Gerard Kerins
481 Bartlett Drive
Madison, CT 06443
(203) 421-4827

Testimony to the CT General Assembly Appropriations Committee
Regarding the Connecticut Commission on Aging
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My name is Gerard Kerins. I am a resident of Madison and a junior at Xavier High School in Middletown.

My father, Dr. Gerard J. Kerins, is a member of the Connecticut Commission on Aging. He is the Section Chief of Geriatrics at the Hospital of St. Raphael in New Haven.

I am writing to support the Connecticut Commission on Aging and the work it does to help the hundreds of thousands of older adults in our state, including one million baby boomers, lead better lives.

I hope the General Assembly will not allow the Commission to be eliminated as is proposed by Governor Rell. This would be a very bad decision for not just the older people of Connecticut but for younger people as well, as I will explain.

As an (unpaid) intern with the Commission during the summer and early fall of 2008, I was fortunate to directly participate in one of its projects and to get a behind-the-scenes look at the Commission in action.

Even during the summer months, the four-person staff at the State Capitol stays very busy on its ongoing, objective research projects for the General Assembly, (long-term care, workforce flexibility, etc.) attending senior forums sponsored by legislators, answering many phone calls for information from people around the state, and leading groups such as the Long-Term Care Advisory Council and Connecticut Elder Action Network.

The project I was directly involved in was the Commission on Aging's collaboration with the Earth's Elders Foundation of Kent, Connecticut. This is a project that would never have happened in Connecticut without the Commission on Aging.

This project supports the Commission on Aging's multi-faceted work to create an environment in Connecticut that welcomes older adults to be able to stay in their homes and communities and fosters intergenerational solutions, respect and understanding.

As many legislators and others at the Capitol remember, in June 2007 the Commission and the Foundation presented an exhibit of the larger-than-life Earth's Elders "super centenarian" photographs created by the foundation's executive director, Jerry Friedman. These are photos of people around the world who are at least 110 years old—the oldest people on earth.

Everyone remembers this was a great exhibit but it was really just the start of a unique project that has the potential to bridge the generation gap in Connecticut between young people and the elderly and make life better for both groups.

The project involves introducing a free curriculum program into Connecticut schools modeled after Mr. Friedman's work. Like Mr. Friedman, students go out into their communities to interview older people. Following the curriculum (there is also a free teacher's guide), the students write essays, take photographs, create artwork and bulletin boards—they interact with their interviewees and learn about their lives.

This program is very flexible, allows for teacher and student creativity, and can be used in history classes, social studies, English and for other courses of study.

My job last summer was to create and send a letter to the superintendents of schools all over Connecticut to inform them of the program, provide background information and to request meetings with the superintendents and their staff members.

By the end of summer several school districts said they were interested including Montville, Waterford, Simsbury and Madison. I personally visited with several superintendents with a member of the Commission staff.

Before I worked with the Commission, this program was adopted by the New Haven School System in the latter part of 2008 and was expected to be expanded this school year. New Haven was the first city in the United States to adopt the curriculum and again, this wouldn't have happened without the Commission on Aging.

More recently, over the winter, word on the program has spread and the Connecticut Department of Education, working with the Capitol Region Education Council, is now exploring using it for after-school programs throughout the state.

I think it's important to mention again that this is a free program; there are no administrative or other overhead costs incurred by the schools or anyone else. It's really a win-win for our older people, students, school systems and the State of Connecticut.

I would also like to note that in addition to giving students a new way to learn—and helping to keep older people engaged in social activities—there is evidence that a program like Earth's Elders can actually help keep seniors healthy.

A new study from the Harvard School of Public Health says social engagement could have as much effect on prolonging life as fitness activities.

Keeping busy causes changes in the brain that protect against cognitive decline. And this positively impacts physical processes controlled by the brain including cellular immunity or mobilizing the body's defenses against disease.

In closing I would like to add that the Earth's Elders program is just one example of how the Connecticut Commission on Aging carries out the work the General Assembly expected it to perform when it created the agency in 1993.

Other projects and research that I'm aware of can actually help save Connecticut millions of dollars if the recommendations are followed.

I hope all legislators will support the Commission and make sure it is allowed to continue doing its important work.

Thank you very much.