



**Testimony of Tabatha Caso, Executive Director, Eastern Area Agency on Aging  
In support of An Act to Invest in the Health and Wellness of Older Maine Residents by  
Expanding Coordinated Community Programming (LD 1684)**

May 1, 2023

Before the Committee on Health and Human Services

Greetings, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Tabatha Caso and I am the Executive Director of Eastern Area Agency on Aging (EAAA). EAAA was incorporated in 1973 and our mission is to provide older adults, caregivers, and adults with disabilities in Hancock, Penobscot, Piscataquis, and Washington counties with the information and access to resources they need to be healthy, engaged, and supported in their communities.

Last year, EAAA's Aging and Disability Resource Center assisted 14,239 older adults with information, assistance, and resources across our 13,000 square mile territory. We are grateful to receive Older American's Act funding to support our resource team of 4, however, it only allows for them to do a limited amount of case management. The resource team regularly reports the contacts are becoming more complex and the need is greater than they can provide within their full-time hours. To put in perspective how large our area is, our 4 counties have more square miles than all of Massachusetts and it takes about 3.5 hours for a staff member to drive from Greenville (Piscataquis County) to Eastport (Washington County). With the population significantly dispersed there are limited services, staffing shortages, transportation challenges, limited age-friendly housing options, and their informal supports could be miles away.

In addition to the large geographic area, several of our towns tend to be older than the statewide average. In Maine, 44% of the households have at least one-person age 60 or over. In Eastport (population 1,351), 63% of the households have at least one-person age 60 or over - with 37% of them living alone. In Millinocket (population 4,280), 60% of the households have at least one-person age 60 or over - with 41% of them living alone. Eastport and Millinocket are two examples of the many rural towns in our territory.

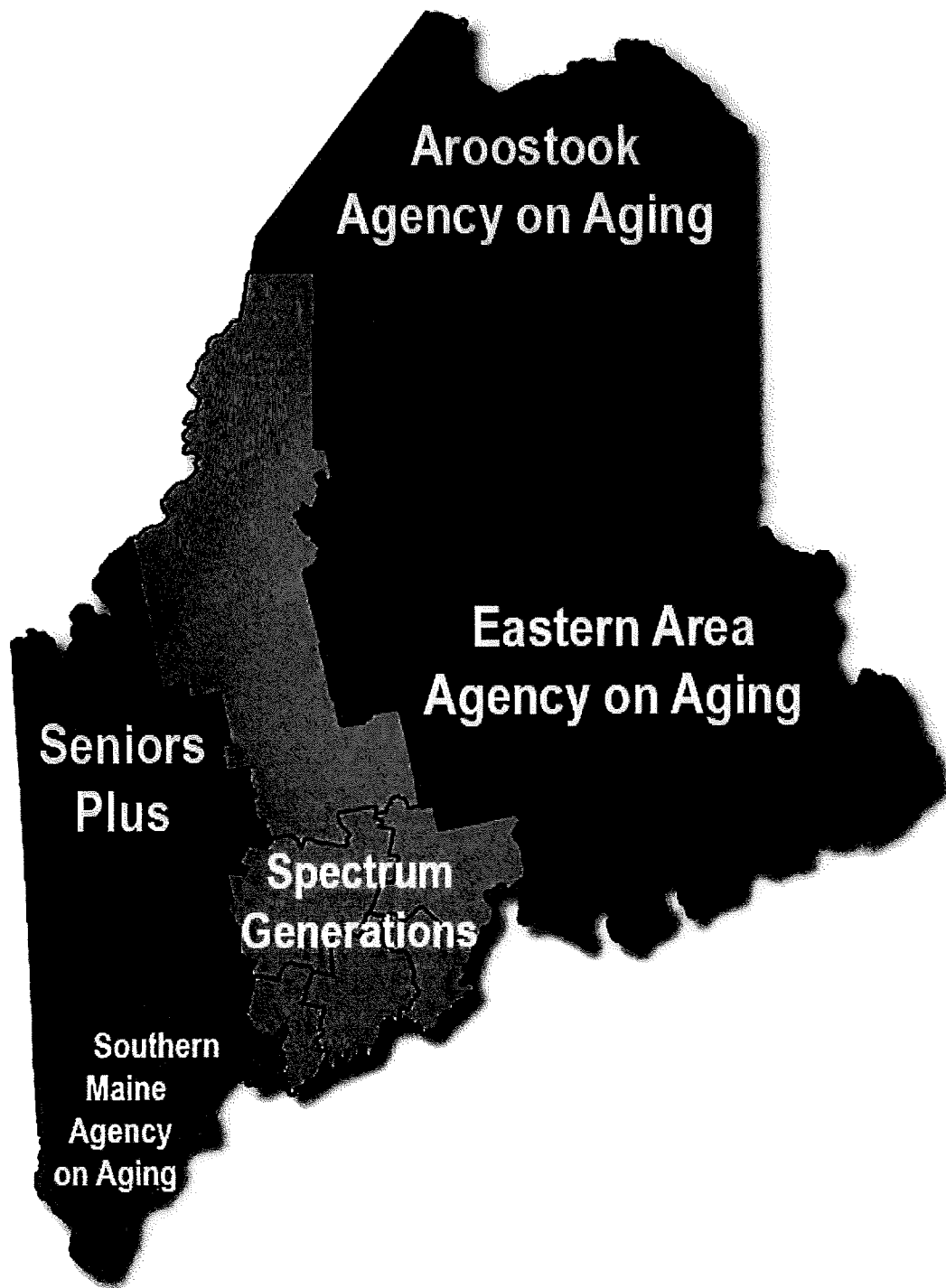
When consumers face these challenges, they need support from a trained individual to assess their situation and to arrange, secure, coordinate, and monitor the services to ensure their needs are met. When the resources are limited, it takes creativity and additional efforts to build a successful supportive plan. With EAAA's current capacity, our resource team of 4 struggles to keep up with the volume of people calling with unmet needs, let alone have the ability to travel multiple hours to visit consumers. We are requesting funding to not only build the statewide infrastructure to fill the gap of lack of case management services specific to older adults, but also to hire and train additional staff who live within these rural communities. Hiring qualified staff in rural communities will allow access to this support quicker, they will have a better understanding of the situation the older adult is in, and also have knowledge and relationships with both formal and informal services. A focus of this funding will also be regional outreach to educate the communities of the support and services available to them.

This past winter we received a call from a 62-year-old woman who lives in a rural town with a population of less than 3,000. She and her husband are retired farmers and only have social security benefits as income. They live in a 200-year-old home that is not well insulated and they lost power which resulted in their pipes freezing. They have a woodstove, but it is a struggle for them to carry the firewood due to them both having mobility issues. They instead opted to turn on the burner on their gas stove to keep warm, which they admitted they knew was not the safest option but felt it was their only option. They did not have a diagnosis to qualify them for traditional Case Management services. They did not know what to do or where to start. Our staff member took the time to follow up with several resources and worked with the local LIHEAP agency to get them an online appointment for heating assistance and secured emergency assistance for the frozen pipes. Once the immediate need was met, through follow up conversations and questions, the staff member identified they were struggling with affording groceries due to the increased cost of food. She supported them in obtaining food benefits, including the Commodity Supplemental Food Program. Once the issues were resolved, the consumer contacted the agency and said "If you are old and/or sick, and especially, in troubling times, you need to start somewhere. People need to survive. Thank you for all your help."

EAAA was able to make a difference for this couple, however, all of the Area Agencies on Aging have rural towns and similar situations. We cannot give this level of support across the state with nearly 400,000 Mainers age 60 or over.

We all have an older adult in our lives, whether it is our coworker, parent, neighbor, or a friend. Please help us provide the best service and support these individuals deserve and need, by supporting LD 1684.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.



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