

The Unkindest Cut

Senior Digest, March 2013

Since 2007, the State of Rhode Island has cut spending on Community Senior Services Grants by \$1.8 million dollars, or 68%. This was done despite the fact that our state's senior population increased during that period, and that Rhode Island now ranks first in the proportion of seniors aged 85 and above in our population. During the 2012 General Assembly session the Senior Agenda Coalition led a campaign that prevented an additional \$248,000 cut to these services that had been proposed in the Governor's budget.

We believe it's time to become pro-active instead of waiting for the next budget cut. The Senior Agenda Coalition has submitted two bills that would combine to fully restore that \$1.8 million dollars previously cut from senior program support. At a cost of about eleven dollars for each Rhode Island senior, the bills would restore funding to 2007 levels for programs that help seniors to "age in the community" (and stay out of nursing homes). These grants primarily fund Senior Centers, Meals on Wheels, and respite care for seniors' caregivers. One bill would also establish a funding formula to gradually increase funding for cities' and towns' senior services over the next five years.

Our case for restoring this funding level rests on a well-established fact: the greatest threats for seniors aging in the community are isolation, loneliness and depression---not chronic illness, poverty or even Alzheimer's disease. For years we have urged our state to "rebalance" Medicaid by shifting funds away from nursing homes and toward more home-based care and other support services for seniors. But keeping seniors healthy in the community isn't enough. If seniors remain isolated at home, they really won't be any better off in the long run than in a nursing home. We must restore adequate funding for the three programs that reach out and help connect seniors with the community.

For older seniors in particular, Senior Centers serve as vital hubs of activities that promote mental and physical fitness and connect seniors with one other. Yet the funding cuts since 2007 have resulted in the closing of one Senior Center in downtown Providence in 2012. During a legislative hearing about the funding cuts proposed in 2012, several Senior Center directors

testified about the threat to their programs posed by further cuts. Meals on Wheels-Rhode Island is much more than a meal delivery service. It's an outreach program that looks in on nearly 2,000 isolated seniors as it delivers them lunch. It had a waiting list of 129 at last count, and that discourages seniors from even applying. Restoring funding would eliminate the waiting list. Volunteer caregiving by family and friends accounts for over 70% of home care for seniors. As seniors live longer, are discharged "quicker and sicker" from hospitals, and require more complex medical care at home, these volunteer caregivers face growing stress. Respite care is a program that gives these caregivers some badly needed time off from the physical and psychological stress of caregiving.

We are organizing meetings of constituents with their state legislators about the need for restoring these funds. During these meetings we share our stories about how they or their loved ones have been helped by these programs. If you would like to help us organize a meeting with your legislators about this, please contact us at 351-6710 or by e-mail at senioragendari@yahoo.com.