

Alaska Commission on Aging Priority:

Other Budget and Policy Recommendations

February, 2010

1. AHFC Homeless Assistance Program

In 2008, 17 percent of the individuals counted in AHFC's point-in-time survey of homeless Alaskans were age 55 and older. Low-income seniors are at increasing risk for homelessness as housing costs rise and their modest incomes barely cover food, gas, medications and other necessities. An increasing number of older Alaskans face behavioral health issues such as chronic mental illness, substance abuse, dementia, or traumatic brain injury, or have recently been discharged from a correctional institution, all of which can also affect their ability to maintain stable housing.

Affordable supportive housing is a top 2010 legislative priority for the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority and its associated boards and commissions. Study after study attests to the effectiveness (and cost-effectiveness) of supportive housing. It is significantly less expensive than the institutional alternatives that homeless and disabled people often cycle through – including shelters, institutions, prisons, and hospitals – and it ends tenants' costly dependence on emergency services for health care and treatment.

The Alaska Commission on Aging recommends State funding of the AHFC Homeless Assistance Program at \$10 million and the Special Needs Housing Program at \$1,750,000.

2. AHFC Senior Citizen Housing Development Fund

Alaska has the fastest-growing senior population in the United States as its baby boomer generation enters its senior years. Our state has a serious need for development of housing specifically designed to meet the special needs of seniors, including the supportive services to help increase their ability to live independently and with dignity.

The Senior Citizens Housing Development Fund is targeted to the needs of a growing older Alaskan population whose incomes are in the low to moderate range, and offers flexibility in the development of mixed-income senior housing projects. AHFC's funding proposal will assist seniors in obtaining affordable, accessible, secure and energy-efficient housing.

The Alaska Commission on Aging supports the \$4,500,000 included in AHFC's FY 2011 capital budget for the planning, development, and renovation of senior and other special needs housing throughout Alaska.

3. Emergency Intervention Services for Seriously Mentally Ill Seniors

Long-term care providers (including Pioneer Homes) report an increasing number of cases of seniors with severe maladaptive behavior and mental illness (typically previously undiagnosed) among residents. Many of these individuals are transferred to Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API), where they are treated but then are often not allowed to return to their former residence because the assisted living facility or nursing home does not have the staff capacity or the appropriate license to care for them. With limited in-state capacity to care for this group of people, more may be referred outside the state for care. (There are only 163 beds statewide in facilities licensed to care for seniors or developmentally disabled people with mental illness; the majority of these are located in Southcentral Alaska.)

An Emergency Intervention Services Project would provide immediate emergency intervention using a team of professionals (health care provider, social worker/care coordinator/case manager, and gero-psychiatrist) coordinated through a statewide program to provide assessment, counseling, health care, appropriate housing, and a plan of care for referred individuals, as well as additional training for providers to become licensed to care for seniors with severe maladaptive behaviors. This project addresses a serious gap in our state's long-term care continuum for vulnerable seniors.

The Alaska Commission on Aging recommends funding of \$400,000 in GF/MH funding for this project.

4. Strengthened Elder Protection Efforts

Adult Protective Services (APS) and the Long-Term Care Ombudsman's Office (LTCO) are reporting significant increases in the number of complaints received in recent years; both offices have heavy caseloads. These agencies have requested budget increases to enhance their capacity by hiring additional staff.

Although federally mandated to visit every assisted living facility and nursing home serving seniors at least once per quarter, the LTCO has been unable to complete this schedule of visits due to the increased number and complexity of complaints which must be investigated. APS handles complaints of abuse, neglect, and exploitation involving vulnerable adults (seniors and people with disabilities). Intakes have risen substantially from 1,021 in FY 2005 to 2,748 in FY 2009 – a 169 percent increase in the last four years. APS currently has only ten investigators for the entire state and manages caseloads three to four times the national average.

With the increasing growth of the senior population, the increase in the number of assisted living and nursing homes serving seniors, and the growing number of complaints filed with LTCO and APS, the Alaska Commission on Aging supports additional funding for both offices to increase their capacity to improve protection of vulnerable older Alaskans.