

Written Testimony of Temitope Aiyejorun Walker, Ph.D.
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“Leveraging State-Level Access and Partnerships to Address Senior Hunger”
United States Senate Special Committee on Aging
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Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Scott, and Members of the Committee, thank you for holding this hearing today to address access to healthy and affordable food and to highlight some of the senior hunger work and initiatives as well as their impact on older adults. I am honored to provide my testimony today about some of the tremendous work occurring across Georgia.

Summary of My Current Role, Connection, and Background in Aging

I have over a decade of experience in evaluating, addressing, and raising awareness about the holistic needs of older adults. I came to my current role having obtained my doctorate in Foods and Nutrition, a graduate certificate in Gerontology, and taught an evidence-based program offered as one among the Older Americans Act (OAA) Wellness programs, Chronic Disease Self-Management Program (CDSMP) at the University of Georgia. My dissertation project titled, “The impact of SNAP participation on food purchasing practices, diet quality, and food insecurity among low-income older adults” exposed me to the impact of critical support services and resources available to older adults while giving me practical experience in public assistance attainment.

Dissertation Work with SNAP-Eligible Older Adults (Completed in 2018)

- The purpose of the study was to better understand the changes in food purchasing practices, nutrition, and health of SNAP (food stamp)-eligible older adults living in Georgia who transition to being SNAP recipients
 - Utilized in-depth interviews, interviewer-administered surveys, diet recall, food security assessments, grocery receipt collection, and grocery shopping observation
 - Utilized established SNAP application assistance program, Georgia CAFE
 - Recruitment from Northeast Georgia and Metro-Atlanta
 - The findings suggest that SNAP benefit receipt affects food purchasing practices of low-income older adults and that identifying changes in key food purchasing practices related to SNAP benefit receipt could inform strategies to maximize the impact of SNAP benefits on improving food security and nutrition of low-income older Americans (*Walker & Lee, 2020*).
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I was able to conduct this novel study because of the unique training I received as a student to provide SNAP application assistance to older adults and those receiving disability benefits that was offered at my graduate school. Within a year of my training and volunteer work, I received a graduate assistantship to serve as program coordinator for Georgia CAFE which is an acronym

that stands for Community Advocacy to Access Food Stamps for the Elderly and Disabled, the first-ever SNAP application assistance program targeted to low-income older Georgians.

Georgia CAFE: A SNAP Advocacy Initiative (2012-2017) *

- Provided SNAP application assistance to low-income older Georgians and those receiving disability benefits in approximately 30 urban and rural counties
- Provided community and professional advocate training face-to-face and online
- Provided community awareness and education via print and online brochures, conducting workshops, and community presentations about participation in SNAP
- Supported evidence-based policy advocacy which included provision of data analysis needed for the application and approval for Georgia's Standard Medical Expense Deduction for older adults and those receiving disability benefits in Georgia

**A University Led-Government-Community Partnership Supported by USDA SNAP Outreach Grant Funding*

I currently serve as Georgia's first Senior Hunger and Nutrition Coordinator. In my role, I manage the implementation of Georgia's first of its kind stand-alone State Plan to Address Senior Hunger implemented in December 2017. I work in concert with university, government, and community partners to help provide training, raise awareness, and support state policies and initiatives to improve the food security of older Georgians. Through my work implementing Georgia's State Plan, I assist in developing and offering technical assistance to the twelve Senior Hunger Coalitions which are housed within the twelve Area Agencies on Aging; attend and conduct meetings with the regional senior hunger coalitions; and monitor annual reports for resources identified, gaps in service delivery, and innovation and strategy development. I also serve as a subject matter expert in senior hunger in Georgia.

Accomplishments of Georgia's first state plan to address senior hunger (December 2017)

- Hired a Senior Hunger & Nutrition Coordinator (SFY19)
 - Developed 12 regional senior hunger coalitions (SFY19)
 - Established a Senior Hunger Interagency Council (SHIC) (SFY22)
 - Began coordinating data collection and analysis across agencies (SFY21)
 - Began developing and providing education and training (SFY19)
 - Expanded access to the National Foundation to End Senior Hunger's *What a Waste Program* (SFY20)
 - Began providing entrepreneurial mini-grants (SFY19)
 - Transitioned Standing Summit Committee to Senior Hunger Advisory Council (SFY22)
 - Developed State Senior Hunger Toolkit and launched on initiative website (SFY22)
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The other critical connection that informs my testimony today is that I work within Georgia's State Unit on Aging which administers state and federal funding and supports the work of our twelve Area Agencies on Aging, which coordinate Older Americans Act services. Specifically, our division oversees non-Medicaid Home and Community-Based Services that includes a range of solutions to help older Georgians and their caregivers live safe, healthy, and independent lives in their homes and communities for as long as possible. In late 2020 and in 2021, the Division of Aging Services received an additional \$44 million in stimulus funding from the Consolidated Appropriations Act and the American Rescue Plan Act, for Home and Community-Based Services and to promote vaccine access. This funding also included \$25 million for meals and \$17.5 million for supportive services. Much work and effort has gone into ensuring our seniors receive the support they need throughout the pandemic and beyond. Many of the additional services provided were made possible through this supplemental funding.

Georgia's Division of Aging Services Addressing Food Insecurity

Here are some of the initiatives we are proud of in Georgia:

- Since 2012, the division has been assessing food insecurity among all clients receiving meals as a provision of the OAA. Through a 6-item assessment module, the division determines which older Georgians are most at risk and in need of nutritional services. (*Lee et al, 2011*).
- In State Fiscal Year 2022, 4.7 million meals were provided to older adults or adults with disabilities through the home-delivered and congregate meal programs.
- In December 2017, Georgia implemented the first State Plan to Address Senior Hunger in the nation. The plan addresses senior hunger through five focus areas: ***Today's Seniors, Health Impact, Food Access, Food Waste and Reclamation, and Meeting the Community's Needs***. Following the meeting of all recommendations of the plan in 2022, work has now begun on the development of the next State Plan on Senior Hunger (*Georgia Department of Human Services Division of Aging Services, 2017*).
- An online SNAP Training Module for the Aging Services Network is currently in development through a federally funded partnership between the Divisions of Aging Services and Family and Children Services. This training module will include key information about SNAP for older adults and adults with disabilities. Those who take the training will be supported in offering workshops about SNAP to the seniors they serve and will receive information about application assistance services in their region.
- The division is fostering partnerships across government, university, private, and non-profit sectors to address research, resource, and funding gaps.

Demographics of Older Georgians are Similar and Unique in Comparison

As is the case nationally, Georgia's older adult population is growing rapidly. Georgia is home to just over 2 million older adults, accounting for 20 percent of the state population. The division serves meals to just over 30,000 clients through the OAA Nutrition Program. The percentage of

our older adults who are living with a disability, have obtained less than a high school diploma, and who may be living in poverty is comparable to the national percentages. Georgia has a high level of diversity among our older adults that is reflected in race, ethnicity, culture, and cuisine. Accepting this diversity as an opportunity, Georgia continues to serve as a model in best practices and what is possible with proper leveraging of partners across different sectors of the state.

Georgia By the Numbers

- ~2 million seniors live in GA.
 - Georgia ranked 7th amongst states seniors are moving to.
 - 20% of Georgia's population are seniors.
 - 55.6% of Georgia's seniors are women.
 - Over 75.5% of seniors receive social security.
 - 10.7% of seniors live in poverty.
 - 31% of seniors have a disability.
 - 79.2% of seniors own a home.
 - 38.6% of seniors live alone.
 - 15.8% have less than a high school education.
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However, I must recognize our high rates of food insecurity among our division clients though rates have been steadily declining, and we are meeting our charge to target those in greatest economic and/or social need. OAA client food insecurity rates fell from 17.0% (2018) to 14.5% (2019) to 11.7% (2020). But even in that, there is a story. The story of seniors in Georgia and across the nation is complex. It is about the factors that impact their lives.

- *It is working, receiving Social Security benefits, or no income at all.*
- *It is owning or renting a home; or it is homelessness.*
- *It is living alone; or living with multiple generations under one roof.*
- *It is choosing which utility bills to pay first; or whether to buy some or all their medicine.*
- *It is figuring out what health coverage will best meet their needs and is affordable.*
- *It is Alzheimer's and other Dementias, or other chronic health conditions.*
- *It is being a caregiver for their parents, their children, grandchildren, or relatives.*
- *It is reaching out to get the word on the next food box giveaway, or local pantry options.*
- *It is finally seeking assistance to apply for SNAP, no matter the stigma, the amount, or the steps needed.*
- *It is trying to find or maintain transportation for food, health, or connecting to others.*
- *It is a lack of broadband access or not being tech savvy.*
- *It is their faith.*
- *It is the love of pets and taking care of them.*
- *It is adjusting to a place they didn't grow up in and navigating in different languages.*
- *It is resilience of decades of getting by to make ends meet.*

Impact of the Older Americans Act (OAA) Nutrition Program and Farm Bill Programs to Address the Needs of Older Georgians

Poverty and food insecurity are associated with lower purchases of food, low fruit and vegetable consumption, and lower diet quality (*Drewnowski & Specter, 2004*). The Older Americans Act Nutrition Program and the Farm Bill programs such as *SNAP, the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, also known as Senior Food Boxes*, play critical roles in addressing food insecurity for older adults. It is fitting that the Committee is recognizing 50 years of the Older Americans Act Nutrition Program which has been a critical support for our seniors.

Georgia has recognized the impact of these programs in helping to meet the needs of our nearly 30,000 meal recipient older adults. The State Unit on Aging has worked to leverage these programs to improve food security among our older adults by:

- Partnering with our aging services network and other state agencies to support access to Older Americans Act services and other key provisions of the Farm Bill.
- Assessing food insecurity among individuals receiving meals as a provision of the Older Americans Act to determine which older Georgians are most at risk and in need of nutrition services. Georgia has been doing this since 2012 (*Lee et al, 2011*).
- Linking research and aging services and policies has shown improved access to nutrition and aging services and strengthened their impact.
 - Georgia's Senior SNAP Initiative began in 2012 born out of the Georgia Food Stamp Workgroup (*Stakeholders in State Government and in Community*) to increase SNAP participation and raise the levels of nutrition among senior households. It also sought to improve efficiency and delivery of SNAP benefits to seniors as a demonstration project with a simplified SNAP application process.
 - Georgia successfully applied for and received approval to have a Standard Medical Expense Deduction in 2015 for the SNAP application process by mapping Georgia's state aging administrative data with CMS Medicare Data (*Lee, 2013*).
 - There was a protective impact of OAA Nutrition Program and SNAP on maintaining food security status among our division clients during the early pandemic period (*Lee et al, 2022*).

Key Observations in Our State's Work to Address Senior Hunger

There are some key observations in our work in Georgia that have implications for the greater work happening across the nation to address senior hunger:

- Food insecurity and hunger among older adults is a multidimensional problem, and the solution should be a whole-person approach that includes all relevant programs, agencies, and stakeholders.
- The Georgia Senior Hunger State Plan uses exemplary approaches with focus areas, including *Today's Seniors*, *Health Impact of Senior Hunger*, *Food Access*, *Food Waste and Reclamation*, and *Meeting the Community's Needs* which broadens the diversity of stakeholders at the table.
- Interagency collaboration backed by adequate funding to identify eligibility for wrap-around services.
- Leveraging partnerships across government, university, private, and non-profit sectors is critical in assessing, implementing, and evaluating nutrition and aging programs, initiatives, and policies.
- The need is greater than the funding and resources of any one agency and thus the recommendation of creating an interagency council to focus on senior hunger from different state agency perspectives allows for information sharing and a pooling of resources.
- Some critical nutrition supports are outside the scope of OAA services (*i.e.*, *SNAP*, *Commodity Supplemental Food Program*, *Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program*, *Housing*, *Transportation*, and *Healthcare*), and as such, they are not funded through the Older Americans Act. However, they remain critical in addressing food insecurity among older adults.
- Allowances for cross-agency referrals is critical to reducing the barriers older adults face when applying for services with similar documentation and eligibility requirements.
- Accounting for the cost of staffing and resources is essential to ensuring adequate funding to carry out critical aging services programs. Inclusion of administrative funding needs can support resource capacity of many programs.
- There is no national model of interagency collaboration in data sharing, service delivery, or program implementation for us to follow and leverage in state work. Therefore, the creation of our interagency council is a pioneering endeavor.

There are many promising practices in the recently published National Strategy to Address Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, which can guide states as they seek to better serve our older adults and improve healthy food access.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today to share my experience in aging and nutrition and to share some of the successful work happening to address senior hunger in Georgia. I welcome any questions you may have for me.

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