

Why GAO Did This Study

Administered by the Administration on Aging (AoA) in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Title III of the Older Americans Act (OAA) is intended to assist individuals age 60 and older by providing supportive services. Title III, Medicaid and Medicare, state, and other sources of funding provide for several types of services, including congregate and home-delivered meals, transportation, and support for caregivers.

This testimony reports on ongoing GAO work in preparation for the reauthorization of the OAA and a full report to be issued by GAO in 2011. Based on preliminary findings, GAO describes (1) Title III services most requested by seniors and how state and local agencies reach those most in need, and (2) how agencies have coped with increasing requests in the current economic environment.

To do this, GAO reviewed aging plans from the 50 states and District of Columbia; conducted site visits to 4 states; interviewed national, state, and local officials; and analyzed preliminary responses to a Web-based survey of 125 Local Area Agencies on Aging for fiscal year 2009. The survey data used in this document reflect a 54 percent response rate as of July 30, 2010. The survey is still in progress and our results are not generalizable at this time. GAO shared its findings with AoA and incorporated their comments as appropriate.

View GAO-10-1024T or key components. For more information, contact Kay Brown at (202) 512-7215 or brownke@gao.gov.

OLDER AMERICANS ACT

Preliminary Observations on Services Requested by Seniors and Challenges in Providing Assistance

What GAO Found

Seniors frequently requested home-delivered meals and transportation services, and based on preliminary responses to GAO's survey and information from site visits, demand for some Title III services may be increasing. Some agencies said they were unable to meet all requests for services in fiscal year 2009. For example, 13 of 67 survey respondents said they were generally or very unable to serve all seniors who requested home-delivered meals, and 15 of 63 said they were generally or very unable to serve all who requested transportation assistance. Local officials cite seniors' desire to remain in their homes as they age, and the economic downturn as possible reasons for increased requests. Given this demand, providers must make decisions about which applicants will receive services. OAA requires providers to target those with the greatest economic and social need,—low-income, minority, lacking proficiency in English, and rural residents—and local officials said they advertise, conduct outreach, and coordinate with other local organizations to identify and serve these groups. Additionally, most local agencies reported screening potential clients to assess level of need, for example, to determine those most at risk of hospitalization due to poor nutrition. In addition to these known service needs, an unknown number of other seniors may need services but not know to contact OAA providers, some officials told GAO.

Local agencies who responded to GAO's survey reported using the flexibility afforded by the OAA to transfer funds among Title III programs to meet increased requests for specific services. Twenty-eight of 61 local agencies said they transferred funds in fiscal year 2009, most often removing funds from congregate meals to home-delivered meals or other services. Although the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act) provided an additional \$97 million specifically for meal programs, Title III programs are heavily reliant on state funds, and 44 of 64 local agencies responding to our survey said their state funding was reduced for fiscal year 2010. To cope with funding reductions, some reported cutting services to seniors. Twenty-seven of 65 local agencies said they cut administrative expenses in fiscal year 2010; others relocated offices or left agency positions vacant. Some state and local officials said they provided less service to individuals so that more could get some amount of assistance. Some agencies said they used Recovery Act funds to replace lost state and local funding or created new programs, but the funding was restricted to meal services and was a relatively small percentage of total OAA allocations.

The proportion of Americans age 60 and over will continue to grow over the coming decades, and demand for Title III services also will likely grow. Therefore it will be increasingly important for service providers to focus services on those most in need.