



**Testimony of Tabatha Caso, Executive Director, Eastern Area Agency on Aging
In support of An Act to Provide Funding to Area Agencies on Aging for Community-Based Services and
Programs to Support Older Adults (LD814)**

March 28, 2025

Before the Committee on Health and Human Services

Dear Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today and for your work in this challenging budget year. We appreciate your ongoing commitment to supporting older Mainers across the state. I also want to thank Representative Cloutier for presenting this bill, as well as Senator Moore and the co-sponsors for being the champions of this critical legislation.

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.

I am here today to **strongly support LD814, the Older Mainers Act**. This comprehensive bill is essential for improving the lives of older Mainers by:

- **Eliminate Meals on Wheels waitlists** statewide.
- **Expand case management services** to directly assist older Mainers.
- **Double access to Medicare support**, saving Mainers an estimated **\$3 million annually**—money they can use for basic needs and would go back into Maine's economy.
- **Support family caregivers** so they can stay in the workforce.
- **Extend hours for Information & Referral services**, ensuring no one is left without help.

I support these provisions wholeheartedly, and you will hear from my peers about the many benefits these services will provide.

Meals on Wheels: An Urgent Funding Crisis

I will focus my limited time on Meals on Wheels (MOW), as EAAA currently has the largest waitlist in the state.

MOW is a federally funded program under Title III of the Older Americans Act (OAA). The federal government sends funds to the State Unit on Aging, which then allocates them to Maine's five Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs). Both the state and AAAs must contribute funding and resources—such as volunteer hours—to sustain the program.

However, **funding has not kept pace with demand**. The rising costs of food, transportation, utilities, and staffing are making it increasingly difficult to serve eligible older Mainers. **Mileage reimbursement alone is a significant burden**—especially in rural regions where volunteers and staff must drive long distances to deliver meals. **For example, last year, EAAA alone spent around \$40,000 on mileage reimbursement just for Meals on Wheels.**

The reality is that federal, state, and consumer contributions, along with donations and various grants, still do not cover the true cost of Meals on Wheels. The AAAs work hard to stretch every dollar and contribute more than the required funding match to sustain services, some AAAs across the state are subsidizing more older adults than their budgets support, leading to financial deficits and an inability to reduce waitlists. Without additional funding, **waitlists will continue to grow, leaving more older Mainers without the nutrition and support they need to remain healthy and independent.**

Older Mainers Are Waiting Too Long for Meals

Right now, about **750 older Mainers** are on MOW waitlists across the state.

- EAAA alone has **337 people waiting**, with an average wait time of **six months**.
- One **91-year-old woman**—who is **legally blind, homebound, and experiencing memory loss**—has been on our waitlist for **447 days**.
- At Aroostook AAA, the **average wait time is nine months**, and **one disabled individual has been waiting for 1,000 days!**

Meals on Wheels Eligibility: Even Those Who Qualify Must Wait

MOW is not an income-based program, nor is it a fee-for-service program.

To qualify, an individual must be:

- 60 years or older, homebound, unable to prepare meals, and without other meal preparation support; or
- Under 60 and disabled and eligible under Social Services Block Grant Funds.

Even when individuals meet these eligibility requirements, they are placed on a waitlist due to insufficient funding and are taken off based on priority level.

Additionally, **federal regulations prohibit charging for meals**, though AAAs request voluntary donations. However, most recipients live on **fixed incomes** and cannot contribute enough to offset costs. Currently, the **average donation per meal at EAAA is only \$0.50** far below the actual cost.

A Cost-Effective, Life-Saving Program

Meals on Wheels **runs largely on volunteer labor**, significantly reducing costs. Without volunteer drivers, the cost per meal would **skyrocket**.

Beyond meal delivery, volunteers provide **critical social interaction and wellness checks**, helping prevent:

- Falls
- Malnutrition
- Costly medical interventions due to lack of support
- Social Connection

Brown University did a 5-year study of over 29,000 MOW recipients, the study found within 30 days of receiving home-delivered meals, recipients experienced:

- **31% fewer hospitalizations**
- **28% fewer emergency room visits**
- **28% lower rates of nursing home placement**

(The Impact of Home-Delivered Meals on Overall Health and Associated Use of Healthcare Services, Brown University School of Public Health, 2017)

Without increased funding, the **number of older Mainers waiting for meals will continue to rise. A piece of the funding in LD814 would provide 336,837 meals to 1,316 more older Mainers and eliminate the statewide waitlist.**

Supporting Meals on Wheels is an investment and commitment to the health, independence, and dignity of older Mainers. For less than \$10 a day, we can provide meals that nourish both the body and the community, helping older Mainers stay out of costly institutional care.

I urge you to **support LD814 in full**, as it provides critical services that empower older Mainers to age with dignity, including the expansion of Meals on Wheels, which will ensure that **no older Mainer goes without**.

Thank you for your time and consideration!