



*Advocating for Older Adults of Today and Tomorrow*

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Testimony of

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On

Connecticut's Economic Strategic Plan Development

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Good evening, and thank you for this opportunity to provide input into the development of Connecticut's Economic Strategic Plan.

As you may know, the Commission on Aging is the independent state agency solely devoted to enhancing the lives of the present and future generations of our state's older adults. In carrying out its mission, the Commission leads public/private-sector efforts to promote and improve public policy on a variety of older adult issues.

I applaud you for including "labor force quality and sustainability" as one of your key areas of study. Today, I want to focus my remarks on one aspect of Connecticut's labor force: the sector that provides long-term care services and supports. **We face a dire shortage of workers to provide care to Connecticut residents. I urge you to include training and retention of health care workers in the state's blueprint for economic policy.**

Long term care services and supports are needed to help people who require assistance over an extended period due to disability or chronic illness. Though it's a topic that most people would prefer to ignore, the truth is that nearly every person in Connecticut will either provide or receive some form of long term care services and support at some point in their lives. These services may range from help with eating and dressing, to round-the-clock nursing care—and everything in between.

For too long, "long-term care" has conjured up images of frail elderly women in nursing homes. Despite the great diversity in patients who receive long term care, and a huge range of care needs, unfortunately, in Connecticut, we do have an over reliance on institutional care, such as that provided in nursing homes. We spend the majority of our long-term care dollars—about two-thirds—on institutional care, the most expensive form of care possible.

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It doesn't have to be this way: Oregon, a state with similar demographics to Connecticut, works to keep people in their communities as long as they can. That state spends about 70% of its dollars on community-based care, serving more people, more efficiently and more appropriately.

Connecticut recently conducted its first comprehensive Long-Term Care Needs Assessment in 20 years, authorized in 2006 by the General Assembly. The results of the assessment were presented yesterday at a legislative briefing hosted by the Aging, Human Services, Public Health and Appropriations Committees.

The assessment was completed over the summer by researchers from the University of Connecticut Health Center's Center on Aging, with survey input from thousands of residents, an exhaustive literature review and a comparison to other states' reform efforts.

One of the assessment's key findings is the fact that most Connecticut residents wish to remain in their own homes and communities when they need long-term care.

Recent attention to the "Money Follows the Person" waiver, the situation with Haven Healthcare, and the release of the Long Term Care Needs Assessment all point to a mandate for broad scale change in our system. We must "rebalance" the system to emphasize home and community-based care through funding prioritization and appropriate treatment based on individuals' needs.

Visionary leadership in our state will help us move toward rebalancing. But, in order to achieve this, we must address a looming workforce shortage in nursing and other direct care fields.

According to the federal Health Resources and Services Administration, Connecticut is already short thousands of nurses. And, as our state's one million Baby Boomers start to require long term care, this crisis will only worsen unless action is taken, both to train new workers and retain current ones.

In fact, from 2005-2025, the number of people in Connecticut over the age of 65 is expected to grow by 51%. Meanwhile, the number of people aged 21-64—generally, those who are working—is actually expected to decrease by 2%. With demand for care workers far outpacing the supply, who is going to provide the care?

Fortunately, the primary providers of long term care are informal caregivers, like family and friends. Nationally, the total estimated annual, economic value of unpaid care to adults with disabilities in 2004 was \$306 billion.

However, we know that even the most caring spouses, siblings, parents, friends and neighbors cannot fulfill all the care needs of their loved ones. We need a steady supply of formal caregivers, such as personal care aides, nurses, home health aides and physical therapists.

Over the next ten to fifteen years, Connecticut is expected to face one of the worst nursing shortages in the nation, and that shortage is expected to reach crisis proportions quickly: in 2010—only two years away—we are projected to be short about 11,000 nurses, a 33% shortage rate. By 2015, we'll be short about 17,000 nurses, and by 2020 we'll be short 22,000 nurses, a 57% shortage rate.

This increase in need is not restricted to nurses: Connecticut's Department of Labor projects an enormous increase from 2004 to 2014 in the need for home health aides (25% increase), personal and home care aides (28% increase), physical therapists (26% increase) and other occupations providing long term care.

Efforts at the state level have established and expanded nursing faculty incentive programs, established loan forgiveness for certain nursing students and extended licensure to more individuals. Additional coordinated efforts among the K-12 schools, colleges and universities, and hospitals and other health care settings are needed to recruit more individuals into direct care fields.

We also must make a concerted effort towards better retention of workers. The Commission on Aging has partnered with the Connecticut Department of Labor, Connecticut Employment and Training Commission and the Office of Workforce Competitiveness on an initiative called "Redefining Retirement Years." By 2010, twenty percent of Connecticut's workforce will be over the age of 55. Many older workers with valuable knowledge and skills want or need to continue working past the current typical retirement age, presenting a significant opportunity for the health care field. Providing flexibility in workplace policies and practices will enable and encourage these employees to continue working. Not only is this good social policy, it will help ensure that Connecticut is well-positioned to offer the full range of long term care services that individuals will need, now and into the future.

By actively working as a state to promote health care careers, we may help to avert the workforce shortage that threatens efforts to rebalance our long term care system. We know that people want to stay in their communities as long as they can...we know it makes financial sense to maximize state taxpayers' dollars to allow them to do so. Now we must put the support system into place that will bring Connecticut's long term care system up to date. These efforts will make a difference in the lives of patients of today and tomorrow, and they are an essential part of Connecticut's economy.

Thank you.