

Testimony of

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Before the

U.S. Special Committee on Aging

On the

Reauthorization of the

Older Americans Act

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Chairman Kohl, Senator Casey and other Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today. I am pleased to be able to share with you my thoughts on the Older Americans Act and how the programs it created help me manage my health and independence and remain living alone in my home at 92 years of age.

Throughout my life, I have always strived to be an independent woman. I was born in 1918 in Methuen, Massachusetts, graduated from Chelmsford High School, and then from Lowell Commercial College in 1937. I consider myself very much a child of the Great Depression and have continued to live by the values of economy, thrift and self-reliance that I learned during my formative years.

During World War II, I supported the war effort by serving as a Red Cross volunteer, working in the Remington ammunition factory, and faithfully purchasing the war bonds that supported our efforts. My husband and I married once he returned from serving overseas, and he took advantage of furthering his education with the help of the GI Bill of Rights. We moved to York, Pennsylvania in 1948, and bought our first and only home there in 1954. This is the same home I live in today. Our two sons still live near me in Pennsylvania, and our daughter resides in New Hampshire, where our family has traditionally spent every summer.

An old song by Joseph Burke called “A Little Bit Independent” is my theme song, if you will. “A little bit independent in your walk, a little bit independent in your talk...a little bit independent in your smile, a little bit independent in your style...and yet you’re easy on the eyes”. I have worked throughout my life to be an independent woman, to find my strengths and use them, whether in service to my family, community or country; or simply as a self-reliant individual in my own right.

In addition to raising my three children, I also helped my husband start up his own advertising business and worked at several of my own jobs over the years. In the early 1960s, I increasingly became involved in the York community, which was undergoing a turbulent time, with tensions high over racial issues. I was sensitive to the issues of prejudice and had friends with similar concerns and motivation. In conjunction with the YWCA, a program was initiated to mentor inner-city adolescent girls. I actively worked with that program, called the Cookes’ Club, for six years, devoting time each week to provide support and diverse experiences to these vulnerable young women.

I was also heavily involved in the preparation and planning for the York “Charette”, which was held in 1970. The Charette was a weeklong process engaging community participation and national expertise to examine barriers to positive community relations and serious gaps in equitable service. The result was the development of a blueprint for community change at a time when challenges were extensive and tensions were high.

Eventually, my community service activities led to my election to the York City Council in 1971. I went on to serve six years on the Council, and then was elected as the first female mayor of York in 1977. I later served as Deputy Controller for the City of York for several years. So I know something about management, government, and the challenging choices faced by decision makers as to the best use of taxpayer dollars.

After my public service career, when many people consider retirement, I acquired a real estate license and spent the next eighteen years facilitating the purchase of commercial and residential properties. I retired just 11 years ago at 81 years of age. I have been on my own now for 10 years, since my husband, Howard Marshall, passed away in 2001.

I am grateful for the companionship and support of my children and my neighbors. Many of us in my neighborhood are long-time residents. Our tight-knit community is essentially “aging in place” together and helping each other remain in our homes for as long as possible. My sons do not live in the same town, but coordinate schedules so that one of them visits me daily. When I was battling cancer three years ago, I sought medical treatment near my daughter in New Hampshire.

I am proud to still be an independent woman. I want to be able to stay in my home, near my family and neighbors. It is important to maintain my physical health to ensure I can continue to live on my own. I make it a priority to exercise, eat well balanced meals, take medications as prescribed, and follow up with my physicians. And stay active.

I have seen first hand— as a volunteer, community leader, elected official and businesswoman— how important it is for a community to maximize its human and financial resources; create efficient systems; leverage other funding, whether that’s federal, state or private dollars; and support its most vulnerable members. It was hard for me to ask for and accept assistance, but I can’t do all of the things that I used to. I have the love and support of my three children, but we still needed to reach out beyond our family for some assistance. I am truly grateful that the York County Area Agency on Aging and the providers they work with are there for me and thousands of other seniors in my community.

So how does this work in my case? I have a care manager at the Area Agency on Aging who helps me and my family figure out what things we need to put in place to maintain my health and independence. She was able to connect me to the home-delivered meals program; and if, in the future, I need additional supports, services or even just information, she will be ready and able to assist me.

Three times a week, a volunteer from the local senior center delivers meals to me in my home. On Monday and Wednesday, they bring a hot meal for that day and a cold one for the next day. On Fridays, I just get one hot meal for that day, because there's limited funding to provide the service on the weekends. Since good nutrition is essential to health and wellness and I cannot cook for myself the way I used to, I appreciate the meal service. But it's also nice to have a friendly visitor check in to make sure I am safe and doing well. It's too easy for older adults living alone like me to become socially isolated or to suffer sudden health deterioration and not be able to access help.

I understand that the home-delivered meal service is funded in part by federal dollars through the Older Americans Act, which leverages state and county funding, as well as voluntary contributions by participants or other private donors. Working under guidance from the U.S. Administration on Aging and the Pennsylvania Department on Aging, the county-based Area Agencies on Aging in my state then customizes a host of home and community-based services and supports to meet the needs of older adults and caregivers in that area. The Area Agency on Aging then contracts the delivery of many of these services out to local providers, such as senior centers, other aging services programs, or even for-profit companies such as the one that makes and packages the meals I receive.

What's fascinating to me is the range of services and supports that older adults can receive under the Older Americans Act. While the nutrition programs are a core element, the Act also allows the coordination and provision of senior transportation, in-home care, help with home maintenance and modification, care managers like the one I have, legal services, health and wellness programs, public information and referral services, and the list goes on and on. There's even a part of the Act focused on the family caregivers who give so much of their time, love and money to help older relatives. To help them help us!

And we can't forget senior centers, which are more important than ever to help older adults stay connected to their community. Senior centers offer opportunities for good nutrition in a social setting as well as opportunities to engage in active and educational programs. From aerobic classes to learning how to use a computer to communicate by e-mail, seniors depend on this link in their communities across this nation.

Many recipients of services are like me—they just need one or two little bits of help. Others may need a more intensive set of services to maintain their independence, but the Act is flexible that way and allows the senior to customize their care plan to just what they need to stay healthy. Even if you need a high level of supports and services, odds are that receiving this care in your home is still more affordable for you and the taxpayers than if you end up in a nursing home. As our leaders struggle to balance the budget and reduce the deficit, the cost savings that Older Americans Act programs generate are even more critical.

The beauty of the Older Americans Act is that it allows you to retain your dignity, health and independence with just a little bit of support. It forms the critical glue that holds together all the other supports I have: my adult children, my friends and neighbors, and my own determination to age in place. Without those key pieces of the puzzle, I would not be able to still be living well and in my home of 57 years. So I can still be “a little bit independent in my walk”!

My story is not necessarily a unique one. My peers and I have served our families, communities and country for many years and, with the right balance of help, we can continue to remain contributing members of society and maintain our health, independence and dignity for as long as possible.

With the reauthorization of the Act before Congress this year, I urge this committee and your colleagues in the Senate and House to understand how vital these “little bits of support” are to millions of older Americans determined to age in place. We need to reauthorize this landmark legislation in a timely and bipartisan fashion in order to modernize what needs updating, strengthen what is already working so well, and prepare our country for the wave of Baby Boomers standing behind my generation.

Thank you, Senator Kohl and Members of the Aging Committee, for inviting me to share my thoughts about the Older Americans Act with you here today.