

Action Needed to Restore Critical Funds for Senior Services

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First, a few facts. The 2010 Census revealed that about 152,000 Rhode Island residents were over 65, about one out of seven. The first post-war “baby-boomers” reached age 65 in 2011, marking the beginning of an “Age Wave” of growing senior numbers that will last two decades. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by 2020 that ratio will be one in six (a total of 198,000), and by 2030 the ratio will be one in five, totaling 246,000 seniors. Compared to other states, we had the highest percentage of seniors aged 85 and older and the ninth highest percentage of seniors aged 65 and older. Unfortunately, many of our state’s political leaders and policymakers seem unaware of these numbers, and much less have they thought about the challenges this Age Wave will bring.

Now the bad news. Since 2007, despite our rising numbers of seniors, some of the most vital programs that help seniors age in the community have received major cuts in state funding. State funding for Meals on Wheels, senior centers and respite care for seniors’ caregivers funding has been cut sixty-eight percent, a total of \$1.8 million. Meals on Wheels, a program that “checks in” on seniors living alone, has a waiting list of 180 due to lack of funding. A Providence senior center closed its doors last fall, and others are struggling. Only hard-fought coalition campaigns led by the Senior Agenda prevented additional cuts to these services.

The Age Wave means preserving senior services at current levels will not be nearly enough to keep seniors healthy and living in the community instead of nursing homes. We must expand and improve them to help more of today’s and tomorrow’s seniors. This year the Senior Agenda Coalition joined with other groups to introduce legislation to restore that \$1.8 million dollars in cuts made to these programs since 2007. We and other coalition members have met with twenty-one legislators, including the House Majority Leader and key members of the Senate and House Finance Committees, about this legislation. We shared our stories about aging in the community and why this funding should be restored. Nearly every lawmaker had his or her “senior story” about a family member or friend. Now, as General Assembly members work to finalize the next state budget, we need to show them that there is support for these programs in the community.

Because the state budget originates in the House Finance Committee, we ask you to call the Office of the Speaker of the House, Gordon Fox at 222-2466 on a weekday between 9 AM and 4 PM. Tell the person who answers: “I’m calling to ask the Speaker to restore funding for senior community services grants that has been cut since 2007.” The message’s content will be logged by a staff person and communicated to the Speaker. Please call your State Senator and

Representative with the same message. If you care about seniors, please follow the advice a legislator once asked me to give his constituents: "Show me a little effort, pick up the phone."