

Core Member Organizations

- Aging and Disability Professionals Association of Wisconsin (ADPAW)
- Alzheimer’s Association SE Wisconsin Chapter
- Wisconsin Adult Day Services Association (WADSA)
- Wisconsin Association of Area Agencies on Aging (W4A)
- Wisconsin Association of Benefit Specialists (WABS)
- Wisconsin Association of Nutrition Directors (WAND)
- Wisconsin Association of Senior Centers (WASC)
- Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging (WIHA)
- Wisconsin Senior Corps Association (WISCA)
- Wisconsin Tribal Aging Unit Association

The Wisconsin Aging Advocacy Network is a collaborative group of individuals and associations working with and for Wisconsin’s older adults to shape public policy to improve their quality of life.

WAAN State Issue Brief
February 2021

Elder Benefit Specialist Program Funding Support:

Ensure Access to Legal Advocacy Services for Wisconsin’s Fastest Growing Population.

WAAN’s Position: Revise [Wis. Stat. 46.81](#) to increase state funding for the Elder Benefit Specialist (EBS) program from \$2,298,400 to \$4,596,800 to account for the significant increase in the population served by the program, increasing demand for EBS services, and increasing complexities associated with access to essential benefit programs.

There has been an estimated 63% growth in Wisconsin’s age 60 and older population from 2000¹ to 2020.² Despite significant population growth, increasing demand for EBS services, and increasing complexities associated with access to essential benefit programs,

the EBS program has not seen an increase in state funding in 24 years.

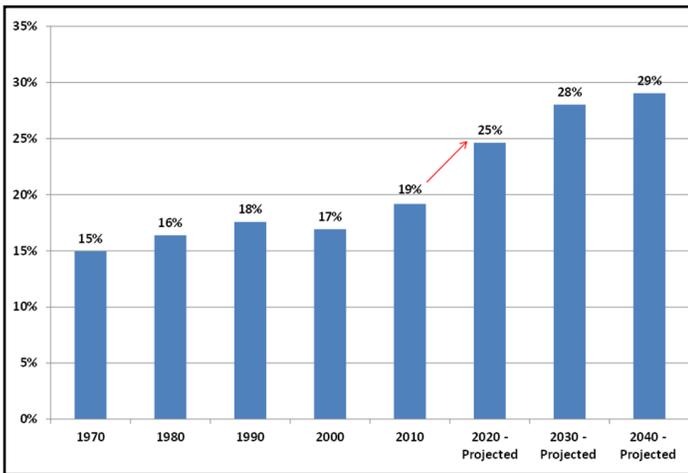
The EBS Program provides a wide range of important legal advocacy services to adults age 60 and older across Wisconsin. The program was created by the legislature in the 1970s to fulfill mandates of the Older Americans Act (OAA) of 1965 that legal



assistance be accessible to older people, regardless of income.³ EBSs provide benefit counseling and assistance with appeals in the areas of Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, FoodShare, housing, consumer debt, and other health insurance coverage issues.⁴

Program reports for the EBS program reveal the number of unduplicated clients served through the EBS Program during program year 2020 was 36,387, a 33% increase from the year 2010 when that number was 27,433. According to the most recent available data, outreach and community education by EBSs reached an estimated 40,722 older adults and media outreach and education activities reached an estimated 3.8 million people.

Additionally, EBS program reports for 2020 reveal **the average annual monetary impact of one full-time EBS to clients and the community** through public benefit program eligibility, overpayment resolution, medical insurance appeals, and other positive outcomes **was \$1,831,085**, for a combined statewide total of \$177,885,443.



Wisconsin, Ages 60 and Older as Share of Total Population⁸

For 2020, it was projected that one in four Wisconsin residents were age 60 and older.⁵ At the time of the last EBS funding increase in 1997, the population of adults age 60 and older in Wisconsin was 907,552, or 16.9% of the total population. In 2020, this number was projected to increase to 1,478,825, or nearly 25% of the state's total population. Moving forward, in Wisconsin between the years "2015 and 2040, the population ages 65 and older will grow by 640,000 people, an increase of 72%." The increase is expected to be higher in areas with moderate to high rates of poverty, per the Wisconsin Department of Health Services⁶, where traditionally individuals have limited access to legal services. It is also expected to

be higher amongst the "oldest old" segment of the State's elderly population, those ages 90 and above, a group who is more likely to require access to public benefit programs including long term care Medicaid.⁷

State funding allocations for the EBS Program were last increased over 20 years ago. The older adult population is rising, but EBS services continue to face budget cuts. While compensation rates vary across the state, if averaged, the amount established even in 1997 was only enough to support an average of one half-time EBS position in each county or tribe, or merely \$34,456.94 per aging unit. Current funding levels require counties and tribes to find other sources of supplemental funding to operate the program. A recent inquiry of EBSs in Wisconsin found that with current budget shortfalls many EBSs have had to reduce outreach and one-on-one counseling, implement waitlists for services, and take other undesirable steps to manage workloads with the funds available, all of which can lead to poorer outcomes for consumers. In some instances, lack of funding caused a reduction in hourly wages for EBS and or no or minimal benefits, which in turn results in higher employee turnover.

The population of older adults is projected to continue to grow for the foreseeable future. Many older adults are faced annually with choosing a prescription drug plan and/or health insurance provider or applying for needed services and assistance; increasingly these processes are completed only online and are complex to navigate. Now is the time to increase funding to support EBS services to ensure older adults have access to needed legal advocacy services. This investment benefits Wisconsin's older adults and the communities they live in.



Contact WAAN

Janet L. Zander, MPA, CSW
 Advocacy & Public Policy
 Coordinator
 Greater Wisconsin Agency on
 Aging Resources, Inc.
 Elder Law & Advocacy Center
 1414 MacArthur Rd., Ste. 306
 Madison, WI 53714
 Office: (715) 677-6723
 Cell: (608) 228-7253
 janet.zander@gwaar.org

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