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April 2017

Aging Networks Face Challenges From State and Federal Budget Uncertainty

By Jonathan Lavin
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This spring brings plenty of challenges to the Illinois and suburban Cook County Aging Networks. This article reflects on the new paradigm in Washington, D.C., the ongoing stalemate in Springfield and the requirements for AgeOptions to move ahead.

Washington D.C., Spring 2017

I returned from the annual National Association of Area Agencies on Aging Policy Briefing (April 3-4) with some hope that the extreme “Skinny Budget” proposed by the President and the Office of Management and Budget (Administration) will not be advanced as is by the Congress.



That proposal did not discuss essential components of the budget – projected revenues, specific impact on each of the vital programs that are proposed for decreases or possibly increases, debt ceiling, etc. A mid-May full budget will offer answers to those questions. Fiscal Year 2017 (current year) proposed reductions and elimination of programs were considered “too late” for consideration as Congress seeks to wrap up the current year (which ends September 30), begins the FY 2018 budget and beyond. We are unsure if there will be Congressional action on 2017 May - September funding or a continuation of the current “CR” funding of 2017 at approximately 2016 levels.

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The Administration's 2018 request asked that \$54 billion be moved from discretionary domestic and foreign programs to Defense, ending the basic 2011 Budget Control Act principal that sequestration (across the board cuts to all federal annual appropriated programs) hurt all equally (except those mandated for entitlement support such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, etc.). The goal is to have a "balanced budget" in 10 years (if this were a household, a 30-year mortgage would be paid off in 10 – but why do that?).

There is much discussion of the cuts to Low Income Energy Assistance, Social Services Block Grants, elimination of the Senior Community Service Employment Program, elimination of the Older Americans Senior Volunteer Programs at the National Services Corporation, Senior Health Insurance Program (SHIP), Community Development Block Grant, etc. We do not expect total support for any of the programs, but hope there will be a safety net after Congress and the President complete the funding plan.

Springfield, Spring 2017

At the state level, no sign of an enacted state budget exists at this writing. Senate Democratic and Republican Leaders have worked diligently to come to a comprehensive budget agreement, but have not been able to accomplish their goal of passing a package of bills with real revenues and a plan for expenditures. In the meantime, Illinois pays state employees, legislators and Medicaid bills, while building up deficits of \$10 billion with \$14 billion in past due bills.

The Department on Aging is seeking to save Illinois money with the advancement of the new Community Reinvestment Program (CRP), which is projected to save Illinois \$929.7 million over six years. Their proposal is to move half of the current Community Care Program clients to a new Medicaid-only program while transferring the other half to the CRP that will be funded with less funds but offer more flexibility than the Medicaid Waiver program.



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The federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) oversees Medicaid Waivers (e.g. the Community Care Program) and has stringent guidelines governing the program. Long-anticipated formal Rules for the CRP were filed on March 31 to accomplish the Department on Aging goals. Much concern has been expressed at the dramatic movement of clients between programs, actual reductions in the amount of funding available to them and the authority of the Department to implement this plan. One feature is that Area Agencies on Aging are being asked to administer the new program in the future with detailed guidelines from the Department. AgeOptions has joined the other Area Agencies on Aging in Illinois to urge the Department to take their proposal to the General Assembly and permit the Constitutional process for bills to become law. Nothing is expected to happen with the Department's proposal without a real state budget.

New Funding for Meals

The Illinois Department on Aging was able to increase funding for Home-Delivered Meals this spring. Meals are provided based on a legal consent decree recognized by the Governor's Office and the Comptroller's Office. We have been reaching out across the region to medical centers and other sources of referrals to assure that the availability of meals for homebound seniors are known and accessed. We are able, for the first time, across the region to address special diets with our program.

Requests for Proposals

As the federal and state budget and appropriations processes unwind, AgeOptions needs to comply with state and federal guidelines for conducting open requests for proposals. We grant funds to agencies for one year but are able to extend those contracts and programs under the Older Americans Act and Illinois Act on Aging for two or three additional years without a new request for proposals. This year we are required to seek new proposals for Social Services, Caregiver Support, Adult Protective Services and Aging and Disability Resource Network services. We will be issuing these new grants later this spring through the Board of Directors



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decision process based on staff planning and recommendations. Grants that begin October 1, 2017, will be eligible for extensions of up to the additional two years when program and fiscal goals are achieved.

Community agencies that apply and deliver services under the Suburban Cook County Area Plan on Aging have demonstrated sound fiscal management and resiliency over the past three years with funding predictability lost because of Springfield's Budget Impasse since 2015. We anticipate a healthy update of programs by our network this year. We are grateful to those agencies that offer services in spite of Springfield's lack of dependability to deliver the resources that are due older persons in Illinois.