

Testimony of
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Joint Legislative Budget Hearing
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Senate Finance Committee
Assembly Ways & Means Committee
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Good afternoon, Chairperson Krueger and Pretlow, Chairpersons Cleare and Seawright, and all the distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly standing committees. I am Greg Olsen, Director of the New York State Office for the Aging (NYSOFA), and I'm honored to testify today. Governor Hochul's State of the State and proposed SFY 27 Executive Budget prioritizes affordability for all New Yorkers and ensuring public safety. The proposed Executive Budget does exactly that, building upon investments in last year's budget. As always, the proposed Executive Budget includes many proposals that support older adults and their families across agencies, and I will highlight some of those in my testimony.

I am pleased to testify to the provisions of Governor Hochul's proposed budget that directly affect NYSOFA programs and services, along with additional budget proposals that will positively impact older New Yorkers and their families and move towards the broader goal of creating a more affordable and livable New York.

Mr. F, age 67, was living in a motel after becoming homeless. Mr. F couldn't afford to stay in the hotel. Mr. F wanted to be with his family in Wyoming County. Erie County Case Manager helped Mr. F by assisting with a SNAP application, where he now receives \$200 dollars a month to assist with purchasing food. EC CM provided home delivered meal services as Mr. F was non-ambulatory and could not prepare healthy meals on his own. EC CM reached out to Wyoming County Office for the Aging and spoke with the TA department, where she was able to locate an affordable efficiency apartment in Wyoming County for Mr. F. After Mr. F was approved to stay in the apartment, EC CM reached out to New York Connects in Wyoming County to continue his assistance with home-delivered meals, SNAP, and finding furniture for his new apartment.

This is just one example of how the county offices for the aging and their partners assist individuals at risk every day for safety, affordability, mental health and livability. Through much-needed investments, the Governor's proposed Executive Budget continues to strengthen NYSOFA's and the network of aging services' foundation that will help individuals access needed services, age in their communities of choice and lead healthy lives by:

- Continuation of the largest investment in NYSOFA state history by continuing the \$35 million to address documented unmet needs statewide. This brings the total invested to \$268 million since 2019.
- Increasing by \$5 million funding via Targeted Inflationary Increase (TII) for vital services such as in-home care, nutrition, transportation, case management, and caregiver supports.
- Doubles funding to expand the Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORC) model, which brings together health and social services to help older adults age in place.

- Protecting individuals from scams and fraud through training and a public awareness campaign.
- Developing recommendations for a one-stop for all benefits that older adults may be eligible for across state agencies to put money back in their pockets.
- Continuing the \$2.9 million to expand efforts to combat isolation, bridge the digital divide, improve overall health and wellness, reducing depression, addressing elder abuse, and strengthening NYSOFA's stipend program for volunteer recruitment and retention.

Housing and Household Affordability for Older Adults

Most people want to remain in their own homes and communities as they age. Doing so is possible if housing is designed or modified for aging-in-place and a community has affordable housing options for varying life stages. The following proposals build further on this foundation by advancing additional protections for households:

- Addressing the cost of automobile insurance through common-sense steps to battle fraud, limit damages paid out to bad actors and ensuring that consumers, not insurance companies, are prioritized. Car ownership and insurance protections are especially vital for many older adults to remain independent. Older adults are among the safest drivers, but many also struggle with high insurance premiums and other costs that put their independence at risk.
- Accelerate affordable housing to build more housing and speed up approvals.
- Funding to expand access to modular starter homes.
- Manufactured home loan fund to provide upgrades to mobile home parks.
- Ending state taxes on tips up to \$25,000 annually.
- Reducing home insurance costs for the 1.8 million older adults who own their own homes. Discounts will help homeowners who take positive actions to improve their homes and increase opportunities to age in community through safety features, roof improvements, weatherproofing, storm shutters, smoke alarms, theft protection (security systems), and more.
- Protecting older-adult renters (approximately 1 million older adults are renters) by holding landlords accountable for failing to fix building issues and helping older adults who may be particularly vulnerable to this form of exploitation. The Governor's plan would also update the Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption (SCRIE) and DRIE – raising income limits from \$50,000 to \$75,000 – which will prevent evictions.
- Energy efficiency/cost savings for older adults – by expanding the EmPower program for low- and moderate-income ratepayers; and investing in and promoting the Energy Affordability Program (EAP), EmPower+, and the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP). These proposals will reduce energy costs for low-income families, improve

energy efficiency, and/or provide cash assistance and monthly discounts to make improvements affordable, further securing New Yorkers' ability to age in community.

- Controlling utility costs for older adults – by removing hidden fees; requiring data centers to pay their fair share of energy costs; protecting tenants from utility shutoffs if a landlord doesn't pay bills; and cap energy costs at 6% of income for low-to-moderate-income residents.

Food and Nutrition Support for Older Adults

Nutrition plays a crucial role in maintaining health, independence, and quality of life for older adults, helping to prevent chronic diseases and support overall well-being. New York's nutrition program for older adults – the nation's largest – provides over 22 million meals annually to more than 250,000 older adults, supporting physical health and well-being while combatting social isolation.

- Investing in food banks and pantries (2,700 pantries statewide).
- Providing grants for capital costs to upgrade infrastructure, equipment and vehicles.
- Modernize EBT with chips to eliminate SNAP theft.
- Expand free summer meals and rural summer meals.

Public Safety and Consumer Protections for Older Adults

- Hold federal officers accountable for breaking the law by establishing a right to sue federal officers for Constitutional violations.
- Protecting safe access to worship – prohibiting protests within 25 feet of houses of worship.
- Autonomous vehicle pilot expansion – providing additional options for older adults who lack transportation access, which is vital for preserving independence and social inclusion.
- Install subway platform edge to reduce falls in subway system.
- Modernize and streamline crime victims' system for easier access.
- Protecting private data by requiring data brokers to register with the state and providing a process for individuals to be able to delete information collected.
- Labeling AI-generated content, including election-related content.
- Prohibiting misleading discounts in online sales.

Health Care Services for Older Adults

- Expanding scope of practice to allow licensed workforce to take on more tasks.
- Reducing prescription drugs costs by utilizing the states purchasing power.
- Increasing awareness of the availability and benefits of hospice and palliative care.
- Protecting vaccine access and ensuring that New York can set its own immunization standards based on accepted medical science and public health needs.

This budget is about so much more than any one program or service. It must be examined holistically. Older adults, like all New Yorkers, touch many different systems in their day-to-day lives, which is why the Governor's systemic investments are so important.

NYSOFA will continue to engage anyone, anywhere who can help improve the lives of older New Yorkers. I am especially proud of our cross agency work such as:

- Our partnership with the Department of Veterans' Services to model our unique transportation solution for veterans who have difficulty getting to their appointments at the various VAs – a need which has shown to increase suicide risk,
- Our partnership with DOH to coordinate vaccination safety and access messaging and joining to promote the state's Master Plan for Aging,
- Our partnership with OASAS to expand the SBIRT to older populations. SBIRT is a comprehensive, integrated, public health approach to the delivery of early intervention and treatment services for persons with substance use disorders, as well as those who are at risk of developing these disorders.

There are other examples as well. We will continue our work to ensure that all New Yorkers, regardless of their circumstances, have access to our services and those services provided by other state and local agencies and providers.

Thank you—I appreciate the opportunity to be here, and I am happy to answer any questions.