

Older Americans Act

For more than 60 years, the Older Americans Act (OAA) has been the cornerstone of federal programs that help older adults remain healthy, independent and engaged in their communities. The OAA supports a nationwide aging network that provides nutrition services, disease prevention programs, caregiver support, transportation and other community-based services that allow older adults to age in place.

The OAA Nutrition Program, authorized under Title III-C, is the nation's largest community-based nutrition assistance program for older adults. Through congregate meals and home-delivered meals, the program helps reduce food insecurity, prevent malnutrition, improve health outcomes and combat social isolation. **Every day, the Senior Nutrition Program serves nearly one million meals through approximately 5,000 local providers nationwide.**

Why the Older Americans Act Matters

The United States is experiencing unprecedented growth in its older adult population. As individuals live longer, the prevalence of chronic disease, food insecurity, social isolation and nutrition-related health concerns continues to increase. OAA programs provide essential services that address these challenges while supporting the ability of older adults to remain in their homes and communities.

Nutrition is essential to healthy aging. Proper nutrition makes it possible to maintain health and functionality later in life and it positively impacts social, cultural and psychological quality of life in older adults. OAA nutrition programs serve a population with a wide variety of healthcare needs, but nutrition is a common denominator. The congregate and home-delivered meal programs, which generally provide one-half or

more of participants' total food intake, ensure that low-income older adults have the nutritional resources they need to prevent or manage chronic health conditions.

More than 90% of adults age 65 and older have at least one chronic condition, and nearly 80% have two or more chronic conditions. Many of the most common chronic diseases among older adults can be prevented or managed in part through access to appropriate nutrition services. Dehydration and malnutrition also remain significant health concerns and can contribute to hospitalization, functional decline and increased healthcare costs.

The Role of Registered Dietitian Nutritionists

OAA authorizes nutrition screening, nutrition education, nutrition counseling and related nutrition services. RDNs play a critical role in helping older adults prevent and manage chronic diseases, address nutrition risk factors and maintain functional independence.

RDNs support OAA goals through:

- Nutrition screening and assessment.
- Nutrition counseling and medical nutrition therapy.
- Chronic disease prevention and management.
- Healthy aging education programs.
- Malnutrition identification and intervention.
- Care coordination and referrals to community resources.
- Culturally responsive nutrition services.

Expanding access to RDN-led nutrition services strengthens program outcomes and helps address the growing burden of chronic disease among older adults.

About the Academy

Representing more than 112,000 credentialed nutrition and dietetics practitioners, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics is the world's largest organization of food and nutrition professionals. Many Academy members - registered dietitian nutritionists, nutrition and dietetic technicians, registered, and advanced-degree nutritionists - treat the Medicare population.

Academy Policy Recommendations

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics supports policies that strengthen the Older Americans Act and improve nutrition security for older adults.

Recommendation 1: Increase Funding for OAA Nutrition Programs

Congress should provide robust, sustained funding for congregate and home-delivered meal programs to meet increasing demand and address rising food and labor costs.

Recommendation 2: Expand Access to Registered Dietitian Nutritionists

Federal policymakers should ensure that qualified nutrition professionals, including RDNs, are integrated throughout the aging network at the local, state and national levels. Evidence-based nutrition services should be available to all eligible participants.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen Nutrition Screening and Malnutrition Prevention

Congress and the Administration should support evidence-based nutrition screening, assessment and intervention strategies to identify and address malnutrition and undernutrition risks among older adults.

Recommendation 4: Advance Nutrition Security and Health Equity

OAA programs should continue prioritizing older adults with the greatest economic and social need, including rural populations, communities of color, tribal populations and others at increased risk of food insecurity and poor health outcomes.

Recommendation 5: Promote Food as Medicine Strategies

Congress should support innovative nutrition interventions, including medically tailored meals, nutrition counseling and medical nutrition therapy, that improve health outcomes and reduce healthcare expenditures.

Bottom Line

As Congress considers future reauthorization legislation and annual appropriations, policymakers have an opportunity to strengthen nutrition services and improve access to evidence-based interventions that support healthy aging.

For more information from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, please contact govaffairs@eatright.org.