

**Testimony of**

**Secretary Nora Dowd Eisenhower**

**Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Aging**

**Before the**

**Aging and Youth Committee**

**Of the**

**Pennsylvania State Senate**

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Chairwoman Vance, Chairwoman Washington and distinguished members of the Senate Aging and Youth Committee, thank you for allowing me to address you on this important issue. I am Nora Dowd Eisenhower, Secretary of Aging, and I am joined today by Mike Hall, Deputy Secretary for the Office of Long Term Living.

It is important for us to be here together presenting our progress since our last meeting just two weeks ago. Since we last were with you, we have engaged in several positive, constructive dialogues with the leadership and members of P4A and the County Commissioners. In these conversations, we have signaled our commitment and agreed upon a plan for working with the Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) in pursuit of our mutual goals:

- to ensure that every senior is treated in an equitable and consistent manner that assures them of appropriate high-quality services, and
- to ensure that maximum funding is available for direct services for seniors.

First, let me walk through a typical consumer's experience. Most often the consumer and their family are faced with a need that requires immediate attention. It is not unusual for them to be unaware of the services that are available or to whom they can reach out for help.

Often, the local AAA is where they can turn for help. The AAA provides up-front counseling, advice, and support to the consumer and their family. If this consumer appears to have a need, the AAA conducts a 10 page interview to find out if the consumer is functionally eligible for state-funded services. The AAA also helps the consumer to gather the information they will need for determining financial eligibility, a process that is conducted by the local County Assistance Office.

This is only the beginning. Once eligibility is determined, the AAA conducts a more in-depth interview to learn about the consumer's specific needs and the support and resources that are in place from family or friends. Using this information, the AAA and the consumer develop a comprehensive, individualized plan for services. The AAA is responsible for the ongoing relationship with the consumer, assuring that changing needs are being met and that the service agencies are responding to expectations.

Today we are talking about one component of this process – the 10 page interview that determines eligibility.

You may be aware that the department made some changes in the assessment process last year. To be clear, we did make some minor adjustments to the assessment form. And, the eligibility process has been separated from the care plan process. Prior to that change, a much longer 37 page form was used that combined these two functions.

It is important to note that almost half of all assessments take place in nursing facilities. The purpose of these 'pre-admission assessments' is to determine eligibility for MA payment to the nursing facility, not to develop a plan of care as that is the responsibility of the nursing home. Prior to the change in the assessment form, the AAAs

were completing the full 37 page form for all consumers, including those in nursing facilities, which resulted in unnecessary extra work for the AAAs and confusion for consumers. By revising the form to separate eligibility determination from needs assessment and service planning, we have reduced unnecessary duplication and eased the AAA workload whether the assessment is done in the community or in the nursing home.

In the past four years, we have invested considerable time evaluating our work and the work of the AAA network with an eye toward quality assurance. We acknowledge that challenges exist at both levels, and that change is needed within the Department, as well as in the network. It is the responsibility of the Department to ensure:

- that consumers receive fair and consistent treatment in every county,
- that state and federal funds are used judiciously, and
- that we define our expectations of the network which include issuing clear guidance and direction around performance outcomes, data tracking, cost reporting, and customer service.

The AAA network is equally responsible to assure high-quality, timely services for our seniors. In achieving this, each AAA is accountable:

- to use tax dollars responsibly,
- to have a productive, well-trained staff, and to
- operate in an efficient manner.

It is our collective responsibility to provide the highest quality services to our elders in need and to be accountable to Pennsylvania taxpayers.

In our conversations with AAAs over the past few weeks, we have discussed our shared commitment to three basic goals:

- Consistency and equity in eligibility determinations across the Commonwealth. In order to gauge consistency, we monitor the number of medical conditions identified and the amount of help (Activities of Daily Living – ADLs) that a senior needs, such as feeding, bathing, dressing and toileting. We want to make sure that similarly situated, clinically comparable consumers can count on similar outcomes – equivalent eligibility determinations – no matter where in the state they reside.
- Consistency in cost. We're trying to make sure that the cost of performing the eligibility assessments is reasonably consistent and uniform across the Commonwealth so that our resources are fairly distributed among the AAAs and throughout the state.
- Consistency in productivity. Again, I believe our partners at the AAAs share our commitment to prudent use of the Commonwealth's resources. In this regard, we have pledged to share with the AAAs data on the relative numbers of staff the agencies dedicate to the assessment process, as well as comparative data on the number of assessments completed by the staff over the course of a year. We want to make sure that we are all managing the system effectively and getting the best possible results from our tax dollars.

Our preliminary review of the data on consistency in outcomes, cost and productivity suggests that – with the AAAs – we have some work to do to achieve the kind of comparability and accountability we all believe is appropriate and necessary.

We have promised to share this data with the AAAs, work to resolve any discrepancies, identify substantial variances and disparities and then develop clear criteria for leveling the system and responsibly managing our costs.

In addition, we know that many questions about the Department's work and guidance (or lack thereof) will be addressed. We know we can provide clearer definitions, better guidance on cost allocation, and more regular feedback on issues as they emerge. As we move into a technological age, it is our duty to provide more real time feedback on progress and to be more direct in our instructions to assure the equity for consumers that we all want.

Finally, I want to assuage some of the concerns I have been hearing from directors, counties, legislators, and other stakeholders. First, I want to assure county commissioners and workers that the dialogue has just begun. We do not foresee any impact on jobs. Second, we are committed to spending the time to get this right, to address these important issues. Third, we will not make any changes that result in a less responsive system for consumers; in fact our goal is the opposite.

In closing, I want to assure you that we are committed to a productive process that directly engages the AAA network, and we share the same goals of creating a timely, effective, equitable, and accountable system that allows us to serve the greatest number of older Pennsylvanians.

We have met several times over the last few weeks with P4A and have made significant progress and have scheduled several regional and statewide meetings over the next several weeks to continue the dialogue, including a meeting with the AAA Board of Directors Thursday of this week and with northeastern agencies in Wilkes-Barre on Friday. These meetings are just the beginning of our interactions.

Thank you for your attention and I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.