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OHIO ASSOCIATION OF AREA AGENCIES ON AGING ANNOUNCES 2026 AWARD WINNERS AT STATE CONFERENCE

Ohio State Senator Mark Romanchuk and State Representatives Bride Rose Sweeney, Nick Santucci and Jodi Salvo Among Those Celebrated for Advocacy on Behalf of Older Ohioans

COLUMBUS, OH (October 26, 2026)—On Wednesday, October 21 and Thursday, October 22, 2026, the Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging (o4a) celebrated its **37th Annual Conference** in Columbus, Ohio at the Hilton Easton with nearly 500 aging and disability service professionals in attendance for two days of networking and learning.

The Association also announced the recipients of its 2026 awards. A diverse array of winners have partnered with o4a and Ohio's 12 Area Agencies on Aging to improve the lives of older Ohioans, Ohioans with disabilities, their caregivers, and their families.

- **Outstanding Public Service Award: Ohio State Senator Mark Romanchuk, District 22:** “Senator Romanchuk has been a thoughtful and steadfast champion for older Ohioans and the services that help them remain independent and connected to their communities,” said Duana Patton, CEO of the Ohio District 5 Area Agency on Aging and Board President of o4a. “He recognizes the value Area Agencies on Aging bring through their local expertise, trusted relationships, and community-based coordination, particularly in his support for including AAAs in the Next Generation MyCare Ohio program. His willingness to listen, ask difficult questions, and engage on complex policy issues has made him a valued partner in strengthening services and supports for older adults and people with complex needs across Ohio.”
- **Elected Official Advocacy Award: Representative Bride Rose Sweeney, 16th House District:** “Representative Sweeney exemplifies the kind of leadership Ohio needs on complex policy issues. She takes the time to understand the details, listens to the people closest to the issue, and works toward practical solutions,” said Beth Kowalczyk, CEO of o4a. “Her engagement on policies affecting home- and community-based services demonstrates a clear understanding of what is at stake for Ohioans who rely on these supports to live safely and independently. We are grateful for her willingness to ask tough questions and work across the aisle to help ensure these services remain accessible to those who need them.”
- **Elected Official Advocacy Award: Representative Nick Santucci, Majority Whip, 64th House District:** “Representative Santucci demonstrated the value of engaged, accessible leadership by taking the time to understand our concerns and consider how a proposed rule could affect the work of Area Agencies on Aging,” said Beth Kowalczyk, CEO of o4a. “His willingness to ask questions, examine the practical implications, and support a measured approach helps protect opportunities for AAAs to build partnerships and expand services for older Ohioans. We appreciate his partnership and his commitment to making sure state policy works effectively for the people and communities it serves.”
- **Elected Official Advocacy Award: Representative Jodi Salvo, 51st House District:** “Representative Salvo brings a valuable perspective to the Statehouse, informed by her experience in social work and human services

and her understanding of the challenges facing individuals and families,” said Beth Kowalczyk, CEO of o4a. “Through her leadership with the Aging Caucus and her engagement on complex policy issues, she has helped ensure that the needs of older Ohioans remain part of important policy discussions. We appreciate her commitment to finding solutions that strengthen community supports and help people continue living safely and independently where they choose.”

- **Advocate of the Year Award: Jennifer Kucerra, Ohio Olmstead Task Force, Ohio DD Council:** “Jennifer is the kind of advocate who turns commitment into meaningful action,” said Beth Kowalczyk, CEO of o4a. “She brings people and organizations together, builds strong partnerships across the aging and disability networks, and speaks up when critical services are at risk. Her dedication to protecting access to home- and community-based services reflects a deep understanding of what it takes to ensure people can live and thrive in the communities they call home. We are proud to recognize her exceptional leadership and tireless efforts to advance independence, dignity, and choice for older adults and people with disabilities across Ohio.”
- **Staff Member of the Year Award: Grant Ames, Director of Government & Strategic Initiatives, Central Ohio Area Agency on Aging (COAAA):** o4a recognizes Grant for his outstanding leadership and dedication to Ohio’s aging network. Over the past year, he helped guide COAAA through its transition to a Council of Governments and provided valuable insight and support to colleagues statewide. “Grant brings a practical, collaborative approach to the challenges facing our network,” said Beth Kowalczyk, CEO of o4a. “His willingness to share his expertise and help move solutions forward reflects his deep commitment to older Ohioans and the communities we serve.”
- **o4a Partnership Award: Ohio District 5 Area Agency on Aging, The Gorman-Rupp Company:** Through an employer engagement pilot, Gorman-Rupp and the Ohio District 5 Area Agency on Aging have helped connect employees with caregiving resources and support they may not otherwise have accessed. “Family caregivers are essential to the well-being of older Ohioans, yet many employees may not even identify themselves as caregivers or realize that support is available,” said Beth Kowalczyk, CEO of o4a. “Gorman-Rupp Company has helped bridge that gap by bringing information and resources directly into the workplace, demonstrating how employers and Area Agencies on Aging can work together to reach caregivers where they are. This partnership is an excellent example of practical, forward-thinking collaboration that can make a meaningful difference for working families and serve as a model for other employers and communities.”
- **o4a Partnership Award: Area Office on Aging of Northwestern Ohio, the Toledo Regional Alliance:** Led in partnership with the Area Office on Aging of Northwestern Ohio, the Alliance has coordinated advocacy efforts in Washington, D.C., helping secure significant federal investments in transportation, infrastructure, and community revitalization across its ten-county region. “The Toledo Regional Alliance has shown how a united regional voice can help turn shared priorities into meaningful investments,” said Beth Kowalczyk, CEO of o4a. “By connecting aging services with local government, transportation, education, and business leaders, the Alliance has expanded opportunities to address the issues that matter to older adults, from accessible transportation and housing to health care and employment. We applaud this collaborative approach to advocacy and the Alliance’s commitment to ensuring older adults are included in decisions that shape the future of their communities.”
- **o4a Partnership Award: Area Agency on Aging Region 9, the Anne Sonneborn Charitable Foundation:** Through a \$15,000 grant, the Anne Sonneborn Charitable Foundation is helping sustain Area Agency on Aging Region 9’s SleepWell Program, which provides beds, mattresses, and essential furnishings for children being raised by grandparents and other older relatives. “The Anne Sonneborn Charitable Foundation is making a tangible difference for grandfamilies by helping older caregivers provide safe, stable, and nurturing homes for the children in their care,” said Beth Kowalczyk, CEO of o4a. “This partnership shows the power of community philanthropy to address real needs, ease the challenges facing family caregivers, and improve the lives of multiple generations. We are grateful for the Foundation’s commitment to helping families thrive.”