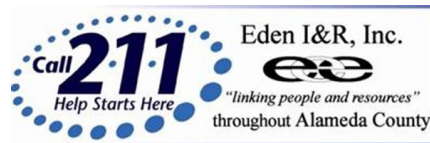




Senior Services Coalition of Alameda County



CIL



5/23/23

To: Council President Nikki Fortunato Bas

CC: Mayor Thao, Councilmembers Dan Kalb, Janani Ramachandran, Noel Gallo, Kevin Jenkins, and At-Large Member, Rebecca Kaplan.

City of Oakland, City Council

1 Frank H. Ogawa Plaza, Oakland, CA 94612

Subject: Proposed Fiscal Year 2023-2025 Budget

Dear Mx. Bas,

Thank you for taking the time to review our concerns regarding the City of Oakland's FY23-25 draft budget proposal. Aspects of the proposal have set off alarm bells for community-based organizations, the Mayor's Commission on Aging, local senior advocacy groups, and others who care for the well-being of older adults and people with disabilities. Our concerns are centered on three elements: reorganization, staffing, and funding, as follows.

Reorganization

The most startling aspect of the budget proposal is that the Aging and Adults with Disabilities Division has been folded into the Children, Youth, and Families Department. First and foremost, we ask that you recognize this change appears to put into reverse the progress Oakland has made on the AARP supported, Age Friendly initiatives over the last few years to bring visibility to the needs and skills of the distinctive and rapidly-growing older adult population. Adding the words "Seniors and People with Disabilities" to the

Department title of “Children, Youth, and Families” is a good step but there must be substance behind it. The current narrative from the Human Services Expenditures section, mentions children and youth sixteen times, families five times, and seniors only twice – in the reductions category. Certainly attention to children and families is essential. It is equally essential to recognize that seniors and people with disabilities are an integral part of the fabric of Oakland, and to ensure that their unique needs are addressed.

In reality, having a dedicated classification that calls out the specific needs and skills of seniors has become an imperative, especially for a large city. We are two years into the United Nations Decade of Healthy Aging, a collaboration developed from the World Health Organization’s (WHO) International Plan of Action on Aging – a radically innovative program *encouraging all government bodies to incorporate the principles* of Independence, Participation, Care, Self-fulfillment and Dignity into their agendas, planning, and budget considerations. In 2018, Oakland was one of the first in the county to establish itself as a WHO approved Age-Friendly City. In order to maintain that positive forward movement, this budget must change in a few substantive ways.

Oakland’s budget proposals put the city out of step with California’s Master Plan for Aging, which states: “Aging is changing and it’s changing California. California’s over-60 population is diversifying and growing faster than any other age group. By 2030, 10.8 million Californians will be an older adult, making up one-quarter of the state’s population. California’s Master Plan for Aging affirms the priority of the health and well-being of older Californians and people with disabilities.” It is a “blueprint for state government, local government, the private sector, and philanthropy to prepare the state for the demographic changes and continue California’s leadership in aging, disability, and equity.” We urge Oakland to align with reality.

While we do not believe that nesting Aging Services within another department was an act of intentional ageism, the budget proposal nevertheless furthers pervasive existing ageist and ableist ideology, shunting us out of sight and out of mind. While yes, we typically see increased need for support as we age – one of the drivers of the growing senior homelessness crisis in Oakland – older adults and people with disabilities very much value their autonomy, lived experience, and capacity to engage in meaningful endeavors.

Older adults have spent their lives working, raising children, learning, some fighting for justice, and contributing to society in a million other ways. They pay taxes. They are deserving of their own honored seat at the table. In fact, they *vote in greater numbers than any other age group*, demonstrating their active participation and care for the world around us. It is essential to embrace the valuable contribution that seniors make beyond their financial contributions. This inclusion is not just a “nice thing” to have, it is essential to the wholeness of a community – without it, the long term health of the entire community is compromised.

We are concerned that the proposed reorganization will undermine the value of senior centers, turning them into community centers and watering down the senior-focused selection of programs and services, and thus limiting access to essential health and supportive services. Oakland's senior centers are wonderful resources for the thousands that attend them and by necessity offer a rich spectrum of programs that address the very real and often complex needs of the aging community. Seniors can now go to senior centers to receive a healthy meal, learn of available resources, and connect with peers and experts to support their physical and mental health. In addition, we cannot forget about the thousands of seniors who, while not attending the centers, also have support service needs and a great deal to offer based on their own experiences.

Staffing

A closely-related issue is cause for concern: several positions within the Aging Services have been frozen. The Supervisor's salary represents committed matching funds for the Senior Companion/Foster Grandparent Program grant. It is crucial to rectify this gap to provide the resources that are required to enable effective operations and provide quality services and support for Oakland's growing aging population. This cannot wait to see if the City's fiscal situation improves one day because delay will allow conditions to worsen for older adults. Prevention is everything when it comes to support services, health, and cost-saving.

Funding

Finally, it has come to our attention that many long-term providers of aging and disability services were fully unaware that the recent Community Grant RFP encompassed the same funds that the Council has been allocating through a different process for decades. The City did not notify all past grantees, did not clarify that the new RFP was a replacement for the past process, and did not indicate that aging services were included in the grant's population of focus. Consequently, these agencies did not apply for the grants and, as a consequence, have missed opportunities to fund senior-related initiatives. This will hinder several key organizations' ability to serve seniors in Oakland.

We know that some local CBOs use City funding to cover their rent, others to pay for staffing, and yet others to purchase food for their clients. Without this support, some programs run the real risk of losing their lease or being unable to maintain staffing levels. This, in turn, will cause more seniors than is ethically tolerable to once again go without the services they depend on and get thrown back into isolation. In fact, the food scarcity issue is especially disturbing given the results of a report released just last month by the CDPH. It shows that *mortality in California older adults from malnutrition is sharply on the rise*. These deaths have more than doubled, from about 650 in 2018 to roughly 1,400 in 2022. This trend has not abated with the slowing of the pandemic.

In light of the potential harms that we have outlined, we strongly urge you to:

- a.) Separate and highlight Aging and Adults with Disabilities as a distinct agency serving these community groups with services targeted to their needs, with a clear mission, mandate, funding and implementation plan.
- b.) Unfreeze the Aging Services staff positions that have been frozen. Or, at a minimum, we must have a skilled, full time staff person to facilitate the Commission on Aging and conduct internal coordination of the many Senior Services initiatives and programs.
- c.) Reissue the Community Grants RFP immediately, while allowing those who have already submitted to maintain their applications on file until the new deadline. Explicitly mention and include provisions for seniors in the application materials, ensuring their needs are appropriately addressed

If you are reading this, you are aging. Everything done today to foster a better world for older adults will benefit you, in the short and long term. Don't let an extraordinary group of 56,584 Oakland senior residents get eclipsed in this budget. Please do the right thing and continue moving forward, not backward, to adapt to the changing demographics and needs of our vibrant city.

Sincerely,

Wendy Peterson, Director, Senior Services Coalition of Alameda County

The Oakland Mayor's Commission on Aging - Commissioners Hill, Osage, Garrett, Spears, Kalmus, and Gunst

Lisa Malul, Executive Director, Rebuilding Together Oakland

Patricia Osage, Executive Director, LIFE ElderCare

Charlie Deterline, Executive Director, SOS Meals on Wheels

Lara Calvert, Executive Director, Spectrum Community Services

Shirley Gee, Executive Director, Vietnamese American Community Center of the East Bay

Alison DeJung, Executive Director, Eden I&R
Corinne Jan, RN, PHN; Chief Executive Officer, Family Bridges

Micheal Pope, CEO, Alzheimer's Services of the East Bay

Jessie Spivey, Director of Elder Services, Oakland LGBTQ Community Center

Emma Martin, Community Engagement Program Manager, CIL

Chris Iglesias, Chief Executive Officer, The Unity Council

Nate Miley, President, United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda County

Monique Hooks, Executive Director, DayBreak Adult Care

Janice Roberts, Executive Director, Mercy Brown Bag

