Testimony to the Government Administration and Elections Committee

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Distinguished Committee Members:

I appreciate this opportunity to reach out to your committee to implore you, in the strongest terms possible, to reject Governor Rell's call to eliminate the Connecticut Commission on Aging.

In working with the Commission's four-person professional staff for two years, I have developed a great appreciation for the value they, and the 17 unpaid "volunteer" commission members, bring to our state.

This is true both in terms of the Commission's steadfast support for our hundreds of thousands of older adults—and the soaring numbers of baby boomers—and for the objective groundbreaking research and objective information it provides.

In these difficult financial times, the Commission's research on long-term care alone offers the potential for Connecticut to save hundreds of millions of dollars while improving the lives of our elderly residents, and persons with disabilities of all ages, now and in the future.

As you know, the Commission's budget represents a tiny fraction of the state's $18 billion budget. In view of what it returns to the state, the Commission on Aging may be one of Connecticut's wisest investments.

Loneliness, poverty and despair are many of the everyday conditions of the elderly that go unnoticed by the general public. Major changes in both public and private policy—dramatic, systemic changes as proposed by the Commission on Aging—are needed to cope with the effects of an aging Connecticut and an aging America.

Demographic and social structures in our nation are creating attitudes and patterns that are both discriminatory and inhumane. Recognizing our own issues of aging can have a far-reaching and transformative effect on us. To avoid facing our own mortality and our elders is folly.

My Foundation is partnering with the Commission on Aging to foster and support the introduction of a free in-school and after -school curriculum that encourages the young to interact with the elderly. Last year, the City of New Haven became the first city in the nation to adopt the curriculum, with 200 seniors and elementary students participating, and others will follow.

I believe this program has a direct and positive effect on the health status of older adults. A recent study from the Harvard School of Public Health found social engagement could have as much effect on prolonging life as fitness activities.

Keeping social and busy evokes changes in the brain that protect against cognitive decline. This, in turn, influences physical processes regulated by the brain such as cellular immunity or mobilizing the body's defenses against disease. Thus, seniors remain healthier, longer.

The notion of connecting everyone, of restoring a strong continuum in our society, is tremendously exciting. Not only because it enriches and adds texture to the lives of the young, but because it deepens the imprint of tradition and improves the mental and physical health of the elderly. I know if we do this right the elderly, who are so often shunted aside, will be offered a more hopeful future, a future they have lived long enough to earn.

The Commission on Aging's partnership with my Foundation provides just one example of its forward-looking leadership in advancing programs and policies that directly fulfill its mandate from the General Assembly.

Again, I urge you to reject the Governor's proposal and, instead, act to allow the Commission on Aging on to continue moving ahead with its critically important work.

Thank you very much.

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