In preparation for the 2015 White House Conference on Aging, several local organizations sponsored a local public forum to gather input from the San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara Counties community. Sponsors included the Area Agency on Aging and the Santa Barbara Foundation, in collaboration with Congresswoman Lois Capps and the County of Santa Barbara. County Supervisor Doreen Farr moderated the local public forum.

A local public forum on Aging was held on February 18, 2015 in Buellton, California. Nearly 100 people attended the forum and 36 presented comment/testimony. The 2015 White House Conference on Aging identified the topics for discussion: Ensuring Retirement Security, Promoting Healthy Aging, Providing Long-term Services and Support, and Protecting Older Americans from Financial Exploitation, Abuse and Neglect.

The first White House Conference on Aging (WHCoA) was held in 1961, with subsequent conferences in 1971, 1981, 1995, and 2005. These conferences have been viewed as catalysts for development of aging policy over the past 50 years. The conferences generated ideas and momentum prompting the establishment of policies and/or key improvements in many of the programs that represent America’s commitment to older Americans including: Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and the Older Americans Act.

The 2015 White House Conference on Aging is an opportunity to look ahead to the issues that will help shape the landscape for older Americans for the next decade. 2015 marks the 50th anniversary of Medicare, Medicaid, and the Older Americans Act, as well as the 80th anniversary of Social Security. The 2015 White House Conference on Aging is an opportunity to recognize the importance of these key programs as well as to look ahead to the next decade.

“Exercise your right to vote and be involved. Use the political pressure of your numbers. Hold your elected officials accountable.”
– Supervisor Doreen Farr, County of Santa Barbara

“Whatever we learn today we can hopefully put into action.”
– Ron Gallo, CEO Santa Barbara Foundation

Prepared March 2015
A summary of the comments presented at the local public forum is organized by the four discussion topics. In addition, many comments regarded caregiving, so a separate category was created to identify those inputs.

Ensuring Retirement Security
✓ Too many seniors in our community can no longer afford housing and other basic needs after living here their entire lives.
✓ Poverty among elders is rising.SSI/SSP payment levels no longer raise a senior’s income above the poverty line.
✓ A recent needs assessment of elders revealed that hunger was the top need. Basic needs such as a healthy daily meal is harder to find and waiting lists abound.
✓ Without adequate income, seniors cannot achieve their desire to live safely and independently.
✓ Recent IT security breaches threaten the economic health of retirees.
✓ Health care costs continue to threaten the financial security of older persons. Medicare should consider paying for ‘navigators’ to ensure access to appropriate care and reduce duplication of services.
✓ Medicare beneficiaries need someone to help with the paperwork and understanding how to supplement Medicare.
✓ Low income seniors, with or without SSI/SSP, need to be eligible for Cal Fresh (food stamps).

Promoting Healthy Aging
✓ Healthy Aging must recognize the need for mental health. Financial disincentives need to be eliminated.
✓ Healthy Aging includes having the needed level of care available, accessible and affordable in our communities.
✓ More research is needed on the many diseases causing dementia and cancer.
✓ Senior Citizens deserve proper care to age gracefully and with dignity.
✓ Medicare and Medi-Cal need to ensure the safety of older persons. Medicare and Medi-Cal need to recognize dementia as a skilled nursing need in order to allow individuals to receive needed 24/7 long term care either at home or in an institution.
✓ Medicare needs to provide reasonable reimbursement for health care professionals, so that they stay enrolled in Medicare. Medicare needs to reinstate its support for residency training programs for physicians.

Providing Long-Term Services and Support
✓ Huge gaps in services exist.
✓ Lack of money is the key issue – we don’t have enough to create and maintain a comprehensive network of caring services.
✓ Reauthorization of the Older Americans Act is critical to developing a community network of services.
✓ Services must be able to reach and serve all populations especially those hard to serve elders who may face cultural and language barriers. “If you don’t speak English, it is hard to sign up for programs.”
✓ End of Life programs fail to meet the needs of Latino elders.
✓ Programs need to reach out to Latinos through the Spanish-language media, neighborhood facilities like churches, grocery stores and providing bilingual staff at community events. Also need to recognize that Latinos have multi-generational families and times available to participate in the community vary based on family needs.
✓ Farm worker communities face language barriers and there isn’t enough bilingual information.
✓ Need a long term care system for all persons, not just low income and wealthy.
✓ Pilot and demonstration projects confirm that Medicare can support long term care and reduce medical costs.
✓ Each community merits a Resource Center – a focal point for information. The Resource Center needs to link with seniors, senior facilities, health care facilities and retirement communities.

Protecting Older Americans from Financial Exploitation, Abuse and Neglect
✓ Neuropsychologists are experts in understanding, measuring and documenting decision-making capacity. They have expertise in the nature of brain-behavior and brain-cognitive relationships, and in techniques for assessing them. They are essential team members in prosecuting elder abuse because they can evaluate decision-making capacity.
✓ Elder Abuse is an offender of human rights.
✓ Need for a national public awareness/education campaign to prevent elder abuse.
✓ The elder population is valuable and protecting them is everyone’s problem.

Caregiving and Caregivers
✓ Caregivers are expected to fill some gaps and are woefully ill prepared and untrained.
✓ Unpaid caregivers provide 75% of care needed and they need training, emotional support, and respite.
✓ Paid caregivers are poorly paid and live in economic insecurity. Many have two jobs in order to pay the rent. They need a tax bracket recognizing their important role and low pay and housing options.
✓ The toll on caregivers, both paid and unpaid, is physical and emotional.
✓ Caregivers need emotional support; 1/3 of caregivers are clinically depressed.
✓ Nurses and nursing assistants are being injured as they perform their jobs.
✓ Women are unfairly treated as the primary caregivers. Results are devastating for older women.
✓ Grandparents caring for grandchildren is a growing concern as these grandparents face obstacles: financial resources, education, health care access, food insecurity and difficulty obtaining affordable and affordable estate planning. There is also a technology gap between these generations.
✓ There is a shortage of paid caregivers due to a variety of reasons: recent wage law changes, low wages and benefits, and cost of housing. A suggestion is to change the immigration rules.

“By 2020, 25% of our community will be senior citizens and it will continue to grow. We need to prepare.”
—Jim Talbott, President, Board of Directors Central Coast Commission

Overall, comments expressed concern that we are not preparing for the unprecedented growth in older persons, especially the old-old. And, general support was evident that more funding is needed to create ‘senior–safe communities.’

All these comments have been shared with Congresswoman Capps and the White House Conference on Aging. For more information contact the Area Agency on Aging or the Santa Barbara Foundation.