

Fully Funded Older Americans Act Crucial to Safety Net, Advocates Say

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Although the Republican budget ax is not falling as heavily on 1996 funding for the Older Americans Act (OAA) as elsewhere, seniors groups are lined up solidly against OAA cuts. The Clinton administration is too.

"Across the board, elderly and disabled programs are facing death from a thousand cuts. At what point does the social safety net become so frayed as to leave too many holes to protect the aged?" asked Steve Protulis, the new executive director of the National Council of Senior Citizens.

In fiscal 1995, OAA programs, funded mostly by the Health and Human Services Department but in one case by the Labor Department and in another by the Agriculture Department, got just more than \$1.4 billion in appropriations.

President Clinton asked for a \$40 million increase for 1996. But the amount approved by the House as part of its 1996 appropriations bill for the departments of Health and Human Services, Labor and Education, when added to the Agriculture Department's contribution, totals \$1.28 billion.

The Senate has not yet taken up the Labor-HHS bill, which Clinton has said he will veto because of cuts in non-OAA programs such as Head Start, but Sens. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) and Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) teamed up in the Senate Appropriations Committee to boost the figure to \$1.34 billion (including the Agriculture contribution).

Senior citizen groups consider the OAA, enacted 30 years ago, an essential part of the social safety net for some of the nation's poorest or most physically and mentally challenged people, although some programs benefit healthy senior citizens as well. It helps fill in the gaps in social protection not covered by Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security and welfare.

It does this through programs ranging from Meals on Wheels (113 million meals brought to people's homes last year) and "congregate feeding" (126 million meals served at senior and community centers) to in-home care for shut-ins, transportation of those unable to get around themselves, and preventive health care. The Labor Department segment of the OAA pro-

gram, Community Services Employment, provides part-time minimum-wage jobs to 100,000 seniors annually.

Cuts in OAA programs, even modest ones, would pain many people, according to spokesmen for the aged.

Take Alzheimer's patients and their families, said Steve McConnell, vice president of the Alzheimer's Association. "There are 4 million people with Alzheimer's, most of them old," he said. "They are mostly cared

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for at home by their families, sometimes by children who can be 50 or 60 years old themselves, sometimes by a 75-year-old wife with health problems and physical limitations of her own.

"Many of the caretakers are of very modest income. They can't afford to hire people to come in and help with caregiving tasks, to pay for putting the

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Alzheimer's patient in a day-care center, to transport them to a doctor's office when needed.

"Funds provided by the Older Americans Act help them do this. These families are stressed beyond belief, and cuts may be the straw that breaks the camel's back for many of them."

Without Meals on Wheels, Jewel Roach, 86, of Huntsville, Ark., said she would have a hard time. She has joint disease, chronic bronchitis and other disabling illnesses that preclude many normal activities. Living on welfare, she gets one home-delivered meal daily because she is unable to cook for herself.

Health and Human Services Assistant Secretary Fernando M. Torres-Gil, who administers OAA, said the re-

ductions are taking place just when the program is needed most.

With other programs being cut or capped, he said, "there may be fewer resources to keep people in their homes instead of having to go to a nursing home or out on the streets. The OAA is the last bastion of helping families to take care of their elders and keep them in the community."

With Congress determined to balance the budget, Rep. John Edward Porter (R-Ill.), chairman of the House Appropriations subcommittee on the Labor and Health and Human Services departments, who favors many of the OAA activities, was forced to make some choices.

"We had to make some very difficult decisions," said Elizabeth Morra, spokeswoman for House Republicans on the Appropriations Committee. "We had to really look at streamlining and downsizing" to save some programs from being killed altogether. "The sky is not going to fall as a result of any of these changes we're making."

Porter decided, said congressional aides, to first guarantee what he considered the most crucial "core programs" at HHS, increasing the appropriation for the National Institutes of Health by \$300 million, for example. But programs considered to have less impact or to duplicate other government programs were cut or killed.

On OAA, he followed the same pattern. Core programs were cut modestly. But some small programs were zeroed out, including a \$25 million program for research on new forms of service delivery, a \$4.5 million ombudsman program for nursing home residents, a \$17 million preventive health care program, a \$4.7 million program to prevent elder abuse and \$2 million for insurance and pension benefits counseling.

The Clinton administration, objecting to the overall cuts, said the small programs provide innovative new approaches to problems. Specter and Harkin restored some of them.

Discussions in the House Economic and Educational Opportunities Committee and Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee on a reauthorization of OAA, whose authorization has expired, are far from over.