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August 2017

Task Force Leads AgeOptions Advocacy Mission on Behalf of Older Adults

A central element of AgeOptions' mission is Advocacy - advocacy to improve systems and services so people can thrive as they age. The Older Americans Act requires all area agencies on aging, within their Planning and Service Areas, to advocate on behalf of older persons to local, state and federal policy makers. AgeOptions has championed that responsibility from its inception in 1974.

Our approach includes educating elected officials and the public about issues and concerns that impact the lives of older persons, as well as the economic benefits of community responses to the challenges and opportunities of an aging society. We have always advocated for comprehensive systems of home and community-based supports to enable older persons to live with dignity. And we advocate to ensure adequate funding to develop and sustain programs to meet the needs of older adults and their families.

While our core advocacy mission remains the same, we constantly anticipate and respond to changing policy, economic and political issues affecting the well-being of the older members of our communities.

The Advocacy Task Force, which was established by the AgeOptions Board of Directors in 2003, has developed into a unifying force and at times our network's voice on major state, federal or regional issues. There is an open invitation to include everyone who is interested in studying and acting on aging issues as Task Force members. The expectation is that those who call in will listen, contribute and seek to serve as liaisons between the Task Force and their communities, agencies and legislators.

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The Task Forces provides information and education on current issues, and expresses positions in support of the needs and rights of older adults and those who care about them.

Chaired by Brad Winick, AICP, LEED AP, an AgeOptions Board director, and co-chaired by Carol Goldbaum, PhD, an AgeOptions Advisory Council member, the Task Force includes members of the Board of Directors and Advisory Council, AgeOptions staff, representatives of funded agencies, aging-focused coalitions and organizations, and other key stakeholders such as legislative aides, township and municipal officials, university professors, students and others.

The Task Force has been instrumental in preparations for the AgeOptions annual Legislative Breakfasts and has participated in grass roots advocacy such as Paper Plate Campaigns in support of federal and state funding of meal programs, walks to Springfield, social media campaigns related to the Affordable Care Act, and joint legislative office visits with community agencies, Board and/or Council members in suburban Cook County, Springfield or Washington, D.C. This spring legislative aids received training on benefits and services, and a number of other efforts have supported AgeOptions' position as a leader on aging issues in northeastern Illinois. More on our activities will be shared in future newsletters.

In Fiscal Year 2017 alone AgeOptions and Task Force members have studied and then advocated on a wide range of important issues. Please contact Kate Bobbitt at AgeOptions, (708) 383-0258, if you would like more information on any of the items below.

In summary, these issues include:

- The failed proposal to create a new Community Reinvestment Program. Monthly updates on the meaning of the new Department on Aging initiative, concerns and recent developments became source information and exchanges on the effort to change the Illinois Community Care Program to reduce costs and increase service flexibility.
- Other changes in the Community Care Program as many of the program's clients migrated to managed care organizations, yet some of the supports for the clients had not. We are now supporting efforts to reduce costs and increase flexibility in the CCP.
- The plague known as the Government Accountability and Transparency Act (GATA) advanced by Illinois with high costs, burden and time lost to complicated and administratively useless exercises at a time when there was no state budget to even pay for contracted services.

- Illinois State Budget Impasse and its effect on agencies/clients
- Major Medical Assistance application backlogs at Illinois Department of Human Services offices that impacted care and costs for older persons who applied for Medicaid health coverage.
- Support for the Dementia Friendly Communities initiative at the federal and Illinois levels.
- Self-education on advocacy techniques and multiple ways to express positions including the Importance of sharing client stories during trying times
- Legislation changing universal prescreening as patients leave hospitals for nursing facility care (SB 2929, Public Act 099-0857)
- Repeal efforts of Affordable Care Act (ACA) and concerns affecting older persons such as the potential elimination of the Public Health and Prevention Fund, elimination of Medicaid expansion, lost insurance plan subsidies, the Medicare Part D “donut hole” elimination, age rating for older persons not eligible for Medicare, reduction of the Medicare Trust Fund, etc.
- Cuts and caps to Medicaid, the sole funder of long-term care supports and services
- Legislation to eliminate arbitration requirements in contracts with nursing facilities (we were proponents of the introduced HB 238)
- Opposition to legislation requiring nursing home patient identification wristlets (HB 223, HB 515)
- Signatory of a letter regarding Safeguarding Federal Nutrition Programs sent by multiple organizations to President Trump and members of Congress
- Signed onto Alliance to End Homelessness letter to members of Congress
- Proponents of unsuccessful legislation to eliminate hospital dumping and to require staffing enforcement in long-term care settings (HB 3392/ SB 1624)
- Examination of the “Pending Medicaid Application” predicament in which long term care facilities are not accepting patients until they are actually enrolled in Medicaid – resulting in some people discharged to homeless shelters.
- Protection of federal domestic programs with the Administration budget proposal asking to transfer \$54 billion from non-discretionary defense to defense funding

- House and Senate health care bills threatened to cut and/or cap Medicaid and end Medicaid expansion, increase premium and deductible rates, cut age tax credits, cut preventive services and more. All the impacts of these bills disproportionately affect older adults, especially those with lower incomes.
- Signed onto a letter to Congress in support of State Health Insurance Assistance Program funding (SHIP) and full funding for the Senior Community Service Employment Program.
- Continued AgeOptions support for the Beneficiary Enrollment Notification and Eligibility Simplification Act of 2017 (the BENES Act of 2017) directed at making enrollment in Medicare and other deadlines more predictable and easy.

It is an honor to advocate with such dedicated and committed colleagues from across suburban Cook County on important concerns, issues and challenges to older persons. We will continue to meet, develop action plans and care about the quality of living for our clientele and the organizations that care so much for them. Please consider joining the AgeOptions Advocacy Task Force.

For more information on the AgeOptions Advocacy Task Force, email Kate Bobbitt at kate.bobbitt@ageoptions.org.