

## **Testimony**

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Good afternoon. I am Diane Slezak, Deputy Director of the Suburban Area Agency on Aging, the Area Agency serving suburban Cook County, Illinois. Our service area surrounds the city of Chicago, is made up of 130 diverse communities, and contains 429,000 persons aged 60 and over – the largest number of older adults in the state of Illinois.

The community-based services that we plan and coordinate play a vital role in helping adults remain in the community and in preventing the use of more costly services like nursing home care and hospitalization. Some of the crucial support that our network provides is in the form of nutrition programs.

We know that nutrition is key to maintaining functional independence, health, and quality of life. Ensuring adequate nutrition is essential to the prevention or delay of chronic disease and disease-related disabilities among seniors. Yet, poor nutrition is a serious problem for many older Americans. A survey commissioned by us in October 2000 and conducted by the Buehler Center on Aging of Northwestern University found that approximately 63% of the older adults in our service area were at moderate to high risk for nutrition deficiencies.

About 50% of the resources that our agency allocates to community agencies under the Older Americans Act are earmarked to assist older persons improve their nutritional status. Our network distributes home delivered meals through 28 distribution points throughout our service area and serves congregate meals at more than 30 sites. In Fiscal Year 2002, our network served over 342,000 congregate meals to 14,593 clients and over 510,000 home delivered meals to 3,730 clients.

In recent years, attendance at congregate meal sites in our area has declined steadily while participation in home delivered meals has increased. Currently, our nutrition programs serve more home delivered meals than congregate meals, a trend which began in 1998 when home delivered meals surpassed congregate meals for the first time since the establishment of the program over 25 years ago. As we have observed this trend, a major focus of our service

planning has been geared at efforts to improve the nutrition status of the increasing numbers of frail, less mobile, and chronically ill elders in our region, while at the same time helping more mobile and healthier seniors pay greater attention to their nutritional needs. It is critical that we continue to focus on both of these populations of older adults, now and as we plan for the future, and to continue to invest in both congregate and home delivered meals programs.

We believe that congregate nutrition programs provide more than just meals. In addition to improving health through balanced meals and nutrition education, the programs provide opportunities for older adults to socialize and often serve as a link to other supports such as case management, in-home help, and information about health services and financial benefits. Recognizing the importance of congregate nutrition services, we are engaging in efforts to revitalize the programming in our area. We have conducted focus groups and surveys with older adults to determine their preferences for nutrition services and have commissioned a study to analyze some of the congregate sites in our area and develop action steps for increased participation. Over the past few years our innovations to service delivery have included demonstration programs at restaurants, congregate sites in lower-income senior housing buildings, and customization of services to reach the increasing ethnic populations in our area. In the past year we have worked with local ethnic agencies to establish dining programs for Chinese elders and East Indian seniors.

Between 1990 and 2000 our service area experienced dramatic increases in the number of seniors aged 75 and older, and the number of older adults who live alone. The home delivered meals program is essential in serving this segment of our senior population. During the years of 2000 and 2010 our service population will greatly expand as more than 285,000 persons in our area reach the age of 60. In order to best serve this population, we believe that we must continue our investment in congregate dining programs.

We appreciate the Older Americans Act support that we receive for our nutrition programs and are very grateful for the 2.54% increase in federal appropriations for home delivered meals programs in Fiscal Year 2003. These funds are critical in enabling us to reach and serve the increasing number of frail, homebound older adults in our area. However, we want to stress the importance of continued investment in congregate nutrition service and our concerns over the 1.39% decrease in federal appropriations for this program.

The investment in congregate dining programs will help to improve and maintain the well-being of the older adults we serve, many of whom are providing care for loved ones and often neglecting their own health and nutritional needs.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments.