

Call to Action on Restoration of Senior Services Funding

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During the past three years, the Senior Agenda Coalition, in concert with other groups, has fought to restore state funding levels for services that keep seniors “aging in community”: Meals on Wheels, respite care for caregivers, and senior centers. In legislative testimony and one-on-one discussions with legislators and the Governor, I have pointed out that these programs do more than help people—they save lives. While some of my listeners nodded their heads, and none contested the point, I suspect some of them were skeptical. I’ve heard stories within the last week that powerfully illustrated that these services can be life and death matters.

On the same day, in two separate incidents, Meals on Wheels volunteers discovered elderly clients lying helpless on the floor and called 911. One person had been there for a day. The other had lain in that condition for two days! Her “lifeline” system that was supposed to summon help had failed. Without Meals on Wheels’ intervention, one or both of these persons could very easily have died. Due to lack of funds, Meals on Wheels has a waiting list of 69 people, a number that will increase dramatically with the onset of winter and difficult driving and walking conditions. Last year the number got as high as 180.

Last Saturday at a gathering of Senior Agenda and Rhode Island Organizing Project leaders, we each shared a story about aging in the community. Two persons who have been long-term caregivers for ill spouses spoke poignantly about the toll that caregiving took on them. Ann (not her real name) cared for her husband with advanced cancer for three and a half years before his death. During that time she had to seek psychotherapy to cope with the extreme mental and physical stress of caregiving. She had been unaware of the availability of respite care.

John (also a pseudonym), age 82, has served as the primary caregiver for his wife for more than five years as she has deteriorated physically and mentally after a serious fall. He also has sought therapy for the stress that caregiving entails. Social workers have told us they often see caregivers “going first” in these situations. Because of stress, it’s not unusual for family caregivers to die before the loved one they are caring for. Ann and John both agreed that respite care (time off) would have done more for their own wellbeing, and cost less than therapy. The Diocese of Providence’s CareBreaks program is the primary source of respite for seniors’ caregivers. It also has a waiting list due to state budget cuts.

The Governor and his staff are now preparing the next state budget that will be submitted to the General Assembly in January. We are asking everyone to call his office at 222-2080, between 8:30 and 4:30 on a weekday, and leave a message asking him to “please restore

funding for Meals on Wheels, respite care and senior centers.” Will you take a moment to make that call and help save seniors’ lives?