



COMING TOGETHER TO ADVOCATE FOR OLDER ADULTS

August 14, 2018

The Honorable Mandy Cohen
Secretary, NC Dept. of Health and Human Services
2001 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-2001

Dear Secretary Cohen:

As President of the NC Coalition on Aging, I am writing today on behalf of the Coalition which is comprised of 69 agency and organizational members as well as dozens of individual members that represent and support our state's aging population. We come together as a collective group to give voice to issues that affect older North Carolinians. We had the pleasure of having you address the Coalition shortly after you came on board as Secretary of DHHS.

The Coalition, first of all, wants to extend our thanks to you, Assistant Secretary for Human Services Michael Becketts, and others involved in the decision making process for selecting Joyce Massey-Smith as Director of the NC Division of Aging and Adult Services. Joyce is a proven leader and her extensive experience in aging and adult services provides her with the knowledge, skills, and ability to move the agency forward at this time when the older adult population in the state is growing by leaps and bounds. She is the right person for the position at the right time, and we are pleased that the Coalition has a good working relationship with her.

The second matter that I write about is to express the utmost concern of the Coalition about the prevalence of food insecurity among our state's older citizens. The most recent (2016) *Feeding America* report on "The State of Senior Hunger in America" ranks North Carolina's older adults 60+ second in the country for being marginally food insecure (20.5%) and fifth for being food insecure (11.6%). Furthermore, a 2014 study of UNC Chapel Hill emergency room visits found that in an eight-week period, 60% of patients 65 and older presenting at the emergency room were malnourished or at risk of malnutrition. This translates to longer hospital stays; more complications with chronic health conditions, falls, and readmissions; and increased health care costs. A 2014 study (Snider, et al.) found that malnourished hospitalized adults have up to 50% higher readmission rates, and a 2011 report (Barker, et al.) noted that malnourished older adults were hospitalized four to six days longer than those who were not malnourished.

Because of the concerns the Coalition has about older adult food insecurity, we recently devoted a full monthly membership meeting to looking at the facts about senior food insecurity in the state, efforts that are underway to address this, and gaps and challenges that exist in decreasing food insecurity among older adults. Although there are many long-standing programs such as the senior congregate nutrition programs and the home delivered meals programs as well as numerous other good efforts in many local communities to connect older adults with food

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resources, sadly not enough is being done to address this issue. For example, here in North Carolina there are approximately 4,000 older adults on the waiting list for congregate or home delivered meals.

We are pleased that the state is continuing to fund the dual eligibles pilot project to increase participation of older adults in the Food and Nutrition Services (food stamp) Program. We do have concerns; however, that information about this Program is not known by many agencies and groups who work with older adults in the state and the participation rate of older adults in food stamps remains low. As of June 30, 2017, only 56.66% of persons 55 years of age and over with incomes less than 125% of the federal poverty level participated in the Food and Nutrition Services Program in the state. We have learned that the Division of Aging and Adult Services is interested in partnering with the Division of Social Services to further outreach efforts to duals so hopefully potential partnering among these agencies can reap results. Efforts such as these are certainly worthy, but a better defined and systematic approach needs to be initiated to tackle the low utilization of food stamps by eligible older adults and the other barriers to food security for this population.

The Coalition asks that the Department take the lead in addressing this challenge. We realize that the Department has a full plate already, but we believe that this issue warrants increased attention and scrutiny due to the sheer numbers of seniors impacted as well as the implications the problem poses for our health and service system, including the increased health care cost of not acting. The Coalition stands ready to assist the Department in any way we can to help tackle this challenge and would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and your staff to discuss how to move forward.

Thank you for the leadership you provide to the Department and for all you have done to strengthen health and human services in North Carolina. We look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,



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cc: Assistant Secretary Michael Becketts
Division Director Joyce Massey-Smith