

Aging Plan
North Carolina Division of Aging and Adult Services
2101 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-2101

North Carolina State Aging Plan 2019-2023

The National Association of Social Workers North Carolina Chapter (NASW-NC) is a membership organization that promotes, develops, and protects the practice of social work and social workers. NASW-NC also seeks to enhance the effective functioning and well-being of individuals, families and communities through its work and advocacy.

Thank you for allowing input into North Carolina's 2019-2023 Aging Services Plan. It is extremely important to not only develop policies on major areas listed below but provide funding as no new funds have been allocated while the aging population continues to rise drastically in North Carolina.

Mental Health

The state of North Carolina needs to ensure we have a trained workforce to help assist aging North Carolinians with behavioral health needs. Older adults are especially vulnerable to other health conditions made worse by heavy drinking and mental health disorders. Heavy drinking can make other health conditions worse such as high blood pressure, mood disorders, diabetes, heart failure, and more. We should also include a focus of mental health and substance use disorder services for individuals that do not qualify for Medicare or Medicaid. Accessing Disability Benefits can take years and these individuals can fall through the cracks while waiting for approval of benefits.

North Carolina needs suicide prevention efforts focused specifically towards older adults. The North Carolina Injury and Violence Prevention Branch tracks suicide through the Violent Death Reporting System which reports the highest number of suicides in North Carolina per total population of an age group is males ages 85 and older. From 2009 to 2013, 1,204 North Carolina residents ages 65 and older died as a result of violence. Of these violent deaths, 993 were suicide (82.5%). Older adults need access to mental health care in their communities with providers trained in issues specific to older adults.

Social isolation can put older adults at risk for depression and other health challenges. Social isolation can also impact older adults becoming prey to scammers. North Carolina should ensure community programs allow adults needed socialization. Programs may include adult day services, exercise classes, and more.

Another challenge older adults are facing is that they find themselves raising grandchildren due to the mental illness or drug use of parents. North Carolina must provide funds to fight the opioid epidemic, provide resources for older adults to get help for their children, and financially support older adults that do raise their grandchildren in kinship care.

Adult Protective Services

As North Carolina's aging population rises drastically, North Carolina's Adult Protective Services are understaffed and underfunded. A study should be done to examine and truly understand caseloads in our state. Caseloads are more complex than ever before as they are a mix of physical, mental, financial and social problems. Each county has specific needs and requires unique solutions. One size will not fit all 100 counties.

Some counties, particularly low-wealth counties, find it particularly hard to carry out core responsibilities due to difficulty in recruiting staff and having adequate resources to provide services for Adult Protective Services and guardianship clients.

Older adults may be more at risk for neglect (particularly self-neglect) and exploitation (particularly financial exploitation) than being physically or emotionally abused. North Carolina needs to ensure services and supports are in place to help seniors from becoming victims.

There are growing challenges as the number of Adult Protective Services and guardianship cases increase and many counties are struggling to find the money to provide needed services. North Carolina must ensure adequate funding for the Home and Community Care Block Grant to help provide needed services in the counties. This funding will go a long way to support Adult Protective Services at the county level and their ability to refer families to services and supports. Currently, due to long wait lists, some counties cannot even access services under the Home and Community Care Block Grant.

Guardianship needs a major overhaul in North Carolina as many counties are unable to meet the needs or are struggling to meet the needs of adults in their care. The Adult Protective Services and guardianship statutes have not had significant review and change in decades to reflect the changing needs of the population intended to be served. Adult Protective Services are seeing more and more young people with disabilities and mental illness and courts are deeming these individuals incompetent- putting them under the care of Adult Protective Services without resources to serve them. The state must find a way to treat these individuals. Better training needs to be provided to professionals before incompetency is put in place.

Social Work Professional Identification

In addition to growing problems faced by Adult Protective Services, we have an untrained workforce trying to handle the demands. In North Carolina Adult Protective Services, no social

work degree is required to be hired as a social worker. Though we have training standards in child welfare, there are none for Adult Protective Services. We must design a system where highly trained and educated degreed social workers are entering the workforce, getting internships in Adult Protective Services and staying to work. North Carolina should offer these individuals loan forgiveness and other incentives to work in the field.

Other

Additional issues faced by North Carolina's aging population that need to be addressed include:

- **Transportation:** North Carolina needs to ensure adequate and appropriate transportation is available to our aging adults in every county.
- **Housing:** North Carolina needs need to ensure older adults can age well in their own homes first.
- **Food Insecurity:** Reimbursement rates for home delivered meals are low, leaving counties making up a huge difference and limiting their delivery options. We need to ensure services and funding are available to provide meals to our older adults. While access to food is important, access to diet appropriate food is extremely important. For our aging population, we must provide access to foods that nurture conditions such as heart disease and diabetes. Further, nutritional food that can be processed by older adults with dental conditions that might make processing certain foods difficult should also be available.
- **Caregivers:** We must ensure legislation passes in the state to support caregivers and keep them in the workforce. This includes access to paid family leave.
- **Direct Support Staff:** Our state needs to train more professionals to work in homes with seniors. Further, our state needs to ensure better screening and supervision for these individuals.

Sincerely,

Kay Castillo, BSW
Director of Advocacy, Policy and Legislation
Registered Lobbyist
kcastillo.naswnc@socialworkers.org

Valerie Arendt, MSW, MPP
Executive Director
Registered Lobbyist
varendt.naswnc@socialworkers.org