



**Testimony of Kenneth E. Gordon**

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*“Senior Hunger and the Older Americans Act”*

Before the

**US Senate Committee on  
Health, Education, Labor & Pensions**

**Subcommittee on Primary Health & Aging**

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Thank you Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Paul and members of the Subcommittee on Primary Health and Aging for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing regarding the issue of senior hunger and the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act (OAA). I am deeply honored to be able to speak on behalf of both the older adults and family caregivers who depend upon the senior meal programs authorized by the Older Americans Act, and the thousands of staff and volunteers who make these programs possible throughout our country.

My name is Ken Gordon. I have the privilege of serving as the Executive Director of the Area Agency on Aging for Northeastern Vermont. We're a small, non-profit social service organization serving older adults and family caregivers in the far Northeastern corner of the state, an area bordering Canada to the North, and the state of New Hampshire to the East. It's a rural and heavily wooded area that is home to about 10,000 senior citizens.

While the backcountry of Vermont is beautiful, it's a difficult place to grow old. The winters are harsh, food and fuel costs are high, and public transportation is often lacking. And, like elsewhere in the country, senior hunger remains a vexing problem for older Vermonters. Despite the extraordinary progress we have made in this country over the past 75 years in combating poverty and poor health among older adults, we still face the startling reality that nearly six million seniors (or over 11% of all older adults) from across the United States face the threat of hunger each year.

Unfortunately, hunger among senior citizens is a growing problem. According to the US Census, senior hunger in Vermont and many other states has risen dramatically in recent years. Seniors at the greatest risk of hunger are individuals age 60 - 64 and those living alone in rural areas. Front-line providers are reporting even greater rates of food insecurity since the onset of the economic downturn because family members are less able to help.

The seniors we serve come from all walks of life, both rich and poor. Aging has a way of humbling us all to the realities of birth, death and our short time on this earth. But the majority of the people we serve are older adults of modest means who have played by the rules. They've worked hard throughout their lives, paid taxes, responded to the call for military service, volunteered in their communities and made possible the quality of life we enjoy today. And now, at the end of their lives, they are struggling to make ends meet.

Increasingly, as gasoline, home heating fuel and food prices continue to rise, we see many of the seniors we work with being forced to choose between paying for food, fuel, rent or prescription medicines. Seniors on fixed incomes are particularly vulnerable to price increases. Because food is often the most flexible part of a household budget, it is frequently the first expense to be cut when prices rise.

Hard times are also forcing many of the seniors we work with to choose foods that have limited nutritional value in place of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low fat dairy products and lean proteins. As we know, there are important consequences

associated with the food choices we make, and this is particularly the case for older adults. Over 90% of seniors have one or more nutrition related chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, or high blood pressure that makes their food choices a critical factor to their health and well-being.

In Vermont, and across the country, Older Americans Act nutrition programs play a critical role in combating senior hunger. In concert with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), food commodity programs, community food shelves and other initiatives, they form a hunger “safety net” for older adults and their families. In 2008, the Act’s congregate and home-delivered meal programs served over 240 million senior meals to approximately 2.6 million older adults and family caregivers. The Older Americans Act nutrition programs are extraordinarily popular among seniors because there is little, if any, stigma associated with them, and the eligibility determination process is straight forward and relatively easy to negotiate.

As those of you who have visited the senior nutrition programs in the communities you serve already know, the programs work well because they are collaborative efforts that rely on a partnership between the individuals receiving services, families, private donors, the state and federal governments, faith-based organizations and the community at large. Participants are asked to contribute according to their means through a system of anonymous, voluntary contributions, and they do. In 2009, seniors and their families in Vermont contributed more than \$800,000 towards the cost of operating these programs. Private foundations and

corporate donors regularly provide supplemental funding to support these programs, state and local governments provide their “match” to federal dollars, churches and other community groups lend their facilities to the cause, and volunteers provide much of the labor that makes these programs so successful.

As an aside, I’d like to invite you all to visit the Area Agencies on Aging, senior centers and meal programs in your home communities, to learn for yourselves about these programs and to meet the individuals they serve.

One of our senior meal recipients, a 92 year old widow and retired homemaker from St. Johnsbury, Vermont, by the name of Maybell Peck, has described the home-delivered meals she received as a real “life saver.” And for many, many people across the country, home-delivered meals are precisely that.

Senior meals provide life-sustaining nutrition for hundreds of thousands of older adults each day. Without this service, many seniors would be left hungry and alone. Often, these programs provide the only true meal of the day for many, if not most, of those individuals participating in the program. The volunteers and staff who deliver meals also perform a valuable “check-in” service to ensure the safety of the senior, and are sometimes the only human contact that a person may have for long stretches of time. It is absolutely critical that we invest in these programs, as they serve as an important lifeline for some of the most vulnerable and frail people living in our communities.

It is also important for policy makers to understand who is being served by these programs. In our case, the majority of those being served are older men and women, age 75+, who are living alone on very modest incomes. Many of these seniors are unable to drive, have disabilities, suffer from multiple chronic health conditions, and do not have the physical ability to shop or prepare a meal. Often, they literally have no other way to feed themselves, and are completely reliant upon this service in order to remain living at home.

Mrs. Peck also told us that the meals she received gave her a sense of “power,” and in many respects these meals do empower older adults to remain independent and living at home. Senior nutrition programs help older adults and family caregivers to remain in control of their own lives, while helping the Medicare and Medicaid programs avoid the significant costs of unnecessary hospital care and nursing home placements.

It’s been said that an army marches on its stomach. And, to a large degree, the same can be said about our efforts to manage chronic health conditions and to provide seniors and people with disabilities with alternatives to nursing home care. The Older Americans Act senior nutrition programs form the foundation upon which our Medicaid Waiver home and community-based care programs rest and are essential to these programs’ continued success. They are also an important part of the chronic care initiatives that have been initiated in recent years by the Centers for Medicare and

Medicaid Services that have been proven to enhance the quality of life for those who participate in them and save taxpayer dollars, too.

### **Challenges**

While the Older Americans Act nutrition programs have made a meaningful difference in the quality of life for millions of older Americans, the programs face enormous challenges and are operating under extraordinary stress.

Demand for these programs, particularly in the category of home-delivered meals, has grown significantly in recent years as the population ages, and a growing number of states turn to more cost-effective and consumer-preferred home and community-based alternatives to nursing home care.

Increasingly, because of the rising cost of living, seniors are less able to support these programs via their contributions. Declining participant contributions are the norm for most senior meal programs in the area we serve. A similar trend has been reported nationally.

Funding for these programs has not increased in relation to the sharp rise in food and fuel costs in recent years, nor has it reflected the increased demand that these programs are experiencing as a result of the economic downturn. Additionally, providers in rural and frontier communities face particular challenges in the face of rising gasoline prices.

In response to these challenges, continued federal support for the Older Americans Act senior nutrition programs is critical. Additional funding to ensure the

viability of these programs in the future as the number of older adults grows dramatically is essential to the well-being and security of the nation's older adults and family caregivers. Additional flexibility within the Act to develop innovative approaches and that provides states and Area Agencies on Aging with the flexibility to address local priorities is also critical to sustaining these programs in the future.

Lastly, while the Older Americans Act nutrition programs address a critical need, and they pay for themselves many times over in the form of avoided health care costs, in the view of many, these programs represent something more important. They reflect the sacred obligation that many of us learned early in our lives to honor and respect our elders. These are the folks who made our lives possible and whose labor and sacrifice led to the quality of life that we enjoy today. Collectively, we share in both the obligation and the responsibility to ensure that our elders' basic needs are adequately addressed, and that our country's senior citizens are able to live their lives with the independence and dignity that all Americans deserve.