

# Alaska Commission on Aging 2009 Legislative Priorities

## Top Priorities:

- 1. “Adjust Rates for Family Caregivers, Nutrition, Transportation, & Support Services”** – This \$2 million increment to the Senior Home- and Community-Based Services (HCBS) Grants program’s budget base (under Senior & Disabilities Services) will provide additional funding for important services such as meal programs, ride programs, care coordination, family caregiver support, adult day programs, respite care, and other vital services for seniors and their families. Alaska’s senior population is growing by about six percent each year. At the same time, costs for food, energy (gas and heating fuel), worker salaries and benefits, and other essential program elements have escalated dramatically. During FY 2010, a shift in the regional funding formula under Alaska’s State Plan for Senior Services, which will allocate a greater percentage of available funds to those regions with increasing senior populations, stands to leave the more rural, remote regions with drastic funding cuts which may jeopardize the ability to provide much-needed services. This increase in base funding will help ensure that all regions of the state receive adequate funding for HCBS so that seniors may remain in their own homes and communities.
- 2. Regular Rate Reviews for HCBS Providers Serving Older Alaskans and Trust Beneficiaries** – State reimbursement rates for services for seniors and Trust beneficiaries under Medicaid waivers or grant-funded programs were frozen for years while program costs continued to rise. While small rate increases for waiver services were added for FY 2009, and senior grant programs received a \$1 million increase to their budget base this year, implementation of a mechanism ensuring periodic rate reviews assures providers that reimbursement for services will keep pace with their costs in the years to come. Currently, hospitals and nursing homes receive automatic rate reviews on a regular basis. Home- and community-based services, which often prevent the need for much more costly institutional care, should receive the same regular rate adjustments in order to continue to meet the needs of beneficiaries.
- 3. Reauthorization of the Medicaid Adult Dental Program** – This program began in 2007 and is scheduled to sunset on June 30, 2009. While the standard Medicaid program pays for only emergency dental care, this enhancement offers \$1,150 in coverage for preventive care, including exams, cleanings, fillings, and dentures. These services provide a substantial benefit, especially for older Alaskans, increasing their ability to obtain nutrition from a wide variety of foods. Routine exams also allow for detection of gingivitis and early periodontal disease, which can be arrested with proper oral hygiene, and can detect and provide treatment for other diseases such as oropharyngeal (throat) cancer. Since the program’s inception on July 1, 2007, 9,267 persons have been served; 2,334 full or partial dentures were provided and 1,150 crown procedures were performed. About 40% of the persons served by this program are Alaskans over the age of 60. The program got off to a late start but has been a valuable addition to the palette of Medicaid services for low-income seniors and adults with disabilities, as it reduces the need for extraction of permanent teeth and supplies restorative care and dentures to those who need them. The program should be extended through FY 2010 and beyond.

4. **Establishment of the Alaska Housing Trust and Funding for Supportive Services** – Last year the Legislature provided AHFC with funding to assist in providing housing for homeless Alaskans. This legislative session, the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority and its beneficiary boards are seeking the establishment of a Housing Trust as well as additional funds to supply supportive services to those who receive housing through the program. The Alaska Housing Trust’s mission is to reduce homelessness by creating and maintaining an adequate supply of affordable housing. It will support housing projects serving those at 80% or less of area median income (AMI), with priority for those at 30% or less of AMI. In Alaska, 17% of the homeless are older adults, age 55 and above. People can become homeless for a number of reasons: job loss, foreclosure, divorce, addiction, and mental illness are some common precursors to homelessness. Unless they are able to get help for these problems, it can be difficult to end the cycle of homelessness. Supportive services are a proven step to keeping people housed and moving forward in their lives. Stable homes promote stable communities.
5. **Creation of a Statewide Transportation Fund** – Coordinated transportation provides safe and affordable rides for Alaska seniors and other eligible persons to medical appointments, grocery shopping, services, and other needs. Transportation is also vital for seniors to remain socially engaged and participate in community life. Transportation is especially critical for homebound seniors to break the isolation and loneliness that can result from being home day after day. Demand is increasing as the number of seniors grows and the cost of gas becomes prohibitive for many who used to drive, but transit providers cannot always meet the growing need for services. Coordinated transit systems, funded primarily by local governments and federal Older Americans Act funds, are in need of a solid base of additional funding to maintain and improve transportation for older Alaskans and individuals with disabilities as their fuel costs have increased 35% in the last 12 months. Many transit services are unable to serve more distant neighborhoods in their area, accessible vehicles may have limited schedules, and beneficiaries may experience long waits for service. Meanwhile, people living in smaller, remote communities with no public transit or coordinated transportation are often isolated with very limited access to the services they need. This fund would improve transit services both in communities which already provide coordinated transit and in those with no current transit service at all, to ensure greater accessibility for all beneficiaries.

### **Other Important Issues:**

- ◆ Support efforts to improve senior access to high-quality and affordable primary and behavioral health care (Community Health Centers; MDs’ and dentists’ acceptance of Medicare and Medicaid patients; IMPACT; SBIRT; Tele-behavioral Health; SOAR – now known as Senior Behavioral Health Project)
- ◆ Improve safety and protection of vulnerable older Alaskans (Adult Protective Services statute changes; COMPAN (Communities Prevent Abuse and Neglect Project); Fall-Safe Project)
- ◆ Strengthen Aging & Disability Resource Centers
- ◆ Enhance the Medicaid waiver to serve persons with Alzheimer’s Disease and Related Dementia
- ◆ Promote Healthy Body, Healthy Brain Campaign outreach activities