BACKGROUND
This year we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the original enactment of the Older Americans Act (OAA) of 1965. The Senate HELP Committee unanimously approving the reauthorization is just the first step in the reauthorization process. The OAA presents a unique and historic opportunity to renew the authorization and update the scope of its programs to meet the needs of a 21st century older adult population. The social work profession has long played leadership roles in the aging network at the local, state, and federal levels.

The OAA is relevant to the work of our nation’s social workers and the people they serve, because it funds programs and services that enable older adults to enjoy healthy, productive, and independent lives. Services authorized by the OAA include, but are not limited to, nutrition programs, family caregiver support, job training, transportation, tribal assistance, navigation and state resource centers, long term care ombudsman programs, health and wellness programs, and programs to prevent and address older abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

WHY THE REAUTHORIZATION OF A ROBUST OAA IS NECESSARY
Changing Demographics. The aging of the US population presents social and political implications for both the social work profession and this nation. The aging of the Baby Boom generation and other changing demographic trends require proactive policies and approaches to ensure that older adults thrive and remain engaged with their families, communities, and the broader society.

New Challenges. As longevity increases and the population ages, the need for housing, economic security, health care (including mental and behavioral health), transportation, advocacy, and additional support services becomes more relevant. Consider, for example, the following:

» In 2005, 42% of people 65 years and older reported they had at least one functional limitation, with women reporting higher functional limitations than men. Also, more than 50% of those 75 years and older reported having activity limitations.

» An estimated 12 million people will need long-term services and supports by 2050.

POLICY SOLUTIONS
» Celebrate and maintain the successes of the OAA by reauthorizing the legislation in 2015.

» Support the role of social workers in reauthorization of the OAA, including their essential role as coordinated care providers.

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1 In our publication Social Work Speaks, in the “Aging and Wellness” chapter, NASW notes, “Demographers attribute population aging primarily to declining fertility and mortality rates. From 1950 to 2000 the proportion of adults 65 years of age or older increased from 12.1% to 14.5% of the U.S. population; this percentage is projected to rise to 20% by 2050. Similarly, the median age of the population rose from 30.2 to 35.3 years between 1950 and 2000, and is expected to rise to 40.7 years by 2050. Globally, the ‘oldest old’—those 85 years and older—constitute the fastest growing segment of the population” (NASW, Social work speaks [10th ed.], Washington, DC: Author).