Social Workers Provide Input at White House Conference on Aging

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July 13 marked the sixth White House Conference on Aging (WHCoA). This event has taken place each decade since the 1960s to identify and advance actions that improve the quality of life of older Americans. National NASW submitted written comments before the conference (www.socialworkers.org/practice/aging/whcoa2015comments.asp), which CEO Angela McClain attended. Between February and May, the White House hosted a series of five invitational forums held in Boston, Cleveland, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Each forum included a multiple-option approach, expert panels, and breakout sessions. Participating social workers reflected on opportunities, challenges, and concerns that are important to older adults.

The 60 participants in the Healthy Aging breakout session discussed the greatest health issues older adults face, barriers to addressing those issues, and recommendations. The group generated broad recommendations focused on the need to see health holistically, reflecting the World Health Organization’s definition of health as “a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” At the same time, participants expressed concern that society focuses predominantly on physical health, often overlooking issues such as depression, substance use, and suicide among older adults. Barriers to holistic health included the stigma related to aging and mental health. An example cited was the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA’s) lack of current funding for grant programs dedicated specifically to older adult mental health and substance use. Participants also expressed concern that responsibility for older adult mental health and substance use programs is spread across numerous federal and state agencies, without clear designation of accountability.

Retirement Security

Senator Elizabeth Warren’s comments on retirement security framed an afternoon breakout session on the topic. The 35-person breakout group was in accord on the need to strengthen and expand retirement security, especially Social Security. Earlier in the day, Senator Warren also discussed not only a proposed regulation by the U.S. Department of Labor to address investment advisers’ conflicts of interest, but also how threats to Medicare, Medicaid, and the Affordable Care Act could reduce retirement security.

Conclusion


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