

# Overview of the Aging Network

## Aging Policy Manual

### 1.1 What is the Aging Network?

The diverse mix of organizations that work on behalf of older people is known as the aging network. The focus of the network is expressed in the declaration of objectives for the federal Older Americans Act, which provides its framework and mission:

“The Congress hereby finds and declares that, in keeping with the traditional American concept of the inherent dignity of the individual in our democratic society, the older people of our Nation are entitled to, and it is the joint and several duty and responsibility of the government of the United States, of the several States and their political subdivisions, and of Indian tribes to assist our older people to secure equal opportunity to the full and free enjoyment of the following objectives:

- 1) An adequate income in retirement in accordance with the American standard of living.
- 2) The best possible physical and mental health which science can make available and without regard to economic status.
- 3) Obtaining and maintaining suitable housing, independently selected, designed, and located with reference to special needs and available at costs which older citizens can afford.
- 4) Full restoration services for those who require institutional care, and a comprehensive array of community based, long term care services adequate to appropriately sustain older people in their communities and in their homes, including support to family members and other persons providing voluntary care to older individuals needing long term care services.
- 5) Opportunity for employment with no discriminatory personnel practices because of age.
- 6) Retirement in health, honor, dignity – after years of contribution to the economy.
- 7) Participating in and contributing to meaningful activity within the widest range of civic, cultural, education and training and recreational opportunities.

- 8) Efficient community services, including access to low-cost transportation, which provide a choice in supportive living arrangements and social assistance in a coordinated manner and which are readily available when needed, with emphasis on maintaining a continuum of care for vulnerable older individuals.
- 9) Immediate benefit from proven research knowledge which can sustain and improve health and happiness.
- 10) Freedom, independence, and the free exercise of individual initiative in planning and managing their own lives, full participation in the planning and operation of community based services and programs provided for their benefit, and protection against abuse, neglect, and exploitation.”

## 1.2 Structure of the Aging Network

The administrative hierarchy of the “formal” aging network includes the U.S. Administration on Aging at the federal level, the Wisconsin Bureau of Aging and Disability Resources at the state level, three area agencies on aging at the regional level, and 82 county and tribal aging units at the local level.

The broader “informal” aging network includes statewide aging organizations like the Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups. It includes the local affiliates of national organizations such as the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). The aging network also extends to other statewide and local public and private service providers, councils on aging, social service departments, multipurpose senior centers and advocacy groups. These highly visible local organizations translate state and federal monies into tangible community based services for older individuals.

Each part of the network operates from a unique perspective with different expectations which directly or indirectly impact the lives of older persons, but all work together with the common interest of improving the quality of life for older individuals.

This chapters of this manual of policies and procedures is for those organizations covered under the “formal” aging network, which receives state and federal funding either directly through contract with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, Bureau of Aging and Disability Resources or by subcontract with a contract agency.

## 1.3 The Administration on Aging

The Administration on Aging (AoA) is the federal agency responsible for programs authorized under the Older Americans Act of 1965. AoA serves as an advocate for older persons at the national level, advises Congress and federal agencies on the

characteristics and needs of older people, and develops programs designed to promote the welfare of older individuals. AoA provides advice, funding and assistance to achieve community based systems of comprehensive social services for older people.

## 1.4 The Bureau of Aging and Disability Resources

Established as part of the Older Americans Act of 1965, state units on aging are agencies of state governments designated as the focal point for matters relating to the needs of older people within the state. The Bureau of Aging and Disability Resources, in the Division of Public Health, in the Wisconsin Department of Health Services is Wisconsin's designated unit responsible for planning, coordinating, funding and evaluating programs for older persons authorized by both federal and state governments.

The focus of the Bureau of Aging and Disability Resources is to improve the quality of life of older residents of Wisconsin by advocating on their behalf, and by promoting the development of a comprehensive and coordinated system of social and health services.

The Code of Federal Regulations describes the federally mandated mission of the Bureau of Aging and Disability Resources:

“...the State Agency on Aging shall be the leader relative to all aging issues on behalf of all people in the State. This means that the State Agency shall carry out a wide range of functions related to advocacy, planning, coordinating, interagency linkages, information sharing, brokering, monitoring and evaluation, designed to lead to the development of a comprehensive and coordinated community based systems in, or serving, communities throughout the State.”

## 1.5 Area Agencies on Aging

Area agencies on aging (AAAs) were established by the 1973 amendments to the Older Americans Act. They are public or non-profit organizations or units of local government designated by the state and responsible for a specific geographic area known as a planning and service area (PSA). AAAs advocate on behalf of older people within their PSA and develop community based plans for services to meet their needs. AAAs also administer federal, state, local, and private funds through contracts with local service providers. In Wisconsin there are three AAAs, each designed to oversee a specified planning and

service area. The single multi-county area agency plays the role of contract monitor and provider or technical assistance to the county and tribal aging units in the PSA.

The Code of Federal Regulations specifies the mission of the AAAs:

“...the area agency on aging shall be the leader relative to all aging issues in the planning and service area. This means that the area agency on aging shall proactively carry out, under the leadership and direction of the State Agency, a wide range of functions related to advocacy, planning, coordination, inter-agency linkages, information sharing, brokering, monitoring and evaluation, designed to lead to the development or enhancement of comprehensive and coordinated community based systems in, or serving each community in the planning and service area.”

## 1.6 Aging Units

County and tribal aging units represent the Wisconsin tradition of localized decision-making for human services. County and tribal aging units, designated by county boards or tribal councils, are the policy planning and community organizing agencies for aging activities. The Wisconsin Elders Act, which became law in 1992, established the aging unit as the focal point for aging-related activities at the local level.

The Wisconsin Elder Act, 1991 Wisconsin Act 235, established the role of aging units in state statute:

“Work to ensure that all older individuals, regardless of income, have access to information, services, and opportunities available through the county or tribal aging unit and have the opportunity to contribute to the cost of services and that the services and resources of the county or tribal aging unit are designed to reach those in greatest social and economic need.”

## 1.7 Other Organizations

The aging network also extends to other statewide and local public and private service providers such as councils on aging, volunteer organizations, multipurpose senior centers, and advocacy groups. These highly visible local organizations translate state and federal monies into tangible community based services for older individuals. A partial listing of these organizations follows:

- Board on Aging and Long Term Care (BOALTC)
- Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups (CWAG)
- Senior Centers
- Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs)
- Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) projects
- Senior Companion Program projects
- Interfaith Programs for the Elderly
- Senior Employment Programs
- Foster Grandparents
- Elderly Nutrition Programs and Home-Delivered Meals
- American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)

## 1.8 The Aging Difference

The aging network is fundamentally different in character and orientation from traditional service networks. The focus of the aging network is to ensure that service providers meet the needs of the older population in a sensitive and competent manner. This is done through systemic and individual advocacy. This difference has been called the “aging difference.”

The aging difference has a number of distinguishing characteristics. These include the following items:

- The aging network belong to and is governed by older people. Older people fill major roles in governing the aging network and in determining how the network operates.

- The aging network empowers older people. A key understanding within the aging network is that older people are capable of standing up for their own interests, and that the network is obligated to assist older people in helping themselves.
- The aging network focuses on change. The Older Americans Act requires the aging network to advocate for societal and systemic changes on behalf of older people.

The aging network is a network of and for older people. It is not primarily a service network. It is a network whose major roles are to empower and enable older people. The network must also work to ensure that existing service systems are responsible and accessible to the elderly.