

Human Services Finance Committee
Minnesota House of Representatives
Testimony of Dawn Simonson, President & CEO, Trellis
Co-chair, Senior Meals and Services Coalition
March 9, 2023

Good afternoon, Chair Noor and members of the Committee.

My name is Dawn Simonson, and I am the President and CEO of Trellis, the state-designated area agency on aging for the metro region. I co-chair the statewide Senior Meals and Services Coalition and am here today representing the MN Association of Area Agencies on Aging. Funding for meals flows to the seven area agencies on aging for distribution to trusted, local provider partners. We are asking the Legislature to increase biennial funding for the Senior Nutrition Program by \$20M. Current state funding is \$5.39M and has not increased in decades. Core federal funding is flat at approximately \$24M.

Funding for senior meals is extremely inadequate to meet the need. In 2022, wait lists for home-delivered meals in the metro area reached 828 seniors. This is unacceptable. Malnutrition leads to increased falls, serious illness and hospitalizations. Together, we can help to prevent these consequences by ensuring that low-income and health-compromised seniors have the food they need. In today's era of workforce shortages in health and nursing home care, we must invest in relatively simple, low-cost services that help older adults live at home.

Home delivered meals-on-wheels and group dining reach older adults who are food insecure and support those with health conditions who cannot shop for food or prepare meals. Last year in the metro, 29% of home delivered meal recipients were older adults of color and 70% had incomes below 200% of poverty. Our providers offer culturally specific meals and meals that address health conditions such as diabetes.

Minnesota's seniors don't ask for much. They do without. However, this is changing as evidenced by the letters of support from AARP MN and the Senior Caucus. Minnesota seniors are asking the Legislature to increase funding for meals.

In your materials, there is an analysis of the senior meal program over the course of the pandemic. Demand rose, and with Covid-19 stimulus funds, 15,600 more seniors received meals in 2020 compared to 2019. The number of meals rose by about 1 million in 2020 and 2021. Covid-19 funds gave providers confidence that they could reach out and offer meals to older adults in need.

However, we are exhausting our Covid-19 funds and can support far fewer meals in 2023 and we project fewer yet in 2024. Inflation has increased the costs of food and delivery by 26% from 2020 – 2022 and will have impact going forward. By 2025 our capacity to serve will be skeletal while the older population continues to grow.

The evidence is clear. Increasing state funding for meals will yield:

1. Better nutrition and reduced isolation for our state's most vulnerable low-income and frail seniors;
2. Support to help them live at home and more able to meet other basic needs for medication, housing and utilities; and
3. Fewer hospitalizations and premature nursing home placements

People of all ages need adequate, healthy food. Please increase funding for meals for our older neighbors throughout Minnesota. We cannot forget this population and their needs as we address food insecurity in our state.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of seniors in Minnesota.