



Wider Opportunities for Women

## Testimony to the U.S. Administration on Aging on the Older Americans Act Reauthorization

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My name is Stacy Sanders and I am the Associate Director of the Elder Economic Security Initiative™ (Initiative) at Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW). The Initiative offers a conceptual framework and concrete tools to shape policies and programs to promote the economic well-being of elders and their families. Through the Initiative, WOW works with coalitions in twelve states representing over 500 community-based advocates and service providers to carry out organizing, advocacy and outreach strategies to promote elder economic security at the national, state and local levels.

Underpinning the Initiative is the Elder Economic Security Standard Index (Elder Index), developed by WOW and the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. Drawing from national and state data sources, the Elder Index provides county-by-county data on the real cost-of-living for elders living in the community. The Elder Index incorporates the cost of housing, health care, transportation, food and other basic needs, including add-on costs for home and community-based long-term care. The Elder Index is specific to household size, geographic area, and life circumstances.

A comparison of the Elder Index to other measures of income makes clear the relevance of this new measure. According to 2008 national averages of the Elder Index, a single senior renter requires nearly \$20,200 annually to make ends meet in retirement. Average annual Social Security income provides an older woman renter with only *56 percent* of the income required to achieve economic security, compared to *74 percent* for an older man. Furthermore, median incomes among elders without earnings also fall short of economic security.

For community-based service providers and advocates, the Elder Index truly fills a gap in knowledge – about what it really costs to age in place. This information is already being used at the state and local level, including by Area Agencies on Aging, State Units on Aging, United Way affiliates and others, for several purposes.

Many of these groups are using the Elder Index to inform strategic planning efforts and to target programming and resources. The Elder Index provides an opportunity to more accurately assess economic vulnerability and need. Further, it allows providers to more accurately evaluate how well services and supports help seniors close the income gap.

Ultimately, WOW and its partners want to promote data-based decision making and programming - and to use the framework of economic security and the Elder Index for this purpose.

Today, we've heard a lot about infusing innovative concepts and tools into the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act. With this in mind, WOW recommends making economic security a concrete goal of the Older Americans Act (OAA) and suggests using the framework of economic security and the Elder Index for planning, evaluation and programming.

As next steps, WOW plans to host listening conference calls with its partners across the country and looks forward to sharing more detailed recommendations with you. If you have any questions, then I am happy to answer them. Thank you.

**- Stacy Sanders, Associate Director of the Elder Economic Security Initiative, WOW**