



Advocating for Older Adults of Today and Tomorrow

Testimony of

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On

*SB 470: An Act Concerning the Shortage of Nursing and Allied Health Professionals and
HB 5687: An Act Concerning the Nursing Profession*

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

March 4, 2008

Good morning. My name is Deb Polun and I am the Legislative Director for the Connecticut Commission on Aging, the independent state agency solely devoted to enhancing the lives of the present and future generations of our state's older adults. The Commission on Aging supports these initiatives designed to enhance our direct care workforce.

In 2006, the Legislature wisely invested in a Long-Term Care Needs Assessment to ensure that data are available to inform long-term care planning in our state. This study, conducted by the UConn Health Center's Center on Aging, included an exhaustive literature review, a national study of best practices and a survey of over 7000 residents and care providers in our state. The results of the Needs Assessment were presented in January at a Legislative Briefing.

Connecticut is already one of the "oldest" states, and Baby Boomers make up about a third of our population. The Needs Assessment found that changing demographics will increase the need for long-term care in Connecticut by 30% by 2030. (Long-term care refers to the full range of services and supports provided to people of all ages in need, from a home-delivered meal a few times a week, to home-based care, to nursing home care—and everything in between).

Although much of this long-term care will be provided by informal, unpaid caregivers, like spouses, grown children and friends, the need for paid caregivers is also expected to grow exponentially. The nursing shortage has gotten the most attention: 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—already short about 10,000 nurses, by 2020 we'll be short 22,000 nurses, a 57% shortage rate.

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As this Committee knows all too well, this shortage is not restricted to nurses. The Connecticut Department of Labor predicts a 25% increase in the need for home health aides, a 28% increase in the need for personal and home care aide positions, and a 14% increase in the number of respiratory therapists, by 2014. In fact, virtually every occupation providing any form of long-term care is expected to see enormous growth as a result of demographic shifts over the next decade. Moreover, these shifts occur against a backdrop of increased attention to facility quality and a likely increase in requirements for staffing levels.

Meanwhile, the number of people aged 21-64 in Connecticut is actually expected to decrease by 2% over the next several years. What this indicates is a very real need to develop pathways into our long-term care workforce and to improve negative images often associated with direct care fields.

This Committee has been a leader in establishing and expanding nursing faculty incentive programs and loan forgiveness for certain nursing students. The Commission on Aging appreciates these prior initiatives and asks for your support of these two bills this session. Specifically, we are grateful of your support of enhancement of the allied health workforce, as well as nursing (in SB 470) and for efforts to return nurses to direct care work (HB 5687).

As to retention of current workers, the Commission on Aging has partnered with other state agencies on an initiative called "Redefining Retirement Years." By 2010, twenty percent of Connecticut's workforce will be over the age of 55. Providing flexibility in workplace policies and practices will enable and encourage employees who want to continue working to do so, better positioning Connecticut to offer the full range of long term care services that individuals will need, now and into the future. I would be happy to share this report with the Committee, to inform policy making; it is also available on the Commission on Aging's web site.

Actively working as a state to promote health care careers is a critical component to efforts to improve the quality of care and prepare our state for an increased need for long-term care workers. I urge your support of these initiatives.