

2014 Aging in Community Legislation Unsuccessful

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During the legislative session just concluded, the Rhode Island General Assembly did not pass most of the bills that we or others proposed to promote “aging in the community.” For the second year in a row, funding was not increased for Meals on Wheels and respite care that would have eliminated their waiting lists. A companion bill establishing a population-based reimbursement formula for senior centers and increasing their state grants also failed to pass. Some might argue that it could have been worse, as these programs’ funding remained level, at a time when tens of millions of dollars were cut from children’s mental health programs. We see it as a missed opportunity.

We were also very concerned that, for the fifth year in a row, home care provider agencies received no rate increases that would have allowed them to increase home care workers’ pay. Low wages and limited benefits will contribute to continued high turnover among members of the home and community-care workforce. This will not improve the quality of these services for seniors.

Our takeaway from this session is that our governor is best positioned to provide the leadership needed to improve “aging in community” for seniors in Rhode Island. For that reason we are sponsoring a Rhode Island Governor’s Candidates Forum on Senior Issues on Monday, August 4, from 1:00 to 2:30 PM at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Warwick. (Registration information is at the end of this column). All six candidates for governor have pledged to attend. Joining us as co-sponsors are over twenty agencies and organizations that will be bringing constituents to the Forum, including many senior centers. The Forum will have several purposes:

- a) First and foremost, by filling the room with three hundred people, it will seek to demonstrate to the candidates there is a broad constituency that is very concerned about senior issues.
- b) Secondly, we want to educate the gubernatorial candidates about the wide range of programs that are essential to “aging in the community,” including some they might not be aware of: respite care, Meals on Wheels, door-to-door para-transit programs, civic engagement opportunities such as volunteering and lifelong learning programs, and senior centers’ important role in reducing isolation and depression.
- c) Finally, we want to help voters determine candidates’ positions on providing adequate funding and effective policies that will improve Rhode Island’s currently dismal ranking as a “senior-friendly” state on many national indicators.

Registration for the Forum is free, but must be done via the Internet at <http://tinyurl.com/SeniorForum>. We encourage anyone interested to sign up as soon as possible, as it's very likely that enrollment for this event will be completely filled. John Dewey once said that "democracy means paying attention." Here's your chance to do so, as well as to make a political statement that seniors matter. I invite you to join us on August 4.