

Saving RIPAE: A Team Effort

When the Rhode Island General Assembly enacted an FY 2010 state budget that included funding for the Rhode Island Pharmaceutical Assistance for the Elderly, or RIPAE, program it marked a victory for a community campaign to save RIPAE. Governor Carcieri's proposed budget would have eliminated RIPAE on January 1, 2010. RIPAE subsidizes prescription costs for 18,000 low- and moderate-income seniors once their annual prescription drug costs reach \$2,700 per year. Once reaching this point, known as the "donut hole", seniors covered by Medicare Part D have to pay the next \$4300 in prescription costs out of their own pockets.

The campaign to save RIPAE commenced with a strong, well-organized array of testimony before the House Finance Committee. Groups that turned out included the RI Gray Panthers, Senior Agenda Coalition, AARP, Governor's Commission on the Disabled, the United Way, directors of several senior centers, and a large contingent of seniors from the Ralph Holden Senior Center in Central Falls. Susan Sweet, former Associate Director of the R.I. Department of Elderly Affairs, pointed out that the savings from the cut would be around \$300,000, far less than the \$1.1 million had been claimed. Ella Perry, a seventy-five year old stroke victim and diabetic, testified how she needed RIPAE to cover eight medications she took per day. Gray Panther leader Savino Salerno summarized the testimony when he said, "We the elderly have to come here to beg. Where is the judgment and justice in this situation?" While Finance Committee Chairman Steven Costantino did not disclose his position on the matter, after the testimony he made a point of pointing out that the General Assembly, not the governor at the time, had founded the RIPAE program.

Following the hearing, the Senior Agenda Coalition and Gray Panthers organized a petition and phone-calling campaign to urge legislative leaders to save RIPAE. Many of the state's senior centers circulated petitions among their members. Signatures were also collected at events such as the Senior Expo. Petitions containing over nine hundred signatures were personally delivered to Chairman Costantino's office. Ann Hallal and John Gouveia, residents of Warwick's Shalom Apartments, collected over 200 signatures that they presented to their State Representative, Al Gemma, at a public meeting. State house staffers said that they were receiving "lots of calls" about RIPAE. When the House Finance Committee reported out a budget on June 18th, RIPAE was restored with full funding.

I think this campaign demonstrated how a team effort and strong testimony from individuals who were directly affected could win a victory. Savino Salerno's question remains: why should seniors have to fight every year to keep badly-needed programs like RIPAE? It's a question each of us should ask our legislators.

I believe that history tells us that, as John Dewey said, "democracy means paying attention", and, I would add, speaking up for our interests. It took courage for Ella

Perry to testify about her medical conditions and her need for RIPAE. It took organizing by individuals like Ann Hallal and John Gouveia, as well as by groups like the Gray Panthers and senior centers, to generate the phone calls and petitions. The struggle to protect our seniors' health and independence is ongoing.