

**Testimony to the General Assembly's Appropriations Committee**

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**February 18, 2010**

Distinguished Committee Members:

I appreciate this opportunity to reach out once again to the General Assembly and to your influential 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 three years, I have developed a great appreciation for the value they, and the 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 my fellow baby boomers—and for the objective groundbreaking research and objective information it provides.

Further—and increasingly important in these difficult fiscal times—the Commission returns many more times to the state in real dollars than it costs taxpayers. In recent months, for example, the Commission discovered \$11 million in untapped federal funds related to the Money Follows the Person program that would have been left on the table

in Washington were it not for the Commission's diligent oversight. Also, as I'm sure you know, the Commission has made recommendations to restructure the state's long-term care infrastructure that could save Connecticut at least \$600 million every year. These are not insignificant numbers. The Commission deserves to be congratulated for this work—and to have its modest budget restored. It is ludicrous—and incredibly short-sighted—for the Governor to again recommend its elimination.

As you know, the Commission's budget—recently and unfortunately reduced by 50%--represents a tiny fraction of the state's \$18 billion budget. More important, 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<sup>®</sup> 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. In 2008, 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 unwise 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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