

Councilmember Anita Bonds, Chairperson
Committee on Housing and Executive Administration
B24-0419-No Senior Hungry Omnibus Amendment Act of 2021

Dear Madam Chair and distinguished members of the Committee on Housing and Executive Administration,

My name is Joon Bang, the Chief Executive Officer of Iona Senior Services. On behalf of the Iona community, we applaud you for taking a stand against the food insecurity affecting our older adults in the District. When I joined the organization five months ago, my first client visit was at Regency House, the only public housing available for older persons in Ward 3. Of the 140+ Regency House tenants, over 40% have one or more disabilities and nearly 80% of them live alone. Unfortunately, these percentages while extremely high, are not too far from the stark realities of the compounding needs and difficult life experiences of many of our aging residents across the city.

This client visit was a part of our Food Pantry Plus delivery. It is an Iona program developed to meet the needs of our most vulnerable older adults who are unable to go out to buy food or essentials because of immobility caused by physical or cognitive impairments, income insecurity, abject poverty, or simply because of the lack of transportation access. As we made deliveries, one client welcomed us into his home. His relationship with Iona began seven years ago when he found help with his lapsed SNAP benefits and housing application. Rose, Iona's licensed community-based registered dietitian nutritionist intervened when he was identified as being food-insecure and at high nutrition risk just a few years ago.

Since then, he began receiving home delivered meals, and as I listened to their conversation during this visit, I witnessed something much more meaningful than just the act of making a food pantry delivery. I saw trust and friendship in their interaction. I learned through them that food security, while it must begin with access to nutritious meals for ALL older adults, it is also about building community with our older neighbors forged by genuine human connection and care. Over time the two had worked together for him to receive nutrition support specific to addressing deficiencies that were exacerbating his chronic diabetic leg ulcers caused by his paraplegia and other health challenges unique to him. Rose and members of the Iona team served as the link between him and the access to the resources that helped him continue to live and age in his community. His life experience is just one of the 12,000+ individual and unique experiences of our older adults living in poverty in our city, the vast majority of them unnoticed and invisible to most of us.

For this reason, we support initiatives that seeks to reduce barriers for vulnerable individuals as they age especially so if it means we are able to create equity in access to important resources to support their needs. There are two elements of the No Senior Hungry Omnibus Amendment Act of 2021 we believe can be achieved sooner than later – the Elderly Simplified Application

Project (ESAP) and the addition of Home Delivered Meals (HDMs) to the Elderly and Persons with Disabilities Waiver (EPD Waiver).

SNAP is considered the most effective tool in combating food insecurity impacting older adults in the country today. However, only 46% of the District's eligible older adult population is receiving this benefit. Research has shown that stigma, misunderstanding of eligibility, and barriers during the application/enrollment process are three key factors for underutilization of SNAP. We are in favor of the steps outlined to increase SNAP participation and highly support the adoption of the ESAP.

EPD Waiver HDMs would provide a valuable prepared meal resource for disabled adults aged 18-59. Last month, our nutrition team received a referral for a 57-year-old EPD Waiver-eligible client who was desperate to find a HDM program he qualified for. Living alone and recently released from the hospital, he suffers from multiple chronic conditions including debilitating congestive heart failure. He was unable to shop for or prepare appropriate meals for himself and could barely afford to buy food.

In addition, we respectfully ask the City Council to invite and fund community-based organizations and anchor institutions to develop outreach strategies tailored to meet the needs of our diverse and multicultural aging communities. There is no one size fits all solution to support the unique and diverse needs of vulnerable populations. We also believe that it is important to acknowledge that passage of legislation and policy change takes time. Time many of our older adults simply do not have. I began this testimony by sharing with you about my first Iona client experience. Unfortunately, that gentleman passed away just a few months ago. Ultimately, the health of any society depends on how we treat the most vulnerable among us. No older adult should go hungry in this country and certainly not in our nation's capital. Please move with urgency to support the needs of our communities. I thank you for your time and the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Joon Bang
Chief Executive Officer
Iona Senior Services