By CLEO OWENS
AARP Tennessee Volunteer Leader

Do you wonder what your retirement would be like without Social Security or Medicare? What would it be like for your children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren?

Do you have some ideas about how to protect and preserve these crucial programs?

AARP believes that “You’ve Earned a Say” and we want to hear those ideas.

That’s why we are launching a listening tour to ensure you – and all the people of Tennessee – have a say in the future of Medicare and Social Security.

In the coming months, AARP is sponsoring town halls, community conversations and other events – to give you a chance to state your views and offer ideas about how to keep Social Security and Medicare strong for the long haul.

On April 4, you can come to a meeting in Johnson City, Knoxville, Nashville or Jackson and share your thoughts. Live in Memphis? We would like to hear from you on April 5. You can learn more about those meetings on our web page at www.aarp.org/tn.

Can’t make it?

On May 17, you could be part of a live studio audience in Nashville sharing your thoughts on the nationally broadcast RFD-TV show “AARP LiVE.” In June, we will have a forum in Memphis; in September, we will be in the Tri-Cities.

Also, keep an eye out for what's happening in your hometown. AARP volunteers will be hosting smaller conversations in communities across the state for much of the year – and you are welcome. We will be collecting questionnaires at fairs and expos near you.

But you don't even have to leave home to offer your thoughts. You can call 1-888-OUR AARP to offer your opinion. You can go online to www.earnedasay.org. You can even register for one of our telephone town halls – on June 20, July 20 or Aug. 20 – via our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/aarptennessee and WE will call YOU.

We want to make it easy for you to join the conversation because your health and retirement security are at stake. Right now in Tennessee, more than 1 million people rely on Medicare and 1.2 million receive Social Security checks. The number of people enrolling in both programs is expected to skyrocket over the next several years as Baby Boomers become eligible. That is going to place a strain on both programs.

Because of the ever-rising cost of health care, the Medicare fund that pays hospital bills will face a shortfall in 2024. Social Security can pay all promised benefits until about 2036, and after that, it can pay 75 percent. That's not good enough.

A primary goal of "You've Earned a Say" will be to empower you with unbiased, straightforward and accurate information about proposed changes – without all the political jargon and spin.

We also will ask federal candidates to clearly state their positions on the future of Social Security and Medicare, and then share those positions with you so you can make informed choices at the polls in November.

We can no longer afford to keep silent and leave the speaking to others. We must exercise the right and the responsibility our Constitution has given us to raise our voices.

You have earned a say and AARP is listening.

Editor's Note: Cleo Owens is also a member of the AARP Tennessee Executive Council.