

Governor Candidate's Forum a Huge Success

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The Senior Agenda Coalition was established in 2002 to convene a governor's candidates' forum on senior issues. The Senior Agenda Coalition eventually became a year-round senior advocacy and community organizing program, but continued the tradition of holding governor's candidates' forums in 2006 and 2010. Those forums produced media coverage and perhaps increased some candidates' awareness about senior issues, but little in specific commitments and follow-through to improve seniors' lives.

The results of our 2010 forum were particularly disappointing. Well in advance we sent the participating candidates our position paper on senior issues such as "rebalancing" by shifting Medicaid funds away from nursing homes to expanding home and community-based care. We also shared the topics we would be asking questions about. At the forum, their responses to questions about "rebalancing" and other topics made it clear that none of them had "done their homework" about our issues. Moreover, when answering a final question, "what will be your top priorities for protecting and improving Rhode Island seniors' quality of life?," the first responding candidate said he would not increase funding for any senior programs because of the recession. The other six candidates were happy to follow suit. We ended up with no commitments to any improvements in Rhode Island's senior services.

Following the principle that "if you want things to change, you've got to do something different," we decided that our 2014 governors candidates' forum would take a different approach. Thanks to our thirteen co-sponsoring groups, on August 4 we filled the room with 360 people, double the number in 2010. We began with a slide presentation that included a graph of the projected "age wave" of dramatic growth in Rhode Island's senior population. It provided data showing that 90% of seniors say it's "very important" to stay in their own home as they age, that the average annual Medicaid cost for community-based care is twenty thousand dollars, while for nursing home care it's fifty-one thousand, and that over 1,300 elders in Rhode Island nursing homes are "low care" and don't have to be there. Candidates took notes.

We then asked each candidate to begin by "telling us a story about someone you know who has faced challenges as he or she 'aged in the community' ...and the lessons you took from their

story.” Each candidate had a compelling story to share, about aging parents or close relatives, and those stories set the tone for the discussion that followed.

Responding to our questions, all six candidates pledged to restore the \$2.8 million dollars cut from senior programs since 2007, and several said they would budget even more. All supported improving wages and benefits for home care workers. They agreed to make major improvements in the state’s service to help seniors and their families choose care options. This forum was a huge victory, shared by everyone who attended. We look forward to a new governor who will provide leadership on these issues, and to working with him or her to achieve the results that Rhode Island’s seniors and their families deserve.