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Adequacy of the Administration on Aging's
Provision of Technical Assistance for Targeting
Services under the Older Americans Act

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Before the Subcommittee on Human Resources
Committee on Education and Labor and the
Select Committee on Aging
House of Representatives



Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committees:

It is a pleasure to be here today to share the results of our work on the targeting of minorities in programs and services administered by the Administration on Aging (AoA). In our testimony today, you asked us to present information on (1) the data that are available to assess the effectiveness of targeting, (2) how AoA provides technical assistance on targeting to state units on aging, (3) the unmet technical assistance needs of state units with regard to targeting, and (4) the ability of the AoA to administer Older Americans Act programs under its current organizational placement within the Office of Human Development Services of the Department of Health and Human Services.

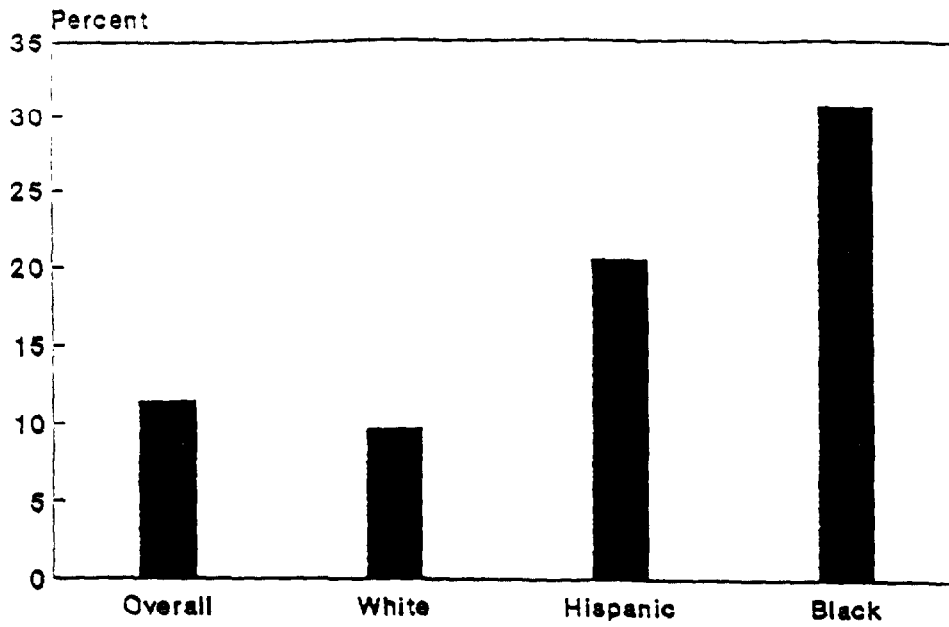
BACKGROUND

Before turning to the results of our work, I think it is important to discuss its context. One of the most significant demographic facts affecting America's present and future course is the aging of its population. Both numerically and as a percentage of the U.S. population, the 65-and-older age group has grown, and will continue to grow, more rapidly than other age groups. In 1989, 29.6 million Americans, about 12 percent of the total U.S. population, were 65 years of age or older. By 2030, an estimated 66 million people will be 65 or over, and they will then represent

about 22 percent of the total population. The elderly minority population is also growing. In 1989, there were 2.5 million elderly blacks and 1 million elderly Hispanics. By 2020, the elderly black population is projected to more than double to 5.5 million, while the number of Hispanic elderly is expected to more than quadruple to over 4 million.

Older Americans as a group have a lower economic status than other adults in our society. Moreover, black and Hispanic older Americans have substantially smaller incomes than their white counterparts. While the overall poverty rate among people 65 years of age and over was 11.4 percent in 1989, this rate was much higher for the minority elderly. In fact, according to census figures, 1 of every 3 elderly blacks (766,000 individuals) and 1 of every 5 elderly Hispanics (211,000 individuals) were poor in 1989--compared to 1 of every 10 elderly whites (2.5 million individuals). (See figure 1.)

Figure 1: Percent of Elderly at or below Poverty Level, by Race/Ethnicity



Source: 1989 census for persons 65+

Findings from several studies also indicate that, in addition to a higher poverty rate, elderly minorities have greater needs in areas such as health services and supportive social services. Despite these needs, many minority elderly persons do not receive adequate services because of problems such as access, cultural barriers, and a lack of awareness concerning the availability of these services.

While making it clear that the Older Americans Act is intended to serve all older Americans, regardless of race or ethnicity, and is not a needs-based program, the Congress has specified through various amendments to the act that those with the greatest social or economic need, particularly low-income minorities, be given preference in the provision of Older Americans Act programs and services. This notion of "targeting" scarce resources to those most in need is by no means new; it is at the very foundation of the Older Americans Act, which sought to target resources to the older population as a group perceived to have special needs for services.

The act has been amended several times in recent years to identify categories of individuals to receive preference for services. Since 1984, state units and area agencies on aging have been specifically required to target those elderly individuals with the greatest social or economic needs, "with particular attention to the needs of low income, minority individuals." Some of the

targeting initiatives currently authorized under the act include: the development of intrastate funding formulas; the description by state units, area agencies, and providers to address the needs of low-income minorities; reporting of actual minority participation in Older Americans act programs; the special provision of outreach efforts to identify and inform minorities of services they are eligible to receive; the establishment of area agency on aging advisory councils with minority elderly representation; employment of bilingual staff; and the training of staff in cultural sensitivity.

Despite this greater emphasis on serving the minority elderly population, the participation rate among minorities in programs authorized under the Older Americans Act is believed to have declined in the 1980's, according to data from AoA.

WHAT DATA ARE AVAILABLE TO ASSESS THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TARGETING?

Concerned about this decline in minority participation and, therefore, AoA's ability to reach minority elderly and other elderly with the greatest social or economic needs, you asked us to determine what data are available to assess the effectiveness of targeting initiatives. Our answer to this question is that methodological problems concerning the reliability of participation data are a severe impediment to determining AoA's effectiveness in this area.

We have identified several problems with the methods used by AoA to collect program data, including problems with the current data collection instrument. As a result, it was impossible for us to determine whether minority participation in programs and services authorized under the Older Americans Act is increasing, decreasing, or remaining constant. Without accurate data on participation, we cannot determine the effectiveness of targeting initiatives.

We made more extensive comments on this issue at a hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on Aging of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources, where we stated that minority participation in Older Americans Act programs and services cannot be measured adequately at this time.¹ We did find, however, that some states have developed computerized client-tracking systems that potentially will allow them to measure minority participation in Older Americans Act programs. Such systems could allow states to assess the effectiveness of their targeting initiatives. However, AoA has not developed the specific standards needed for the data input to these computer systems, and therefore the information cannot be compared across states.

¹United States General Accounting Office, "Minority Participation in Administration on Aging Programs," testimony before the Subcommittee on Aging of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources, U.S. Senate (GAO/T-PEMD-91-1), March 15, 1991.

NATIONAL SURVEY ON TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

You also asked us to determine (1) how AoA provides technical assistance to state units and (2) whether the technical assistance provided by AoA meets the needs of the state units. As part of this study, we specifically examined the issue of technical assistance for targeting special populations. To answer these questions, we conducted a national survey of both providers and recipients of technical assistance. This includes: AoA, its 10 regional offices, 11 national resource centers, and 51 state units on aging.

Under title II of the Older Americans Act, one of the functions of the Commissioner on Aging is to provide technical assistance to state units and area agencies on aging with respect to programs and services funded under the act. More specifically, the act requires the Commissioner to

"consult with national organizations representing minority individuals to develop and disseminate training packages and to provide technical assistance efforts designed to assist State and area agencies in providing services to older individuals with the greatest economic and social needs."²

²Section 202(a)(18) of the Older Americans Act

To assist in the provision of technical assistance, AoA established 10 regional offices within the Department of Health and Human Services' regional office network, with each regional office responsible for providing technical assistance to the state agencies on aging within its region. Each regional office oversees from four to eight states or territories.

Provisions for technical assistance are also mandated by title IV of the Older Americans Act, which states that the Commissioner may establish multidisciplinary centers of gerontology to provide technical assistance to the Commissioner, policymakers, service providers, and the Congress. Eleven multidisciplinary centers of gerontology, called national resource centers, were established, including the National Resource Center on Minority Aging Populations located at San Diego State University.

A recent survey of state units on aging, conducted by the National Resource Center on Minority Aging Populations at San Diego State University, found that the most commonly cited technical assistance requirement was for demographic and/or census information. This information is critically needed by state units and area agencies for several reasons. First, the Older Americans Act requires state units and area agencies to identify older individuals who are eligible for assistance under the act, with particular attention to those with the greatest social and economic

needs, including low-income minorities. Without accurate demographic and census information, it is difficult for these agencies to fulfill this mandate. Second, demographic information facilitates state units and area agencies' ability to develop, monitor, and evaluate the effectiveness of specific targeting strategies. Third, state units on aging need accurate demographic information because they distribute Older Americans Act funds to the area agencies through funding formulas that take into account the number and location of targeted elderly persons.

One of the reasons it has been difficult for state and area agency officials to obtain demographic and census information is that the U.S. Census Bureau has not generated such information on a regular basis. In the 1980's, however, the Census Bureau developed two experimental programs that generated population projections for states and counties, broken down by age, race, and sex. Through our discussions with officials at the Census Bureau, we have learned that they are discussing enhancements to their population estimates program to generate projections for states and counties on a regular basis, which may include age, race, ethnicity, sex, and income.

Scope and Methods of GAO's Study

We mailed questionnaires to all 10 regional offices, the 11 national resource centers, and 51 state units on aging. (We included the District of Columbia, but excluded territories.) We

had an overall response rate of 99 percent. We also interviewed officials from AoA's central office, the National Association of State Units on Aging, and the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

In presenting our results, we will discuss (1) the amount of technical assistance for targeting that regional offices and national resource centers provide to the state units on aging and (2) the extent of the state units' on aging unmet needs, if any, for technical assistance provided by the regional offices and resource centers.

We specifically asked whether technical assistance is provided to help state units on aging (1) reach those elderly individuals with the greatest social and economic need, (2) target minority elderly, and (3) acquire demographic and census information about the aging population in their respective areas.

Findings On Technical Assistance

Amount of Technical Assistance Currently Provided

We asked officials at AoA's regional offices to indicate how much technical assistance they currently provide to state units on aging. Eight of the 10 regional office officials responded that

they provide a great or very great amount of technical assistance for (1) targeting those elderly individuals in greatest social and economic need and (2) targeting elderly minority individuals.³ In contrast, none of the 10 regional office officials indicated that they provide a great or very great amount of technical assistance to help state units acquire demographic information about the elderly populations in their respective geographic areas.

As was the case with regional offices, officials from the national resource centers indicated that they provide more technical assistance for some issue areas than others. This is not surprising since each resource center was established to provide technical assistance in a specific issue area. In fact, we did not expect most resource centers to provide a great deal of technical assistance for targeting issues. Nevertheless, most (6 of 11) resource center respondents indicated that they do provide a great or very great amount of technical assistance for (1) targeting elderly persons in the greatest social and economic need and (2) targeting elderly minorities. However, only two resource center officials noted that they provide a great or very great amount of technical assistance on demographics.

In sum, AoA's regional offices and national resource centers report that they do provide state units on aging with a great deal

³Responses based on a 5-point scale: little or none, some, moderate, great, and very great.

of technical assistance to target (1) those elderly in the greatest social and economic need and (2) minority elderly. However, they generally do not provide the same level of technical assistance to state units to help them obtain demographic information about the elderly populations in their respective geographic areas. (See table 1.) This is important, because without this information it is difficult if not impossible for these agencies to determine what fraction of the eligible population has been reached, or whether targeting is improving or declining vis-a-vis that population.

Table 1: Combined Percentage of Regional Offices and National Resource Centers Indicating They Provide Various Levels of Technical Assistance to State Units

<u>Type of technical assistance</u>	<u>Amount of technical assistance provided</u>				<u>Total^a</u>
	<u>Little or none</u>	<u>Some</u>	<u>Moderate</u>	<u>Great or very great</u>	
Targeting those with greatest social or economic needs	0%	10%	24%	67%	101%
Targeting elderly minorities	0	14	19	67	100
Demographic/census information	14	52	24	10	100

^aPercentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

Unmet Needs for Technical Assistance

To determine whether the technical assistance that is provided actually meets the perceived needs of state units on aging, we asked officials from the state units to indicate the extent of their unmet needs for technical assistance in the area of targeting.

Although most officials from regional offices and resource centers reported that they provide a great or very great amount of technical assistance to help target those elderly individuals in the greatest social and economic need, 18 percent of the state unit officials reported having great or very great unmet needs in this area.⁴ Another 33 percent of the state unit officials reported having moderate unmet needs. Concerning technical assistance to target minority elderly persons, 24 percent of the state unit officials reported having great or very great unmet needs. Another 22 percent of the state unit officials reported having moderate unmet needs in this area.

State unit officials also reported having unmet needs for technical assistance on demographic information. Twenty percent of the state unit officials reported having great or

⁴Officials from a total of 49 state units and 17 area agencies indicated the extent of their unmet needs to us.

very great unmet needs for such technical assistance. Another 16 percent of the state unit officials reported having moderate unmet needs of this sort.

In summary, we found that a sizable proportion of officials at state units on aging reported having at least moderate unmet needs for technical assistance to (1) target those elderly persons with the greatest social and economic needs, (2) target minority elderly persons, and (3) acquire demographic information on the elderly populations in their respective geographic areas. (See table 2.)

Table 2: Percentage of State Units on Aging Indicating Various Levels of Unmet Needs for Technical Assistance From Regional Offices and National Resource Centers

<u>Type of technical assistance</u>	<u>Amount of unmet needs</u>				<u>Total^a</u>
	<u>Little or none</u>	<u>Some</u>	<u>Moderate</u>	<u>Great or Very Great</u>	
Targeting those with greatest social or economic need	16%	33%	33%	18%	100%
Targeting elderly minorities	10	43	22	24	99
Demographic/census information	27	37	16	20	100

^aPercentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

Unmet Needs That Represent Serious Concerns

We also asked state unit officials to identify which of their unmet needs for overall technical assistance represent serious concerns for them. The respondents most frequently identified technical assistance for targeting, with 32 percent of the state unit officials identifying targeting issues. Specifically, they indicated a need for more technical assistance on outreach initiatives to low income and minority elders, on demographic data, and on how to perform needs assessments.

Another unmet need that represented a serious concern, was for technical assistance regarding data collection. Twenty-eight percent of the state unit officials specifically identified this unmet need. In addition, some expressed a specific need for technical assistance on how to develop and/or implement computerized data collection systems. As I mentioned earlier, without accurate data on participation in Older Americans Act programs, it is not possible to determine the effectiveness of targeting initiatives.

Sixteen percent of the state unit officials indicated that they have a serious unmet need for technical assistance in interpreting legislation, policies, and regulations. While the respondents did not necessarily specify legislation and

regulations pertaining to targeting, this issue has been a major focus of recent amendments to Older Americans Act and AoA regulations.

Finally, 10 percent of the state unit officials noted a serious unmet need for technical assistance in monitoring plans and contracts, and assuring compliance with laws and regulations by area agencies and service providers. They also mentioned a need for regional offices to provide more monitoring. Again, while they did not specifically mention monitoring of targeting mandates, we believe this unmet need is relevant to targeting. It is in their plans that area agencies specify how they intend to meet the needs of those elderly individuals they have identified for targeting. State units that are able to monitor the area plans effectively can provide more technical assistance on targeting to those area agencies that are not meeting their targeting goals.

Although it is evident that state units on aging have unmet needs for technical assistance on targeting, some of which represent serious concerns, we recognize that an obstacle to the provision of technical assistance is the paucity of staff at AoA's regional offices. Regional offices have approximately 7 to 8 staff, with limited funds for training. This means that regional office personnel are constrained in their ability to develop the necessary expertise

for the provision of technical assistance. Moreover, AoA has limited travel funds to allow regional office staff to visit states and provide hands-on technical assistance.

THE ABILITY OF AOA TO ADMINISTER PROGRAMS UNDER ITS CURRENT STRUCTURE

You also asked us to examine the ability of AoA to administer Older Americans Act programs under the current organizational structure within the Office of Human Development Services of the Department of Health and Human Services. As you know, the Department of Health and Human Services recently announced that it is merging most programs administered by the Office of Human Development Services into the new Administration for Children and Families, but that AoA will not be included in this reorganization. Rather, the Commissioner on Aging will report directly to the Secretary. Because we do not yet know the precise nature of this arrangement, it would be premature for us to comment on this development at today's hearing.

SUMMARY

As a result of our study of the technical assistance that AoA provides to state units on aging, we have focused on several issues. First, in order for state units and area

agencies on aging to evaluate the effectiveness of their targeting strategies, they must have a sound methodology to ensure that they can collect accurate data on the participation rates of targeted populations in Older American Act programs. However, as I have already noted, there are major unresolved problems in AoA's data collection methodology. Therefore, AoA cannot currently assess the effectiveness of targeting initiatives.

Second, for state units to identify the number of elderly persons with the greatest social or economic needs, as well as elderly minorities, they must have access to census data on the geographic distribution of elderly persons in their state or planning and service areas. Currently, such information is neither readily accessible to state units and area agencies nor is it up-to-date. As many state unit officials indicated in our survey, they continue to have unmet needs for such information.

Third, in order to develop methods to target those elderly persons with the greatest social or economic needs and minority elderly persons, our survey indicated that many state units need more technical assistance. Specifically, state unit officials noted serious concerns about their unmet needs for technical assistance in the areas of needs assessments, outreach initiatives, federal laws and regulations, and the

monitoring of area plans and service providers. These needs exist in spite of the fact that most of the regional offices and the national resource centers reported that they provide a great or very great deal of technical assistance for targeting. Fourth, despite the manifest need, AoA appears to lack adequate staff, as well as travel and training funds, to provide such technical assistance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of our ongoing work (and as we stated in our previous testimony), we recommend that the Commissioner on Aging take steps to (1) modify the current data collection instrument and methodology to ensure accurate participation data related to programs and services authorized under the Older Americans Act, and (2) develop specific standards for the data input to computer systems currently being used or contemplated by the states so that the information generated can be compared across states. We also recommend the Commissioner on Aging take steps to (3) acquire from the U.S. Census Bureau the necessary demographic/census information to be used by the state units and area agencies to identify and target elderly populations in their respective geographic areas, and (4) identify those state units that continue to have serious unmet needs for technical assistance for targeting, and then provide those agencies with the necessary assistance.

Mr. Chairman, we intend to issue our report on these important topics in a few months. At that time, we will advise you of the agency's position on our recommendations and, if necessary, propose legislation to assure that needed actions are taken.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.