

Written Testimony of Tori Strawter-Tanks

**“Breaking the Cycle of Senior Loneliness:
Strengthening Family and Community Support”**

Hearing before the United States Senate Special Committee on Aging

Wednesday, March 12, 2025, 3:30 p.m.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. My name is Tori Strawter-Tanks, and I have the privilege of serving as the Director of Senior Services in Clayton County, Georgia, and the President and Founder of the Georgia Association of Senior Centers (GASC). I am honored to be here today to discuss a critical issue facing older adults across the country—social isolation and the vital role senior centers and other aging programs play in combatting it.

Senior centers are hubs of high-impact exercise, cultural engagement, physical wellness, and lifelong learning. The Older Americans Act contributes to funding senior centers and other important aging services, and protecting that funding is critical to ensuring older adults continue to have access to the services I have spent my life carrying out.

Across Georgia, and throughout the nation, senior centers provide vital programs that enhance the lives of older adults, keep them socially engaged, and support their overall well-being. These include:

Health, wellness, aquatic, technology, and fitness classes, theatrical productions, cultural arts programs, trips, and evidence-based programs. This programming plays a vital role in improving seniors' physical health, reducing fall risks, preventing chronic disease, enhancing mental well-being, fostering creativity, promoting social engagement, strengthening community connections, and bridging the generational digital divide.

At Frank Bailey Senior Center in Riverdale, Georgia, we saw firsthand the extraordinary potential of older adults when Ms. Dorothy Steel, who

started her acting career at age 80, took her first acting class at our center. She went on to become a Hollywood sensation, starring as a tribal elder in Marvel's *Black Panther* and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, proving that dreams don't have expiration dates.

Ms. Steel's appeared in several other films. Her story is a testament to the power of senior centers to unlock potential and rewrite the narrative of aging.

Another essential service that senior centers provide is congregate meals. For many older adults, these meals aren't just about food; they are about connection, dignity, and community.

- Congregate meals ensure that seniors receive balanced, nutritious food, reducing the risk of malnutrition and diet-related illnesses.
- They combat isolation by providing opportunities for older adults to gather, talk, and form meaningful relationships.
- For some seniors, this may be the only hot meal they receive in a day.

Without adequate funding for congregate meal programs, like those provided through the Older Americans Act, too many older adults risk going hungry or becoming further isolated.

Along the same line, home-delivered meals also provide nutritious food, social interaction, and wellness checks for older adults who may not be able to leave their homes. These services are especially critical for those who are aging alone, without family or other community support.

Additionally, transportation services provided through assistance from federal funding help seniors get to their medical appointments, buy fresh and healthy food at the grocery store, and see their friends—rather than being isolated at home because they are not able to drive.

Beyond their social and emotional benefits, senior centers and other aging programs save our economy billions of dollars annually. Research

has shown that healthy, active seniors who participate in community-based programs reduce healthcare costs significantly—both for themselves and for taxpayers.

We cannot overlook the **sandwich generation**, those caring for aging parents while supporting their children. As the senior population grows, working caregivers face mounting financial, emotional, and logistical challenges.

When older adults stay active, healthy, and engaged, it eases the burden on their families. Without proper investment in senior centers and community-based services, caregiving falls heavily on adult children already juggling careers, finances, and family life.

Access to social engagement, nutritious meals, health programs, and transportation supports not just seniors, but their families, workforce retention, and the economy. Yet, despite their proven benefits, senior centers remain underfunded, leaving many older adults struggling with barriers like transportation, awareness, and lack of investment.

If we are serious about combatting senior isolation and improving public health, we must:

1. Expand funding for senior centers and other aging services
2. Improve transportation access, especially in rural areas so that older adults can actively participate in community life
3. Strengthen digital inclusion for seniors so they can stay connected in a technology-driven world
4. Recognize senior centers as essential infrastructure to support aging in place, health, and well-being
5. Invest in meal programs to fight food insecurity, combat isolation, and promote nutrition for older adults
6. Support caregivers by ensuring seniors have access to services that promote independence.

Social isolation is not just an individual problem, it's a public health crisis with consequences as severe as smoking or obesity. But, senior centers and programs like congregate and home-delivered meals offer a proven solution, helping older adults not only stay socially engaged but thrive in ways they never imagined.

When we invest in senior centers, we are not just enriching lives, we are saving money, strengthening families, supporting working caregivers, and ensuring a better future for generations to come.

Thank you for your time and commitment to this issue. I look forward to your questions and to working together to build a stronger, more connected future for our nation's seniors.