

Senior Services Legislation Level Funded for 2013

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The General Assembly has passed, and the Governor signed, a state budget for the 2014 fiscal year that began on July 1. Vice President Joe Biden once said, “Don’t tell me what you value, show me your budget, and I’ll tell you what you value.” There’s no polite way to say it--this budget showed that Governor Chafee and the General Assembly’s leaders don’t place a high value on programs that help seniors age in the community.

Since 2007, state funding has been cut by 68% for Meals on Wheels, respite care for caregivers, and senior centers. This has happened despite burgeoning growth in our state’s senior population as the vanguard of baby-boomers reached age 65. Our senior population was 152,000 in 2010, and is projected to reach 198,000 by 2020. These programs, as currently funded, cannot keep up with the demand for services. Meals on Wheels has a waiting list of over 200. Senior centers have cut programs and hours, and one has closed. Seniors’ family caregivers are under increased stress and more of them will need respite care. This year the Senior Agenda Coalition introduced legislation to restore those funds, a total of \$1.6 million.

In coalition with other groups, we worked hard to make our case beyond just testifying at legislative hearings. We met with twenty-one legislators, we shared our “aging in community stories” and most of them had their own stories of aging family members and friends. We believe many rank-and-file legislators “get it”. We were unable to obtain meetings with Speaker of the House Fox and Senate President Paiva Weed. Our constituents, joined by other coalition members, made over two hundred phone calls to Speaker Fox’s office and to their own Senators and Representatives.

We readily acknowledge this was a very challenging budget year. Besides a slowly-recovering state economy, the official FY 2014 revenue estimate issued in mid-May was \$50 million dollars below previous expectations. The General Assembly had only five weeks to make budget cuts or find new revenue sources to make up that difference, no small task. In the end, senior programs were level-funded. One might argue that it could have been worse, as there were cuts to some programs. However, other programs received funding increases. Some of them, such as rental vouchers for homeless persons, will help a number of seniors.

As community organizer Saul Alinsky once said, to make change we must deal with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. As an organization we must work harder and smarter to make seniors a priority for our elected leaders. We will reach out to the Governor, Speaker of the House and Senate President earlier in the process. We will do more to make “aging in community” a public issue. If you want to help, please mark October 18 on your calendar—the

date of our Sixth Annual Senior Conference and Expo. It will include workshops for people who want to make seniors a priority.