and Older New Yorkers’ Day is *Age My Way*, an opportunity for all of us to explore the many ways older adults can remain in and be involved with their communities.

The word “volunteer” cannot capture fully the accomplishments of this group of incredible individuals. Older adults impress us all with their commitment to a greater

good and a greater cause. You tell the real story of what's good about people, what's good about New York. Through your deeds and actions, time and again, you show us how valuable you all are to those you touch, to those you serve, to the families and communities and lives you make better. As a group, you commit more than 495 million hours of service, most often to multiple organizations, all for the simple goal of helping others and the desire to make a difference and to give back. You do so without fanfare. You do so not to be thanked or recognized, but because you see a need, have a passion, want to give back, want to stay engaged, want to make a difference and you step up time and time again. During one of the most difficult times in our nation's recent history – with the COVID pandemic – older adults continued to put themselves at risk to help others by delivering food, preparing meals, providing transportation, and working with other community organizations to address the high demand for help. We thank you for that and for your ongoing service. What you do matters, who you are matters, and your contributions matter, and that's what makes this celebration so special.

Older New Yorkers volunteer for hundreds of community-based organizations and civic groups, and your experience is an asset to all communities. Your giving back comes with exceptional life, family and work experience, which is applicable regardless of where you serve and how you apply your talents. Make no mistake about it, older New Yorkers bring enormous intellectual, social and economic capital to the state of New York. Older New Yorkers and baby boomers make up 65% of all household income generated in New York State. You have very high home ownership rates, are supporting schools, local business, and support almost 7 million jobs. You are the number-one givers to philanthropy and charity, the largest entrepreneur group, number-one in volunteering, and a huge group supporting tourism. Your skills are endless and your value is well defined. It is so well defined and recognized that states are competing for you because they recognize these varied contributions.

Older New Yorkers' Day allows us the opportunity to demonstrate the true side of aging and not getting stuck on artificial numbers – because a number is not what defines you. It is your actions, your passions, your relationships, your commitments, your perseverance, your determination, and your goals that define you. It is our job to highlight your character – and put it on display.

Regardless of where you came from or what your background is, there is a volunteer opportunity waiting and a life that can be changed for the better. You are indeed a diverse group of individuals.

You have chosen to take your work and life skills and experiences and either get involved, remain involved, or enter an encore career. The older New Yorkers we honor today give of their time for literacy efforts, hospice, the NAACP, the American Heart Association, fire and ambulance corps, ARC, YMCA, big brothers and big sisters, the Salvation Army, neighborhood watch, PTAs, Girl Scouts, foster grandparents, SPCA, Kiwanis, veterans associations, orchestras, the VFW, and so much more. We know we could not deliver quality service in our network without volunteers delivering meals,

providing transportation or health insurance counseling, being a long term care ombudsman, and so much more.

Today we honor almost 100 individuals who traditionally volunteer for many local organizations. You have more than 5,500 years of life experience, more than 4,000 years of family experience, and have volunteered for a combined 2,568 years of service. You've raised 298 children, 295 grandchildren, 101 great grandchildren and 2 great, great grandchildren. One of our honorees has been volunteering for 80 years!

How vast is your reach and how important is your time? Across the state of New York almost 1 million people over age 55 volunteer in their communities each year, providing almost 500 million hours of service. The value of that service is more than \$13.8 billion.

Let's not dismiss the value to the volunteer either; it has been well documented that there are tremendous health benefits to volunteering, especially among older adults. Studies have shown that active volunteering lowers the likeliness for depression and isolation, provides purpose and meaning to one's life, increases life expectancy, and lowers the rate of heart disease and other chronic illness that can quickly lead to more costly and intensive medical services.

But let me stop and share what some of you think. You described, in your own words, the benefits of volunteering – You said:

- I give back what I already have, repaying the blessings I have; I hope to change lives for the better.
- The greatest gift you can give is your time, because when you give your time you are giving a portion of your life you will never get back. Making a difference in someone's life is what keeps me going each day.
- Do what you love and love what you do. Make a difference that may not change the whole world, but will change someone else's world.

For most, being older is not about fading away to a 55+ resort community. It's about continuing to be active and engaged – because we all have something we can offer no matter how old we are or our ability.

I believe it vitally important that our next generation grow up valuing service – and to regard it as an intrinsic piece of who they are. You are, in fact, making this happen by example, through service to your community.

I would like to quote New York's by-line: "out of many we are one." This is the founding premise and enduring promise that we inherited from our parents, and the promise of New York that we pass on to our children; your work makes New York State a better place to live, work and grow old.

I am proud to offer these remarks celebrating Older New Yorkers' Day. All of us at the New York State Office for the Aging and county offices around the state thank you and convey how proud we all are of you and the wonderful example you set for all of us.

I now want to take a moment to specifically highlight Mr. Lloyd Cort from Westchester County who was selected to receive Governor Hochul's 2022 Exemplary Volunteer Service Award for his 45+ years volunteering. I had the opportunity to call Mr. Cort to personally deliver the news.

I want to thank Mr. Cort for his incredible contributions that are making his community a better place for people of all ages. Congratulations again on receiving the 2022 Governor's Exemplary Volunteer Service Award. Well done.

The Association on Aging in New York is a critical partner in our efforts to promote independence, preserve dignity, and provide support for residents of New York State under the exceptional leadership of the Association's Executive Director Rebecca Preve. For Older New Yorkers' Day, we've invited the association to select an honoree to receive the Innovative Volunteer Program Award. I now turn it over to Rebecca Preve to announce this year's award recipient: Holly Rhodes-Teague, Director of the Suffolk County Office for the Aging.

Among today's nearly 100 honorees are individuals we are highlighting for special distinction. NYSOFA is proud to specifically recognize older adults who are volunteering for two statewide programs: The Health Insurance Information, Counseling and Assistance Program (or HIICAP) and the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program. Volunteers for HIICAP and the Ombudsman Program assume specialized roles that demand many hours of training, intricate problem-solving, and coordination with local programs to help older adults.

Eileen Driscoll of Ithaca and Barbara Thomas of Plattsburgh are NYSOFA's 2022 Ombudsmen of the Year. Today we specially highlight their work helping residents of nursing homes and adult homes and their families navigate complex care and service issues. They are distinguished among 230 volunteers who have provided 16,821 hours of advocacy services to residents in the state's Long Term Care Ombudsman Program in 2021.

Tom Bailey of Spencer is our HIICAP Volunteer of the Year. Mr. Bailey donates his time to help some of the most rural customers in his community understand the intricacies of their Medicare coverage, oftentimes traveling directly to his clients' homes. His work supports a program – HIICAP – that helped 248,000 New Yorkers with counseling, information, and assistance about their health insurance coverage, including Medicare, Medicaid and more.

We thank them for the special commitment it takes to be a volunteer in programs that rely heavily on the expertise and dedication of individuals donating their time and talents.

And now, I am pleased to present the full slate of honorees for Older New Yorkers' Day nominated by county offices for the aging throughout New York State. Your contributions to the benefit of your fellow citizens are a hallmark of healthy aging, supporting New Yorkers of all ages to thrive and find opportunities to succeed.

In closing, I want to again thank our honorees, the county offices for the aging who nominated these exceptional individuals, the Association on Aging in New York, Governor Kathy Hochul, Lieutenant Governor Antonio Delgado, our esteemed guests from the Legislature, my staff at NYSOFA, and all of the friends and family who have joined us in today's special celebration. Again, from all of us at NYSOFA, thank you.