

Department of Health and Human Services  
**OFFICE OF  
INSPECTOR GENERAL**

**DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS OF AOA'S  
DISCRETIONARY FUND PROJECTS**



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Department of Health and Human Services  
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OEI-04-91-00110

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## PURPOSE

This inspection was conducted to evaluate the dissemination practices for discretionary grant projects supported by the Administration on Aging (AoA).

## BACKGROUND

Title IV of the Older Americans Act authorizes a program of discretionary funds to support training, education, research, and demonstration projects. All grant applicants are required to submit a plan describing how they will disseminate their project results. Although AoA no longer has a unit devoted to dissemination, its staff continue a number of dissemination activities.

## FINDINGS

According to the Older Americans Act, an integral part of the Title IV program is dissemination of information gained from the grant projects. AoA's dissemination efforts do not assure that this information reaches other organizations who can use it.

- AoA relies primarily on grantees, whose capabilities vary widely, for dissemination of project results.
- In evaluating applications, the value assigned to dissemination activities has declined.
- AoA's expanded guidance to applicants has had little impact on actual dissemination activities.
- AoA does not adequately assess project outcomes to determine the utility of the information to others.
- AoA pursues a broad dissemination strategy with too limited resources.

## RECOMMENDATION

AoA should assure the establishment and adequate funding for a permanent function, responsible for dissemination of results of discretionary fund projects.

## COMMENTS

The draft report was circulated for comment to the Commissioner on Aging, the Assistant Secretary for Legislation (ASL) and the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE). The ASL had no comments; ASPE concurred with the findings and recommendation. AoA found our report to be accurate and the recommendation relevant. In her response, the Commissioner on Aging also summarized the agency's current and planned dissemination activities.

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# INTRODUCTION

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## PURPOSE

This inspection was conducted to evaluate the dissemination practices for discretionary fund projects supported by the Administration on Aging (AoA).

## BACKGROUND

The Administration on Aging was established in 1965 by the Older Americans Act (OAA). Through formula grants, AoA guides and assists states and communities to develop and implement services for elderly persons. The agency also administers a discretionary funds program.

### *AoA Discretionary Funds Program*

Title IV of the Older Americans Act authorizes a program of discretionary funds to support training, education, research and demonstrations, as well as dissemination of information. For FY 1991, \$25.9 million has been allocated to the Title IV program. This is two percent more than the 1990 budget, when a total of 140 new grants were awarded.

The purpose of the Title IV discretionary funds program, as stated in the Older Americans Act, is to,

“expand the Nation’s knowledge and understanding of aging and the aging process, to design and test innovative ideas in programs and services for older individuals, and to help meet the needs for trained personnel in the field of aging through —

- (1) education and training ...
- (2) research ...
- (3) demonstration projects ... and
- (4) dissemination of information...acquired through such programs..."

Including dissemination as an integral part of the program establishes that the information gained from the projects should extend well beyond the initial grantees. Effective dissemination promotes utilization by others in the field, and avoids subsequent researchers’ “reinventing the wheel.” The authorizing legislation recognizes the need to disseminate project results in order to gain full benefit from the resources expended on each project.

In preparation for the reauthorization of the OAA in 1991, the House Subcommittee on Human Resources of the Select Committee on Aging is holding a series of hearings. One hearing, in September 1990, focused on the Title IV program, particularly the effectiveness and usefulness of dissemination efforts. The General Accounting Office (GAO) presented testimony on a survey of all state agencies on aging to determine their use of Title IV results. GAO said, “While

Title IV dissemination is having some positive impact, it is not achieving maximum results ... AoA does not have a comprehensive dissemination strategy.”

### ***Dissemination Practices in Other HHS Agencies***

Dissemination of project results is important to many HHS agencies which support research and demonstration projects. The Department has no standard process to assure effective dissemination of the results of grant projects. Dissemination is handled differently by the various operating divisions of the Department.

For example, each of the National Institutes of Health maintain public information offices. These offices, to varying degrees, disseminate the results of projects funded by their agencies. However, according to the National Institute on Aging's (NIA) Public Information Office, NIA grantees, like those funded by other branches of NIH, generally do not rely on the Institute to disseminate the results of their projects. Rather, grantees seek to publicize their own results, which commonly focus on medical and biological issues, in professional journals and forums.

Under the Public Health Service, the Maternal and Child Health Bureau has a cooperative agreement with the National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health at Georgetown University to handle dissemination of the grants funded by the agency.

In the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA), grantees can, with approval from HCFA, disseminate the results of their own projects, but are not required to do so. HCFA routinely sends all approved final project reports to an information clearinghouse.

In another example, the Office of Human Development Services (OHDS) instructs applicants that dissemination is an essential principle of its grant program. However, in the 1990 *Federal Register* announcement, dissemination activity was dropped as an evaluation criterion for rating grant applications.

### **SCOPE OF THIS INSPECTION**

This study evaluated dissemination of the results of AoA's discretionary fund projects. It examined both the grantees' and the agency's dissemination activities. All AoA discretionary grants administered by the AoA central office, and completed between April 1, 1989 and March 31, 1990 were included in the scope of the study. Grants that were completed within this time period had responded to the announcements published in the *Federal Register* for fiscal years 1985 through 1988.

For information about dissemination activities of the agency, OEI staff interviewed professionals within and outside AoA who are familiar with the discretionary funds program. AoA staff included regional and central office administrators and project officers from the Title IV program. Outside organizations included: the Gerontological Society of America, the Association for Gerontology and Higher Education, the National Institute on Aging, the American Association of Retired Persons, and all information clearinghouses used by AoA.

## METHODOLOGY

A list of the grants completed between April 1, 1989 and March 31, 1990 was obtained in August 1990 from OHDS's Grants Management Information System (GMIS). Those 88 grants were classified by type (research, training, and demonstration). A sample of 30 was selected for study. Since there were only 5 research grants, all were included in the sample. The remainder of the sample was selected using a random number generator.

OEI staff examined the project files for each grant to determine what dissemination commitments were made when the grant application was accepted for funding, and what dissemination activities were subsequently reported in the quarterly progress reports and the final report. Since the official files, which are maintained by OHDS, are sent to archives when the project closes, the project officers' files were used for this study. The project officers usually maintain a copy of all items that are in the official file, but they are not *required* to have copies of all official papers including the final reports. In files where the final report was missing, the project officers provided information on the projects' dissemination activities. In some cases, the grantees were interviewed by phone to confirm or supplement the recollections of the project officers.

# FINDINGS

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According to the Older Americans Act, an integral part of the Title IV program is dissemination of information acquired from the grant projects. AoA's dissemination efforts do not assure that this information reaches other organizations who can use it.

## **AOA RELIES PRIMARILY ON GRANTEES, WHOSE CAPABILITIES VARY WIDELY, FOR DISSEMINATION OF PROJECT RESULTS**

AoA has relied on its grantees to take the lead responsibility for dissemination of project results, according to AoA officials. One of the distinguishing characteristics of AoA's discretionary funds program is the wide variety of grantees, ranging from small nonprofit community organizations to major national gerontological associations and universities. The capabilities of these organizations to effectively disseminate their project results vary. Despite the range of abilities, the legislation requires all research and demonstration grants to "include provisions for the appropriate dissemination of project results." Further, the *Federal Register* announcement indicates that all applicants will be evaluated in part on how they plan to disseminate their products. The result is most grantees submit minimal dissemination plans while some plan more extensive activities.

Experts generally attribute the difference in dissemination activities to the resources and reputation of the grantee. Some grantees, with a wide network of contacts, sufficient resources, and experienced staff, disseminate their project results extensively and effectively. For example, one grantee, a national business organization provided the funds to publish the project's report on retirement planning and send it to the human resource executives of leading corporations in the U. S. This organization also had the connections to arrange presentations at forums such as breakfast meetings of business executives across the country. However, most grantees do not demonstrate such capabilities in their dissemination activities.

## **IN EVALUATING APPLICATIONS, THE VALUE ASSIGNED TO DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES HAS DECLINED**

The criteria for evaluating applications are published in the *Federal Register* announcement of the availability of discretionary funds. A panel of experts from outside the Federal Government comments on and scores the applications. The criteria and the value assigned to each one have changed over the years, but generally include:

- *need for, or objectives, of the project*
- *methodology or approach*
- *results or expected outcomes/benefits*
- *dissemination/utilization plan*
- *level of effort or staff background and resources*

AoA requires projects to include a dissemination plan. However, the relative importance of the dissemination criterion in the proposal-rating process has declined. In 1987 each of the criteria was worth the same amount — 20 points. Over the years, the point values assigned to the five criteria have shifted. The dissemination criterion has been reduced from 20 points in 1983 through 1987, to 15 points in 1988, and only 10 points since 1989.

## **AOA'S EXPANDED GUIDANCE TO APPLICANTS HAS HAD LITTLE IMPACT ON ACTUAL DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES**

At the same time that AoA has been reducing the value assigned to the dissemination criterion, the agency has been giving the applicants more substantive guidance on dissemination.

Prior to 1988, the guidelines in the *Federal Register* for the dissemination criterion instructed applicants to describe:

- *the methods for sharing their findings,*
- *the steps to promote utilization of products, and*
- *the specific audiences to be addressed.*

Starting in 1988, the instructions became more deliberate and precise. In 1988, applicants were asked to add:

- *a description of why the proposed steps are expected to be successful in disseminating the products and findings;*
- *reasons why specific audiences will benefit; and*
- *detailed steps to get the products adopted by the audiences.*

The 1989 and 1990 announcements contain a separate section on dissemination. Applicants are notified that they are expected to be aware of projects in the same area as their proposal. To help locate related projects, the announcement gives a list of sources for tracking current and previous AoA-sponsored projects. Further, these announcements provide the following principles of dissemination, and advise applicants to consider them in developing their applications:

- *The most widely utilized projects make dissemination and utilization a central aspect of the project, not a peripheral one.*
- *Dissemination starts at the beginning of a project.*
- *Potential users should be involved in planning.*
- *Products should be prepared with the needs of potential users in mind.*
- *Dissemination is a networking process.*
- *At a minimum, dissemination includes getting your final products into the hands of appropriate users and making presentations at conferences.*
- *Coordination with other related projects may increase the chances of your products being used.*

Review of the dissemination plans in grant applications did not reveal a qualitative difference between plans submitted prior to 1988 and those responding to the 1988 announcement, when the instructions became more detailed. Both before and after 1988, plans list a few standard dissemination activities. The most frequently mentioned activities are: submitting to professional journals for publication, applying to present results at professional conferences, including project description in state and local newsletters, and making presentations at local/professional meetings.

Most projects included in this study responded to the 1987 and 1988 announcements. This study did not cover projects initiated in 1989 or 1990. However, project officers said they have not noticed a significant difference in the quality of the plans submitted in the past two years, compared to previously.

This review found that 90 percent of grants completed between April 1, 1989 and March 31, 1990 implemented the dissemination plans that were proposed at the outset of the projects.

However, the grantees' dissemination plans do not go far enough to assure that project results reach those who are most likely to use them. Accomplishing this requires the kind of efforts AoA has described in its guidelines for dissemination since 1988. Even though the grantees' plans fail to adhere fully to the dissemination guidelines, the projects continue to be approved for funding since the dissemination criterion accounts for such a small portion of the overall evaluation score.

According to project officers and experts outside AoA, the minimal dissemination activities of grantees can be traced to the lack of emphasis from AoA, as well as insufficient time and funds, and lack of capability of small grantees.

## **AOA DOES NOT ADEQUATELY ASSESS PROJECT OUTCOMES TO DETERMINE THE UTILITY OF THE INFORMATION TO OTHERS**

AoA's procedures place heavy emphasis on evaluation of grant *applications* for feasibility and utility of results. However, once the project is completed, the *final results* are not adequately assessed for their potential utility to others in the field.

The purpose of AoA's grant projects is to test new and innovative ideas. Because they explore heretofore untested approaches, some projects will not meet expectations. Since AoA does not adequately review all completed projects, those that should be replicated are not distinguished from unsuccessful projects and projects whose results are less useful to others.

The same project close-out procedure is followed for all projects. *All* final reports are sent to the information clearinghouses. Here the good, new ideas may get lost in the volume of final reports released each year.

Respondents most often noted the lack of resources, including staff, as the main reason AoA does not follow a thorough, systematic process for reviewing completed projects. Additionally,

some feel that AoA's officially judging the relative utility of the projects would politicize the process. Despite these difficulties, a number of outside experts feel assessing project results and targeting them to specific users would greatly increase the application of project results by others. In fact, several experts with outside organizations said that projects must be evaluated and summarized first, before effective dissemination can occur. One major organization said its policy is to review all of its own projects to determine which ones to include in their database/library and to select the ones they will disseminate more extensively. An official with a major organization in the field of aging commented that, "truly responsible dissemination goes way beyond rote dissemination plans...this organization spends half of its time on dissemination activities."

## **AOA PURSUES A BROAD DISSEMINATION STRATEGY WITH TOO LIMITED RESOURCES**

Respondents noted a number of problems with AoA's dissemination efforts. Congress withdrew authorization for the agency's internal information clearinghouse in 1981. AoA has not had a staff devoted to dissemination since then. In addition, funding for the Title IV program has been reduced drastically from a high of \$54 million in 1980 to \$26 million this year. In spite of these reductions, the agency's staff has tried to maintain a wide range of dissemination activities, along with their other duties.

AoA's dissemination activities include:

- sending reports to information clearinghouses
- holding meetings of grantees working on similar projects
- convening regional dissemination conferences
- publishing booklets, a magazine, and information memoranda
- supporting 11 resource centers.

### ***Clearinghouses***

Using clearinghouses as a method of dissemination is essentially passive. Technically, the reports are available, but an organization or individual must take initiative to obtain them. Getting a report out of these archives requires familiarity with database research and access to the computerized sources. Additionally, users of the clearinghouses do not have a means of distinguishing excellent projects from those of less utility without looking at each report.

AoA sends all final reports and products to the following information clearinghouses:

- *National Technical Information Service (NTIS)*
- *AgeLine Database*
- *U.S. Government Printing Office*
- *Project SHARE (closed August 31, 1990)*

The clearinghouses file the projects' final reports in a computerized information system. Only NTIS had information on the number of requests for AoA reports. Over the past ten years, NTIS filled an average of three requests per month.

AgeLine is a commercially available database administered by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). AARP selects some of AoA's reports for inclusion in its database. The most frequent users of AgeLine are faculty and students.

The Government Printing Office sends microfiche copies of projects' final reports to the depository libraries that have requested in advance to receive the general category of publications that includes AoA reports.

### ***Cluster Meetings and Networking***

One of the principles of dissemination is linking people and organizations and vigorously encouraging networking activities. AoA's formal and informal efforts in this area are hampered by lack of funds and lack of procedures for apprising staff of significant projects.

AoA has implemented the principle of networking through cluster meetings. AoA funds several grants in a given area, for example elder abuse, for the same project period, and convenes meetings of the grantees to discuss the projects. Project officers are enthusiastic about this approach and feel the grantees learn from each other. Factors that hamper "clustering" include lack of funds to bring grantees together more frequently, and the very common practice of approving grantees' requests for time extensions. When extensions are granted, "clustered" projects are no longer on the same schedule, and therefore the grantees cannot share their full, final results at the final meeting.

Some project officers have linked new and former grantees with similar interests informally when there is no formally recognized cluster. However, among project officers, there is considerable variation in involvement with grantees. According to AoA officials, there is no provision to keep AoA staff apprised of the Title IV projects outside of each officer's immediate responsibility. This general lack of an information network within AoA inhibits the distribution of information by staff to grantees. In addition, AoA does not routinely cover the costs for staff to attend national conferences on aging. These conferences provide opportunities for professionals to form networks which facilitate exchange of information.

### ***Federal Regional Offices' Dissemination Activities***

A number of AoA central and regional office staff feel a major weakness in the use of existing resources is failing to include regional offices in more dissemination activities. Regional offices are geographically closer to the recipients of AoA funded services and have the potential to contribute substantially within existing resources. According to one aging specialist, the regional offices could, "function as the eyes and ears of the Commissioner and be a conduit of information."

Several respondents noted that the current Commissioner has formally convened a number of grassroots roundtables to identify priority areas. They feel that an informal network through the regional offices could build on the Commissioner's current efforts to get local input. One regional administrator of AoA said that dissemination efforts could be improved by starting at the beginning of the funding process. He felt regional offices could help identify research needs and thereby also identify the potential users of project results.

Since 1983, the Office of Program Policy and Legislation in the Office of Human Development Services has sponsored regional meetings to disseminate information on discretionary grants, including AoA's, and to encourage formation of networks among interested parties. The meetings are convened by the federal regional offices. OHDS considers the meetings to be successful. However, only nine meetings are scheduled for 1991.

### ***AoA Publications***

AoA produces a number of publications that are distributed nationally. Several respondents noted that some of these publications would be better utilized if they were targeted to specific audiences. For example, a project officer suggested that one of the recent publications, *Dissemination By Design*, should be given routinely to all grantees. This booklet describes effective dissemination principles and practical techniques for disseminating information. A frequent suggestion concerned the *Compendium of Active Grants*. Many respondents suggested that the compendium would be more useful if done as a cumulative volume which describes all completed, rather than ongoing, projects arranged by subject area.

### ***National Aging Resource Centers***

A number of AoA staff say the resource centers are AoA's most effective means for "getting the word out." AoA funded 11 resource centers across the country for 3 years to provide training, technical assistance, short term research, and information dissemination for state and area agencies on aging and others serving elderly people. Most of the centers are located at universities. Each one focuses on a specific area of aging, such as long term care, elder abuse, health promotion, minority populations, and rural elderly. The future of the centers is uncertain since the funding terminates in 1991.

# RECOMMENDATION

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The Administration on Aging, with limited resources for dissemination, has engaged in a broad range of activities to disseminate results of its Title IV projects. To strengthen and better coordinate these efforts, the Inspector General makes the following recommendation.

- AoA should assure the establishment and adequate funding for a permanent function, responsible for dissemination of results of discretionary fund projects. This could be done internally or by contract. Responsibilities would include:
  - *providing a focus for AoA's various dissemination activities;*
  - *in the grant application review process, reconsidering the dissemination criterion and the point value assigned to it;*
  - *establishing and maintaining a process to assess project outcomes for utility to others;*
  - *developing methods to assist grantees who lack the resources and expertise to target replicable results to potential users;*
  - *evaluating the role of clearinghouses in an overall dissemination strategy and using clearinghouses accordingly; and*
  - *establishing and implementing a role for federal regional offices on aging in disseminating project results.*

# AGENCY COMMENTS

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The Commissioner on Aging, in commenting on the report, summarized AoA's ongoing dissemination activities. The Commissioner further described AoA's plan to fund a 3 year cooperative agreement to evaluate and disseminate Title IV grant products. Appendix A contains the full text of the Commissioner's comments.

The comments from the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation concur with the report. The Assistant Secretary for Legislation had no comments.

# APPENDIX A

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## *AoA Comments*



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Office of the Secretary

Administration on Aging

Washington, D.C. 20201

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TO: Richard P. Kusserow  
Inspector General

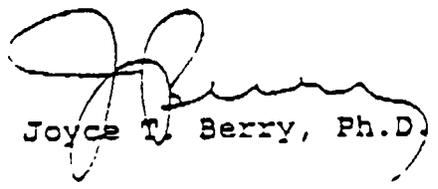
FROM: U.S. Commissioner on Aging

SUBJECT: OIG Draft Report: "Dissemination of Results of AoA's  
Discretionary Fund Projects," OEI-04-91-00110

We have reviewed your report on the dissemination efforts of the Administration on Aging (AoA). We find that the report is accurate and the recommendations for improving our dissemination system are relevant.

At the same time, we feel that the draft report does not pay sufficient attention to the considerable effort that has been made in this area. For a number of years, AoA has awarded grants to projects essentially to disseminate information. Examples of such projects include the eleven National Aging Resource Centers with major responsibilities for the provision of technical training and assistance and information dissemination. The usefulness of the information dissemination to the States by these Centers was acknowledged in a recent General Accounting Office (GAO) study presented to the House Select Committee on Aging on 9/11/90. Other projects funded have disseminated information on health promotion and senior centers.

Taking into consideration both your report and the GAO study, we have begun to address the issues raised by both agencies. Our Announcement of the FY 1991 Discretionary Grant Program will include the award of a three year cooperative agreement, for up to \$300,000 per year, to actively and systematically evaluate and disseminate Title IV grant products and to examine gaps in research, demonstration, training and practice in the field of aging. I believe that this prospective cooperative agreement will assist us in making major progress in this area.

  
Joyce T. Berry, Ph.D.