July 1, 2013

The Honorable Bernard Sanders
332 Dirksen Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Re: A Vision for Legal Assistance in Reauthorization of the Older Americans Act

Dear Senator Sanders:

I write today on behalf of the American Bar Association and its nearly 400,000 members nationwide to express support in principal for the attached Vision for Legal Assistance in reauthorization of the Older Americans Act. The Vision was developed by a diverse group of legal and aging services organizations over the course of several months, starting in January 2013.

For several years, the ABA has been on record supporting specific components of the Vision: continuing the status of legal assistance as a priority service, encouraging the development of coordinated delivery systems, empowering legal assistance developers, continuing national support centers, and targeting services to seniors with the greatest economic and social needs. I have attached a copy of our August 2010 policy for your review.

The Older Americans Act guides many programs and services, such as legal assistance, to help older Americans maintain dignity and independence. Legal assistance can be critical in helping older Americans attain or retain access to services and benefits that are essential to maintain dignity, comfort, security, and quality of life. The ABA has advocated on these issues for over 30 years. We view reauthorization as an important opportunity for Congress to reaffirm and refine our country’s commitment to a safe, secure and dignified life for all older Americans.

We thank you and your staff for your continuing efforts on reauthorization of the Older Americans Act. The ABA stands ready to be of assistance to you and your subcommittee in the reauthorization process.

Sincerely,

Thomas M. Susman

Enclosure
A Vision for Legal Assistance in Reauthorization of the Older Americans Act

Our vision for legal assistance in reauthorization of the Older Americans Act is:

All older adults in the greatest economic and social need will have access to quality legal assistance through a coordinated delivery system to address their most critical legal needs in order to secure and maintain their rights, independence, and dignity.

We support reauthorization of the Older Americans Act of 1965, and view this as an opportunity for Congress to reaffirm commitment, refine and strengthen the Act. The following should be elements of reauthorization:

- Legal assistance must remain a priority service in the Older Americans Act. Legal assistance plays a vital role in helping older Americans resolve complex issues, protect their rights and maintain access to essential programs and services necessary to fulfill the goals of the Act.

- The Act should ensure that legal assistance is provided through a coordinated, delivery system in each state, integrated with aging services providers. Delivery systems vary by state and can include the full spectrum of legal assistance providers, title III B funded legal assistance as defined in the Act, pro bono programs, legal helplines, law school clinics, systemic advocacy, community outreach, and training.

- Expansion of the Act's support for strong, independent, empowered, and fully dedicated state legal assistance developers is essential to provide statewide leadership that ensures the legal rights of older Americans are protected through a legal assistance/elder rights delivery system that is integrated with the network of aging services.

- National Resource Centers should be continued.

- The Office of Elder Rights should be empowered to provide essential support and oversight for the provision of legal assistance.

- Outreach and targeting services to older adults with the greatest economic and social needs are critical to focusing limited resources where they will have the greatest impact.

- Data collection, reporting, and program evaluation systems that support quality improvement for legal assistance and state legal assistance development should be enhanced under the Act.

We agree and support the vision and elements relating to legal assistance in reauthorization of the Older Americans Act.

National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys
National Association of Senior Legal Hotlines
National Association of Legal Service Developers
Bet Tzedek Legal Services
Legal Aid Justice Center (Virginia)