



National Association for
Professional Gerontologists

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July 14, 2011

Hon. Barbara Boxer
112 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Boxer,

I am writing on behalf of the National Association for Professional Gerontologists (NAPG) to recommend that language be included in the 2011 Reauthorization of the Older Americans Act that specifically identifies *Gerontology /Gerontologist* as a priority hiring category for positions receiving OAA funding.

When the Older Americans Act was initially authorized in 1965 it established the Administration on Aging at the federal level, a network of agencies to deliver services to older adults at the state and local levels, and provided for the education and training of professionals with expertise in aging. Career categories existing at that time, such as Social Worker and Human Service Worker, were included in the original language. The 1965 OAA, and subsequent reauthorizations, have proven to be immensely successful in developing capacity within institutions of higher education to offer cutting-edge training and academic programs in Gerontology. By the end of the 20th Century, 756 academic Gerontology Programs were listed in the *Directory of Educational Programs in Gerontology and Geriatrics* published by the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE). Remarkably, however, the many thousands of graduates of these Gerontology programs receive little or no consideration in hiring decisions because the career category *Gerontology/Gerontologist* has never found its way back into the language of the Older Americans Act. This oversight requires correction because it has at least two serious, negative consequences for providing quality services to older adults.

First, the fact that there is currently no requirement for those working in OAA-funded agencies to have any formal, academic training in Gerontology, nor any demonstrated competencies in providing care for the elderly, has led to a workforce that is under-prepared to handle the complex challenges of aging. In recent surveys of agencies serving older adults in California, 60% had no staff members who had taken even a single course in Gerontology (Aging Initiative Labor Force Survey I and II; Moon, et al., 2008, 2009, CalSWEC). At a conference last fall, I spoke with the only staff member at the Washington offices of the Administration on Aging who had a Ph.D. in Gerontology. Without explicit education in Gerontology, professionals serving older adults are unable to bring the latest knowledge and insights about aging to bear in working with their clients and their clients' families.

A second adverse consequence of the absence of *Gerontology/Gerontologist* as a priority hiring category in OAA-funded agencies is that the number of Gerontology/Geriatrics programs in institutions of higher education has actually declined over the past decade. While 756 academic programs were listed in 2000, by 2009 AGHE's directory listed only 675 programs—an 11% decline (Schafer, et al., 2010, GSA). This at the very time we need more, not fewer, academic Gerontology programs to serve the growing older population. One reason for the decline in the number of available programs is likely to be that Gerontology graduates do not perceive a clear pathway to employment following completion of their studies (Maiden, et al., 2005, GSA), and therefore select other majors. Less student demand translates into fewer programs. Including a hiring category of *Gerontology/Gerontologist* for OAA agencies would doubtlessly encourage students to select Gerontology as a course of study, thus improving demand for such academic programs, and increasing their numbers.

The mission of the National Association for Professional Gerontologists, a not-for-profit organization, is to professionalize the field of Gerontology. Professionalizing Gerontology to better serve older adults rests upon three interrelated components—accreditation of Gerontology programs, credentialing of Gerontology graduates, and hiring of Gerontology professionals. We are hopeful that AGHE will develop an accreditation process for Gerontology programs that emphasizes core competencies and skills in working with older adults. At the present time, NAPG credentials the academic backgrounds of Gerontology program graduates, insuring that their coursework includes the various content areas about which there is consensus in the field. The final, and necessary, component involves employment opportunities for credentialed graduates of accredited programs. Including the hiring category *Gerontology/Gerontologist* in the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act represents an important opportunity to further the objective of professionalizing Gerontology.

Thank you for considering this request. If I can provide additional information, please be in contact with me.

Sincerely,

Donna E. Schafer, Ph.D., C.P.G.
Executive Director, NAPG

Cc: Kathy Greenlee