



**Written Testimony of
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On behalf of the Greater Wisconsin Agency on Aging Resources, Inc. (GWAAR) and
the Wisconsin Aging Advocacy Network (WAAN)**

2021-23 Biennial State Budget

Submitted April 28, 2021

Senator Marklein, Representative Born, and members of the Joint Finance Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the 2021-23 Biennial State budget. These comments are submitted on behalf of the Greater Wisconsin Agency on Aging Resources, Inc. (GWAAR), one of three Area Agencies on Aging in Wisconsin. GWAAR's service area consists of 70 counties (all but Dane and Milwaukee) and the 11 tribes in Wisconsin. Our mission is to deliver innovative support to lead aging agencies as we work together to promote, protect, and enhance the well-being of older people in Wisconsin. I am also commenting on behalf of the Wisconsin Aging Advocacy Network (WAAN), a collaborative group of older adults and associations working with and for Wisconsin's older adults to shape public policy that improves the quality of life of older people throughout the state.

At the local, state, and national level, we are no longer preparing for an historic demographic shift—we are, in fact, deeply immersed in the challenges, realities, and opportunities of a society with a rapidly growing number of older adults. Wisconsin's age 60 and older population has increased by an estimated 63% from 2000 to 2020. A shrinking pool of family caregivers and a critical shortage of direct care professionals has made it increasingly difficult to meet the care needs of many older adults and the more than 120,000 people living with Alzheimer's or another form of dementia in our state. Despite these demographic shifts and increasing demand for services, funding for many of the aging network programs and services has not kept pace.

The losses many families experienced this past year have helped us to become more keenly aware of the varied needs of this population. Age and ageism have been significant risk factors during this pandemic, increasing the physical, psychosocial, and economic burden on older adults. The pandemic has made older adults more vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness which can result in significant negative consequences to health and well-being. Recovery for many of those who were critically ill and hospitalized is expected to take months or even years.

Community based, targeted intervention strategies are needed to address the exacerbation of loneliness, disparities in health and long-term care, and economic security concerns that have long challenged many older adults. Investing in programs and services that support older adults to remain living at home, active in their communities, and contributing to the economy is good for the state budget and good for older adults, their families, and our communities.

WAAN’s budget priorities are based on our members’ experience in directly supporting older adults and caregivers in their communities and include: **ADRC Reinvestment funding; Caregiver Supports** - for both family caregivers and the direct care workforce; **Infrastructure Expansion** - including additional resources for high-speed internet, housing supports, transportation, and voting; and **Lowering Health Care Costs** - including support for proposals reducing prescription drug costs for consumers and addressing Wisconsin’s high rate of deadly falls among older adults.

The Greater Wisconsin Agency on Aging Resources (GWAAR) and the Wisconsin Aging Advocacy Network (WAAN) request your support of the following investments:

Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC) Reinvestment

Pre-, during, and assuredly post-pandemic older adults, people with disabilities, and their families and caregivers turn to ADRC’s as the place to go to get accurate, unbiased information on all aspects of life related to aging or living with a disability. To develop a more reliable, accurate, equitable, and flexible funding formula for ADRCs (**last increased in 2006**) -

WAAN’s Position: Provide an additional \$27.4 million GPR investment to fully fund the current contract requirements (mandated and recommended services), and

Provide approximately \$25 million to provide additional funding to expand/equalize ADRC services across the state:

- Fully Fund **Elder Benefit Specialists** Statewide: \$2,300,000 (**no funding increase for this program since 1997**) For more information see [WAAN's Elder Benefit Specialist Issue Brief](#).
- Expand **Dementia Care Specialist (DCS)** Funding Statewide: \$3,320,000
- Expand **Caregiver Support and Programs**: \$3,600,000 ¹
- Expand **Health Promotion Services**: \$6,000,000
- Expand **Care Transition Services**: \$6,000,000
- Fund **Aging and Disability Resources in Tribes** (Includes 7.0 DCS [\$560,000], plus Disability Benefit Specialist, and Aging & Disability Resource Specialist positions: \$1,180,000)
- Fully Fund **Aging and Disability Resource Support Systems**: \$2,650,000

¹ This proposal is also listed under Family Caregiver Support.

For more information see [WAAN's ADRC Reinvestment Issue Brief](#) and [WCA ADRC Reinvestment](#).

Caregiver Support

- **Direct Care Workforce Support**

To strengthen the workforce to ensure sufficient quality staff to meet our long-term care needs -

WAAN’s Position: Support the ten direct care workforce rates, benefits, and untapped workers proposals included in the final [report](#) of the Governor’s Task Force on Caregiving.

- **Family Caregiver Support**

To sustain family caregivers as the backbone of our health and long-term care systems

WAAN’s Position: Support a \$500,000 annual increase in the Alzheimer’s and Family Caregiver Support Program (AFCSP) and an increase in the maximum household income allowed to qualify from \$48,000 to \$55,000, as well as the family caregiver and home care registry recommendations included in the final [report](#) of the Governor’s Task Force on Caregiving:

- Caregiver Assessment: Tailored Caregiver Assessment and Referral Proposal
- Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC): Reinvestment/Caregiver Support¹
- Family Medical Leave Act Amendments
- The Wisconsin Credit for Caring Act
- The Care Act
- Home Care Provider Registry Pilot

Infrastructure Expansion

- **High-Speed Internet Expansion**

To provide critical connections for older adults to meet health, education, social, and economic needs -

WAAN’s Position: Provide reliable, affordable high-speed internet access to older adults and their families no matter where they live.

For more information see [WAAN High-Speed Internet Issue Brief](#).

- **Housing Support**

To preserve older adults’ quality of life and financial security and help them age in their homes and communities -

WAAN’s Position:

For Older Homeowners

- Increase the qualifying income limit for the WHEDA property tax deferral loan program that provides loans to qualifying older adult homeowners to help pay for property taxes.
- Establish a \$1,000,000 forgivable matching loan fund for low-income older homeowners to add assistive technology, home energy conservation measures, or accessibility modifications.

For Older Renters

- Provide \$500,000 for the establishment of regional tenant resource centers with housing navigators to provide support to property owners and tenants by addressing housing responsibilities, reducing conflict, and avoiding unnecessary evictions, and to connect older adults with housing options that meet their needs.
- Establish a no-interest loan program for landlords making safety and accessibility improvements to affordable rental units with older adult tenants.

For Older Adults Who Are Homeless or Seeking More Affordable Housing

- Match 50% of federal low-income tax credits with state housing development tax credits and require the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority to allocate a dedicated percentage of tax credits to be set-aside for older adult housing in its Qualified Action Plan (\$4,000,000 per annum).
- Require DHS to apply for a demonstration waiver that allows the use of Medicaid funds for intensive case management services to assist MA recipients to obtain permanent housing.

For more information see [WAAN's Housing Issue Brief](#).

• **Transportation Support**

To support the health, well-being, financial security, and community engagement of older Wisconsinites-

WAAN's Position:

- **Increase funding for public transit and specialized transportation**
 - Provide a 20% increase in s.85.22 (capital assistance program for specialized transportation) to assist with replacement or acquisition of new transit vehicles and expand mobility management services. Funding for s.85.22 has not increased since the 2000-2001 budget.
 - Provide inflationary increases for s.85.20 (mass transit operating assistance), s.85.21 (specialized transportation assistance for counties), and s.85.215 (tribal elderly transportation) to ensure we can maintain our existing system while setting the stage for increased funding and capacity in the future.
- **Increase coordination of transportation resources**
 - Develop statutory language that incentivizes cities, towns, villages, and counties to create regional transportation networks.
 - Form an Interdepartmental Coordination Council and Advisory Committee.
- **Remove barriers for volunteer driver programs**
 - Enact legislation prohibiting insurers from creating unnecessary barriers to maintaining personal vehicle insurance for volunteer drivers.
 - Include protections for volunteer driving under the Good Samaritan law.
- **Support statutory authority that would provide local units of government, individually or collaboratively, the ability to raise revenue for transit, infrastructure, and other transportation needs.**

For more information see [WAAN's Transportation Issue Brief](#)

• **Voter Support**

To support safe, accessible, and inclusive elections for older Wisconsin voters

WAAN's Position: Support [recommendations](#) to the voting process to improve voter registration (including automatic voter registration at the DMV), absentee voting, in-person voting at the polls, and voting in residential care facilities.

For more information see [WAAN's Voting Issue Brief](#)

Lowering Health Care Costs

- **Prescription Drug Cost Affordability**

According to the WI Poverty Report (2019), public policies designed to increase the coverage of medical expenses for low-income older adults can do more to help to alleviate the economic hardship felt by this group than almost any other public policy. To ensure all older adults can access the medication they need at a reasonable cost –

WAAN Position: Support proposals included in the Governor’s Task Force on Reducing Prescription Drug Prices final [report](#) that reduce prescription drug costs for consumers, as well as those that improve drug price transparency.

- **Healthy Aging Through Reducing Falls**

Wisconsin has the nation’s highest rate of deadly falls among older adults and the problem is worsening. The rate of deaths from falls among people 65 and older in Wisconsin rose 19.1% from 2016 to 2019, while the nationwide rate increased 7.6% over the same time period. In 2019, 1,675 older adults died from falls. To save lives and reduce costs -

WAAN’s Position: Provide a \$500,000 annual budget appropriation to reduce Wisconsin’s high rate of deadly falls through a statewide support center and proven, locally delivered prevention programs.

For more information see [WAAN's Falls Prevention Issue Brief](#).

We look forward to continuing to work with you throughout the budget process to shape public policy that improves the quality of life for older people throughout the state.

Thank you.

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