

CELEBRATING SIXTY YEARS OF THE OLDER AMERICANS ACT



Sixty years ago, getting older in America was grim. Nearly one in three older adults lived in poverty, struggling just to get by. If they got sick or could no longer manage on their own, and didn't have family nearby, most were forced to fend for themselves. Ageism was widespread and unchecked, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and leaving many older adults invisible in society. There were few places to turn for a hot meal delivered to their door, or help navigating problems, and hardly any welcoming places to connect with others who understood what they were going through.

That all changed on July 14, 1965, when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Older Americans Act (OAA) into law. Legislation that offered the promise of living independently, with dignity, and with access to services to every US citizen over sixty, a guarantee that getting older wouldn't have to mean facing hardship alone, that older adults could stay in their own

homes, remain part of their neighborhoods, and get the help they needed when they needed it.

The Older Americans Act became the backbone of aging services nationwide. It created funding streams for meals, rides to appointments, someone to help solve problems, support for exhausted caregivers, and legal help when people were taken advantage of. It built what we now call the national aging network.

New York City is an integral part of this vision. In 1973, we became an Area Agency on Aging, a status established by the OAA, which opened the

door for us to create programs that are still changing lives today. Older adult centers where people gather and engage, case managers who become trusted allies, and services that give family caregivers a much-needed break all play a vital role in helping New Yorkers age in place. These are all services included in the Older Americans Act. Today, NYC Aging reaches over 200,000 older New Yorkers each year.

As the nation's largest Area Agency on Aging, NYC Aging has a huge impact. But our communities have changed, as have the challenges our older neighbors face. The lifestyles, needs, and desires of older adults are constantly evolving, and our systems must keep up. Aging looks different now than it did sixty years ago, and so must our response.

This year, as we celebrate its 60th anniversary, the Older Americans Act is once again up for reauthorization, a process that gives Congress the chance to review the law and make

updates based on what older adults and local communities need now. NYC Aging is standing with advocates across the country to push for changes that give cities like ours more room to respond nimbly to local priorities. We need the flexibility to shift money between meal programs and other services when circumstances change. We need to expand programs that reflect cultural traditions, give caregivers more support, address mental health struggles, and help people get around their communities.

We must also confront ageism – the false beliefs and negative stereotypes about getting older that shape everything from policy decisions to personal interactions. Combating ageism is essential to building a society where older adults are not only supported, but respected and recognized for their continued contributions.

Now more than ever, as core benefits and entitlements like Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security face mounting threats, the Older Americans Act can help provide the stability that older adults in New York City and across the country desperately need.

The heart of the Older Americans Act hasn't changed. Growing older should feel supported, not scary. Having independence, staying connected, and getting good care are fundamental rights for all Americans. As Congress considers reauthorization, now is the time to speak up. Let's work together for a future where every older adult is seen, supported, and able to thrive.



NYC Department of the Aging
Commissioner
Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez