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INTRODUCTION

Social and community services include senior centers, adult day care, legal assistance, meal programs, in-home assistance, transportation, protective services and volunteer programs. Service delivery depends on an adequate supply of trained professionals who are sensitive to the needs of older people. Lifelong education includes basic and continuing education for older adults and efforts to combat illiteracy.

The federal government finances social services for older people primarily through the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) program and the Older Americans Act (OAA). Although these sources overlap considerably, in practice the SSBG program targets lower-income people more explicitly than the OAA. The OAA gives priority to those with the “greatest social or economic need.” The OAA also funds gerontological training. The major source of federal financing for older adults’ educational services is the Adult Education Act.

Other services are funded by the Legal Services Corporation (see Chapter 13, Personal and Legal Rights), the Community Services Block Grant program, the National Senior Service Corps, and the Department of Transportation. Medicaid also funds some social services (see Chapter 7, Long-Term Services and Supports).

Information regarding the adequacy of social services exists only in piecemeal form, and some important sources of data have been eliminated. Federal agencies do not collect or report data on the number of people who are on waiting lists for services or refused services because programs are operating at capacity. Lack of good data hinders effective policy development, program planning and outreach.

State action, both legislative and administrative, is vital to the continuation, improvement and expansion of transportation, education, legal and other services designed to help individuals remain in their community. Although states receive substantial support for these services from the federal government, through such channels as OAA and SSBG programs, additional state appropriations can help ensure that more adequate services reach more people in need.

THE OLDER AMERICANS ACT

Background

Title III of the Older Americans Act (OAA) provides social and nutritional services to older people (Figure 8-1). Its primary objectives are to enable
people age 60 and older to live independently in their own homes, to remove individual and social barriers to economic independence, and to provide a continuum of care for vulnerable elderly individuals. The OAA also plays a key role in our nation’s home- and community-based long-term care (LTC) system. OAA funding supports LTC services that are delivered in people’s homes and in community settings. Moreover, state and area agencies on aging, which administer the OAA, play a key role in the coordination of a state’s entire LTC system, including the provision of services to support family caregivers.

The OAA is administered by the federal Administration on Aging (AoA) but is operated locally. The primary role of state and area agencies on aging is to coordinate service delivery by contracting with local service providers, which are required to target services to people with the greatest social or economic need but also to make programs available to all older people in the community. The targeted populations include people with low incomes or disabilities, minority individuals, rural residents, and others with special needs.

OAA’s Title III-B and Title III-C services include nutrition, transportation, outreach, homemaker, chore, telephone reassurance and legal aid. Multipurpose senior centers facilitate the delivery of a wide range of elder services. Transportation services funded through Title III-B help many older people get to meal sites, shopping and medical services. Taken in total, these services, which can include overall health promotion and disease prevention activities, contribute to the maintenance of good health among older people. (The same types of supportive and nutritional services are available to older people.)

Figure 8-1

Number of People Receiving Social Services Under Title III, by Type of Service Received, FY2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>People (thousands)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal care</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chore</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult day care</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case management</td>
<td>412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition counseling</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisted transportation</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

American Indians and Hawaiian natives under grants provided by Title VI of the act.)

Title III also authorizes services that support family caregivers, including grandparents or older caregivers. These provisions are part of the National Family Caregiver Support Program, which was established in 2000. This program gives each state funds to provide services that include information to caregivers about available services, assistance in gaining access to services, caregiver training, respite care, and a limited amount of supplemental services. A portion of these funds is allocated to help older individuals who provide care and support to people with mental and developmental disabilities (for information on the Senior Community Service Employment Program, which is funded under OAA Title V, see Chapter 4, Employment).

While some individuals use more than one OAA service, overall the unduplicated number of individuals served under Title III in 2002 was 7.5 million. More than 3 million older individuals were registered to receive supportive services. Some 108 million meals were served to 1.9 million individuals at congregate meal sites, and nearly 142 million home-delivered meals were served to 1 million homebound elders in fiscal year 2002. Percentages vary considerably from state to state, but nationally in 2002, 28 percent of Title III participants were poor, 21 percent were minorities, and 28 percent were rural residents.

The 2000 OAA reauthorization created new provisions regarding participant contributions and cost-sharing. Voluntary contributions from participants now may be solicited for all services provided under the act. Previously, the statute explicitly authorized voluntary contributions only for nutrition services. In addition, states may now require beneficiaries to pay a cost-sharing fee for the OAA services they receive. Cost-sharing is not permitted for information and assistance, outreach, benefits counseling, case management, ombudsman services, elder abuse prevention, legal assistance and other consumer protection services, congregate and home-delivered meals, and any services delivered through tribal organizations. States may not subject individuals whose incomes are below the federal poverty line to cost-sharing, and they may also exclude other low-income individuals from cost-sharing provisions. It should be noted, however, that those services and individuals for which or for whom cost-sharing is prohibited may still be subject to requests for voluntary contributions.

The authority to implement cost-sharing represents a significant change in the way OAA services may be administered in the states. As such, Congress attempted to enact safeguards to ensure that services continue to be targeted to the most vulnerable populations. The privacy of participants is to be protected and assets are not to be considered. States are directed to apply cost-sharing on a sliding scale and may not deny services to individuals who fail to make cost-sharing payments. In addition, area agencies on aging (AAAs), which administer OAA programs locally, may request a waiver from
a state’s cost-sharing policies if a significant proportion of beneficiaries are low-income or if implementation of cost-sharing would impose an unreasonable administrative burden. State agencies and AAAs also are required to conduct public hearings and solicit the views of older individuals before implementing cost-sharing. States must develop plans to ensure that cost-sharing will not decrease the delivery of services to low-income individuals. Moreover, the Department of Health and Human Services’ assistant secretary on aging will conduct an evaluation of cost-sharing practices and their impact on participation by vulnerable individuals.

The OAA also plays an important role in LTC quality by authorizing and funding the LTC ombudsman program. The LTC ombudsman in each state is responsible for identifying, investigating and resolving complaints made by or on behalf of LTC facility residents. Although funding for this aspect of the OAA has never been adequate, states historically received an appropriation dedicated to ombudsman spending. Cuts in funding for ombudsman programs can result in inadequate monitoring and oversight and even less adequate reporting of abuse in long-term care facilities.

The OAA is scheduled to be reauthorized in 2005; however, regulations to implement the 2000 authorization have yet to be promulgated.

FEDERAL & STATE POLICY

THE OLDER AMERICANS ACT

AARP supports public funding for Older Americans Act (OAA) programs and outreach designed to increase participation in low-income benefit programs.

States and the Administration on Aging (AoA) should carefully monitor the implementation of cost-sharing and make a publicly available report of the results to ensure the adequacy of services to target populations.

The authority of the AoA to approve state plans and intrastate funding formulas should be clearly stated in both law and regulation.

The AoA and the entire aging services network should promote the full participation of older people who live in rural areas and those with special needs in all aspects of the OAA. These efforts should encourage public-private partnerships.

The AoA should monitor and evaluate its data collection effort, particularly as it pertains to the participation of minorities and special-needs populations in OAA programs. AoA’s data collection efforts should be used to evaluate the effects of new provisions regarding service delivery to rural residents, the expansion of voluntary contributions, and the authority to implement cost-sharing. Improvements to the data collection system should be made, based
on the findings of an evaluation. Such improvements could include the addition of new data, such as the number of people who request and receive each type of OAA service.

The AoA should enforce the OAA provision that prohibits state and area agencies on aging from directly providing supportive, nutrition and in-home services; an exception is made when necessary to ensure an adequate supply of services related to the agency’s administrative functions or when the services would be more economical.

Title III grants should be opened periodically for competitive bidding or reviewed to ensure quality. Current and prospective service providers should be evaluated on the basis of standardized criteria, including quality and effectiveness of service provision, capacity and other factors.

The AoA and the entire aging network should ensure that all states engage in a long-range planning process to address the significant issues that will confront the states and the nation as a result of a rapidly aging population.

**FEDERAL POLICY**

**THE OLDER AMERICANS ACT**

The Administration on Aging (AoA) should rigorously monitor and evaluate states’ implementation of new cost-sharing provisions and expanded authority to solicit voluntary contributions. The AoA should take steps to ensure that states adequately deliver services to the most vulnerable populations, especially low-income, rural and minority individuals.

Congress should adjust appropriations for all Title III programs to reflect both growth in the older population and the effects of inflation.

Congress should appropriate specifically earmarked funding for the ombudsman program.

AARP supports statutory language in the Older Americans Act that targets the most vulnerable populations, especially low-income and minority seniors.

Congress should adequately fund the National Family Caregiver Support Program.

**STATE POLICY**

**THE OLDER AMERICANS ACT**

Before expanding the use of voluntary contributions or implementing cost-sharing, states must obtain public input and should focus especially on low-income and minority participants. States should carefully consider the impact of such changes on their ability to deliver services to the most vulnerable
populations, including the possible effects of requesting payment for a multiplicity of services. States that enact cost-sharing should exempt individuals with incomes below 150 percent of the federal poverty level.

States should integrate all long-term services and supports functions within their jurisdiction.

States should enact legislation ensuring the state unit on aging the prominence and funding necessary to promote independence in accordance with objectives and functions stipulated in the Older Americans Act.

States should supplement Administration on Aging funds to ensure adequate funding for their long-term care ombudsman programs.

States should establish statewide clearinghouses to collect and disseminate a broad base of data on the elderly population, including data on age, race and gender. States also should document annually the adequacy of services for older people who are poor, members of minority groups, frail or otherwise vulnerable and use this information to improve service delivery.

States should publish yearly expenditure reports containing age-specific and uniform data on program activities and make the findings available to the public. Lawmakers and regulators should use the data in planning for, and filling gaps in, service needs.

States should provide mental health and substance abuse services specifically tailored to older people and people with disabilities.

States should expand programs that identify and increase awareness of and sensitivity to depression, suicide risk and substance abuse among older people. These programs should particularly target health and social service providers.

### SOCIAL SERVICES AND COMMUNITY SERVICES BLOCK GRANTS

**Background**

The Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) program, formerly Title XX of the Social Security Act, helps states provide a broad range of social services (Figure 8-2). Programs most important to older people include those that help them live independently and maintain self-sufficiency, prevent or remedy abuse or exploitation, provide in-home services to prevent unnecessary institutionalization, and provide services to individuals in institutions.
Federal spending for social services continues to be limited and has not kept pace with inflation. At the same time, demand for services will continue to grow as the number of older people increases. Moreover, cutbacks in one program may indirectly affect participation in another. For example, community action agencies funded under the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) program perform important outreach and support functions, linking low-income older people isolated by culture or geography with energy assistance, emergency food aid, home-repair programs, and other federally funded services. Reductions in the CSBG program could make it difficult for many vulnerable older adults to obtain these benefits.

Since 1981, reductions in federal funding have resulted in tightened state eligibility standards. Between 1977 and 1997, Title XX funding declined in real terms by nearly $5 billion, a decrease of 67 percent. Such dramatic funding reductions inevitably result in fewer and less comprehensive services being provided to fewer people as affected populations continue to increase.

Proposals that would allocate federal funds to “faith-based” charities that provide social services raise a number of concerns, including adequate separation between church and state and possible discrimination against or imposition of certain religious practices. The impact that such efforts could have on our nation’s social services delivery system has not been examined.
FEDERAL & STATE POLICY

SOCIAL SERVICES AND COMMUNITY SERVICES BLOCK GRANTS

Congress should increase funding for the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) program. Funding levels should be increased to reflect the increased population of older Americans.

Congress should increase funding for the Community Services Block Grant program to help meet the service needs of low-income communities.

Administrative linkages between SSBG state plans and state plans under the Older Americans Act should be strengthened through interagency agreements designed to improve service delivery and coordination.

The federal government should require state SSBG officials to consult with state and local agencies and organizations representing older people and other groups served by the SSBG program to ensure that the services provided are appropriate to meet community needs.

Congress should require states to prepare yearly expenditure reports with age-specific and uniform data on program activities related to the social service needs of specific populations, such as minorities, rural residents, and people with physical or mental disabilities. Federal requirements for states to provide a yearly report to the Department of Health and Human Services should be retained.

States should ensure that public revenues are distributed only to social service agencies that are formally accountable to the taxpayers, that maintain separation of church and state, and that do not discriminate against or impose religious practices or beliefs on those who apply for or receive services.

STATE & LOCAL POLICY

SOCIAL SERVICES AND COMMUNITY SERVICES BLOCK GRANTS

Along with local governments, states must devote a fair proportion of their block grant funds to meeting the needs of older people. States and localities should comply strictly with public hearing and reporting requirements.

STATE POLICY

SOCIAL SERVICES AND COMMUNITY SERVICES BLOCK GRANTS

States should use Social Services Block Grant funds to provide the full range of adult protective services, including financial management, to help clients receive less restrictive alternatives to guardianship and conservatorship.
TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

Background

Transportation services provide the crucial link between an older person living at home and the social services that may make it possible for that person to continue to live independently. The personal mobility associated with transportation is a major factor in the basic quality of life of midlife and older people. Transportation services also link people who have disabilities with caregivers who provide home-care services.

Older people increasingly need alternatives to driving their own vehicles. As many as 11 million Americans age 50 and older do not drive, and the number of nondrivers—or potential transit users—will grow as the population ages. In addition, many older people may be eligible for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) paratransit services because of a disabling condition that prevents them from using fixed-route transportation, either temporarily or permanently. Yet public transportation providers are already concerned that fiscal constraints will impair their ability to meet the demand for ADA paratransit services, especially if human service agencies also cut back on transportation services. Moreover, a 1996 AARP survey showed that agencies on aging believed transportation resources already were insufficient for people who do not qualify for ADA, particularly in rural areas where there is little or no public transit (for a further discussion of transportation, see Chapter 10, Transportation, and of ADA, see Chapter 13, Personal and Legal Rights).

The Older Americans Act (OAA) specifically makes transportation services a priority among the social services funded under Title III. Many OAA state and local programs use part of their federal funding to provide transportation services. Typically, transportation services are provided by transit operators under contract with the local area agency on aging. These operators often receive significant funding from other federal, state and local sources, including Medicaid and Head Start programs. Their viability depends on the assurance that funds will be available from multiple sources, including the Department of Transportation’s Federal Transit Administration (FTA). Much of FTA’s mass-transit funding is restricted for use as capital assistance, so human services grants are important for operating funds. Coordination and cooperation among the various funding sources at all levels of government promote the most efficient and effective use of transportation funds.

The availability of transportation is also a concern on American Indian reservations. Although the federal government recognizes American Indian tribes as sovereign nations, they still must go through state transportation departments to obtain federal transportation funding. The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st century mandates a fair and equitable distribution of
funds for transportation services within states; however, most American Indian tribes nationwide have difficulty accessing funds under this law (for additional information on transportation issues, see Chapter 10, Transportation).

**FEDERAL POLICY**

TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

All federal agencies that administer funds for federal transportation programs and services should actively participate in planning and coordinating those programs and should promote their services.

Congress should appropriate sufficient funding to assist states in developing and maintaining adequate transportation services needed in rural areas.

The Department of Transportation and the Administration on Aging (AoA) should monitor and evaluate the adequacy of transportation services for all older Americans. The AoA should encourage the aging community to help plan the complementary paratransit services provided for in the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Congress should amend federal transportation law to fund American Indian entities directly, providing both operational and capital assistance for transportation services and for coordination with other state transportation funds.

**STATE POLICY**

TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

States should ensure the availability of transportation services for older people, especially those who have low incomes, are frail, or live in rural and other areas not served by adequate public transportation. In addition, states should provide supplemental funding to restore cuts in federal transportation services for elderly people and avoid unnecessary additional fees or other costs that restrict access for older people.

States should enforce federal regulations that call for coordination among federally supported programs, such as state transportation departments, state units on aging, and area agencies on aging, in planning transportation services. As part of this effort these programs should develop a system to collect uniform data on transportation services for older people and people with disabilities.
VOLUNTEERISM

Background

Volunteering offers older people the opportunity to serve as resources to one another, to their communities and to the nation. The National Senior Service Corps (NSSC), authorized by the National and Community Trust Act of 1993 to operate under the Corporation for National and Community Service, provides valuable services to older and younger people. Although not new, the concept of national service has sparked new interest in volunteerism and has the potential to provide a wide range of opportunities and incentives for more Americans to serve in their communities. The corporation provides funds, training and technical assistance for the NSSC and AmeriCorps (the domestic Peace Corps). The corporation also encourages citizens of all ages, incomes and abilities to engage in full- or part-time community service. It is important that volunteers are recruited from the culturally diverse communities these programs serve.

The NSSC includes three programs. Two of them, the Foster Grandparent Program and the Senior Companion Program, include stipends. Volunteers in the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program are reimbursed only for expenses.

Between 1980 and 2001, participation in NSSC programs increased by 78 percent, from 295,000 volunteers to 525,700 (Figure 8-3). However, the number of volunteers who can participate in these programs is still greatly limited by insufficient funding from national and state sources. This limitation, in turn, affects the number of people who can be served. Modest increases in funding for these volunteer programs could result in large increases in the number of people served. Volunteer programs, however, cannot substitute for adequate federal funding of social service programs. Volunteers also cannot substitute for paid, trained professionals in areas where client health and well-being is at risk.
To encourage greater volunteer efforts, the Volunteer Protection Act of 1997 addresses personal liability concerns and the difficulty nonprofit organizations have in obtaining reasonably priced liability insurance. The law ensures that no volunteer for a nonprofit organization (with the exception of volunteer drivers), acting within the scope of the volunteer’s official functions and duties, can be held liable for harm resulting from an honest mistake or act of omission.

**FEDERAL POLICY**

**VOLUNTEERISM**

The National Senior Service Corps should receive additional funds to increase volunteers’ stipends, recruitment and training.

The Corporation for National and Community Service should provide expanded opportunities for both older adults and young people to serve their communities. Volunteers should be recruited from culturally diverse communities. The corporation also should fund service projects that directly support older Americans’ contributions to the community.

**STATE POLICY**

**VOLUNTEERISM**

States should consider enacting laws that supplement the federal Volunteer Protection Act of 1997, including liability protection for volunteer drivers, as long as the additional protections for volunteers do not diminish the rights of social services clients.
AARP PRINCIPLES

AARP supports efforts at the federal, state and local levels to strengthen the educational system. Funding for programs for children, youth and adults should be supplied. Special emphasis should be placed on children and youth who are educationally at risk and on expanding successful programs to prevent later failures.

Older Americans should become visible supporters of school systems as well as a more integral part of the school community as volunteers and users of school facilities.

School curricula should integrate the study of aging, aging processes, and the valuable role played by older individuals.

Schools should develop integrated student-senior curricula to encourage mentoring and involvement by parents and grandparents at school sites.

Students should have the opportunity to learn under the direction of competent and well-educated teachers in an environment that is safe and conducive to learning. Families and teachers must work together, with the assistance of volunteers, to ensure that all students receive this opportunity.

AARP urges business involvement in education and believes employers should be encouraged to permit their employees to bridge family and work responsibilities so that employees can be more directly involved in the education of their children.
EDUCATION

Background

According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), children’s early years in school are the most crucial to their future, not only in the classroom but in life. Thus, NAESP believes schools’ first and foremost concerns must be student progress and welfare. Many organizations are working to ensure this:

- The National Education Association seeks a quality education for each child in safe schools where children can learn the basics, practice values such as responsibility and teamwork, and prepare for future employment.

- The National Association of Secondary School Principals is committed to students’ intellectual growth, academic achievement, character and leadership development, and physical well-being.

- The American Association of School Administrators believes that the purpose of the country’s public education system is to provide quality education for all students through superior leadership, sufficient funding, effective instruction, competent staff, appropriate programs, suitable facilities and community and parental support and involvement.

- The NRTA (formerly the National Retired Teachers Association) is working with retired teachers to make a positive difference on issues ranging from the national teacher shortage to the lack of innovative teacher training programs in higher education. Retired teachers are serving as mentors to less experienced teachers and as role models to children and teens.

The US needs additional public and private investments in human capital (through education and training, for example) if it is to remain competitive in the global economy. Such investments contribute to private-sector output and economic growth, as well as provide societal benefits by instilling desirable values. Education is especially critical as the occupational structure shifts from manufacturing to services, reducing the proportion of jobs that can be filled by people with limited formal education. Young people who join the workforce with a high school diploma or less appear destined for dramatically lower standards of living than their more educated contemporaries.

Major investments in education and training are also made by the Department of Defense (DOD) in order to maintain a well-educated military force. According to the DOD, maintaining technological leadership is critical to both national defense strategy and economic well-being. Therefore, the
department sponsors more than 200 programs to improve science and engineering education.

Schools also can provide an ideal setting for intergenerational programs in which both young and old have the opportunity to learn from one another and share their experiences. This process can be enhanced by including material on aging in the school curriculum. All age groups also would benefit from learning about saving and investing for the future. High educational attainment for all children and opportunities for continuing education for adults are critical to ensuring that Americans can maintain a high quality of life (for more information on financial literacy, see Chapter 12, Financial Services and Consumer Products).

**STATE POLICY**

**EDUCATION**

States should work collaboratively with private and federal agencies to encourage students and adults to study saving and investment programs. These activities should include, but not be limited to, personal retirement efforts, planning for long-term services and supports, pension plans and Social Security.

**FINANCING EDUCATION**

**Background**

Per capita spending on American education has decreased in recent years, as school districts attempt to meet the demands created by record growth in elementary school enrollments. Moreover, wide disparities remain in school financing, both within school districts and within states. Because the primary source of education funding is local property taxes, more affluent areas, with higher property tax assessments, can spend more for education than their poorer counterparts. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often need an enriched educational experience to overcome early learning deficits and the special problems of poverty, yet such students are likely to attend schools with inadequate resources. The gap between educationally privileged and educationally disadvantaged youth becomes larger over time, compounding schooling inequities. States are dealing with this issue in a variety of ways. For instance, laws and courts in some states have mandated increased state support for poorer school districts to bring them more in line with affluent school districts.

States are examining and altering many school-financing policies, such as parental choice of schools, voucher use and merit pay for teachers. Some states are supporting charter schools and/or providing parents with vouchers so children can attend schools other than those in their immediate area. Both
of these efforts undermine state and local funding for the public K–12 system and do little to significantly improve the quality of education in the public school system.

**STATE POLICY**

**FINANCING EDUCATION**

Salaries for teachers should be adequate to recruit and retain skilled teachers, including more minority teachers. States should provide programs to improve the skills of existing teachers.

States should support education benefits, develop strategies to close funding disparities without causing affluent districts to spend less, and ensure that the integrity of the public school system is always protected.

States should ensure that the public K–12 education system is adequately funded to provide high-quality educational opportunities for all children without diverting resources to support such programs as charter schools and voucher systems.

States should ensure that public revenues are distributed only to educational institutions that are formally accountable to the taxpayers.

**LIFELONG AND GERONTOLOGICAL EDUCATION**

**Background**

Lifelong education contributes to personal growth and economic productivity, particularly in an era of rapid technological change. It includes basic and continuing education for older adults and efforts to combat illiteracy in all age groups. Ongoing education can help older Americans overcome skills obsolescence and make later life more rewarding.

Adult education programs receive funding, as formula grants to states, under the Adult Education Act. The Department of Education distributes approximately $340 million annually to the states, and states and localities provide an additional $900 million for basic education for people age 16 and over. Only 2.5 percent of the federal budget goes toward education for Americans of all ages; state and local funds together make up more than three-fourths of the total adult education budget.

Among the neediest older Americans are the functionally illiterate, whose condition deprives them of the basic skills for daily living. Moreover, all forms of illiteracy isolate people, causing their exclusion from public benefits programs, and can perpetuate a cycle of poverty over generations. Illiteracy
rates are generally higher among older people than younger people and are much higher for older minorities than for other older people.

A study by the Federal Interagency Committee on Education found that 14 federal agencies administer 79 literacy-related programs. The four agencies most active in literacy programs for people age 55 and older are the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Labor, the Department of Education, and ACTION. Despite all this activity only a small percentage of illiterate people receive services. The Education Department’s Adult Education Program is the major federal program providing basic education and literacy training. Yet only 1 percent of the education budget goes to adult literacy.

The National Literacy Act of 1991 authorized four new programs under the Education Department’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education: state literacy resource centers, national workforce literacy strategies, programs for functional literacy, and life-skills training among state and local prisoners. In addition, the act requires that states provide direct and equitable access to federal funds by local education agencies (LEAs), public or private nonprofit organizations, agencies responsible for correctional education, and postsecondary educational institutions that serve educationally disadvantaged adults. Organizations serving older adults can apply directly to the state for funding, rather than through LEAs or community colleges.

Although many educational institutions have focused their recruitment efforts on adults to bolster student rolls and alleviate financial difficulties, opportunities for adults have been primarily in enrichment activities rather than in areas that would help adults meet economic or social needs. Adults, especially those who are unemployed or underemployed, also need employment-related education. Programs should address adult literacy, lifelong learning and job preparation (see Chapter 4, Employment for a description of programs that develop the employment potential of aging workers and displaced homemakers).

FEDERAL POLICY

LIFELONG AND GERONTOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Federal agencies should collect comprehensive data on illiteracy rates among older people, including minorities and people with disabilities. The federal government must ensure that all individuals can acquire basic literacy skills, but it cannot do this without better estimates of the numbers of people affected. It also should create incentives for private and public agencies to provide educational opportunities to older people with literacy difficulties.

The federal government should increase support to institutions providing training in gerontology to help ensure an adequate workforce trained in the field of aging.
States should support initiatives that assess the prevalence and attack the problem of illiteracy. States should develop programs to help older persons improve their computer skills. In addition, states should support the use of older people as paid employees and volunteers in literacy training programs.

States should increase learning opportunities for adults (in credit, noncredit and part-time programs) at community colleges, technical and vocational schools, and other institutions of higher education. Support must include student financial aid for qualified adults, the opportunity to audit courses, and public information programs that alert adults to educational opportunities.

States should require supervision and licensing of proprietary educational institutions to ensure quality and prevent fraud.