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Written Testimony

United States Senate Special Committee on Aging Hearing "Renewing Our Commitment:

How the Older Americans Act Uplifts Families Living with Aging-Related Diseases"

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Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Gillibrand, and members of the Committee - thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Erick Montealegre, and I live in Broward County, Florida. I'm a family caregiver, a volunteer with the Alzheimer's Association, and a small business owner in the senior care field. I've only been in this field for a short time - about a year and a half - but every day reminds me just how vital programs supporting older adults are, not just for families like mine in Florida, but for the nearly 12 million family caregivers nationwide who are caring for someone living with Alzheimer's.

Today, I speak to you first and foremost as a son - one of four adult children doing our best to care for our father, Alberto, who is living with stage 3 mild cognitive impairment. I am proud to have him here with me today. As November is National Family Caregivers Month, it makes today's hearing especially meaningful.

Dad was diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment five years ago, after we first began noticing changes in 2019. Initially, he lived on his own, proud of his independence. But over time, it became clear he needed more support and moved in with my sister. We soon found ourselves learning, often by trial and error, how to balance his independence with safety - and how to find resources that would help him stay connected to his family and his community.

Caregiving, as many of us here know, is emotionally taxing, physically demanding, financially challenging and a full-time responsibility. With the help of our local Area Agency on Aging, we accessed services under the Older Americans Act, which have made a world of difference to his quality of life. At first, Dad received home-delivered meals, which ensured he had healthy food and provided the reassurance of a daily check-in. He then began attending a local adult day center, which has become the heart of his day-to-day life - and, in many ways, the heart of my

story. Dad now participates in many activities that keep him engaged and happy, like piano and art. He is able to exercise regularly and safely at the gym they have on-site. He also gets to play chess daily, which is something he has enjoyed throughout his life and allows him to remain socially and mentally engaged. He's 84 years old and, since attending the center, he has taken up dancing – which has been a surprise to all of us. It's encouraging to see him enjoying something new at this stage of life and it gives us hope in his ability to hold back the progression of the disease.

The center provides much more than just recreation. It gives him cognitive stimulation, physical activity, social connection, and dignity. And for my siblings and me, it gives us respite and peace of mind. Knowing he's in a safe, engaging environment allows us to focus on our own families and careers without constant worry. I truly believe that the structure, consistency, and connection that the center provides are key reasons why my father is still doing as well as he is today. It has allowed me to step back from being a “care manager” and freed me to spend time with him as his son.

Dad immigrated to the United States from Colombia back in the 1970s. Over the course of his disease, he's lost some of his English and now speaks primarily Spanish. This can make it difficult for us to communicate with him on complicated topics, such as retirement benefits and planning. The center employs bilingual staff who can speak with him in his native language, helping him and us understand complicated issues around decisions that need to be made. It's hard to overstate what a relief it is to have caregivers who truly understand him and speak his language. They can pick up on nuances in his speech that even I sometimes miss.

Hispanics are one and a half times more likely to develop Alzheimer's disease, making it all the more important to prioritize high-quality, culturally and linguistically appropriate programs. Programs funded through the Older Americans Act are doing exactly that - meeting people where they are and honoring their story. In my culture, caring for our elders is part of who we are, and I hope my children see that example and carry it forward.

Reauthorizing and strengthening the Older Americans Act is an investment in families, dignity, and community. Its programs provide families like ours with structure, valuable resources, support, and hope. Hope that my siblings and I can give Dad the best care possible while balancing our own lives. And hope that, as our country ages, no family will have to walk this journey alone.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.