Testimony to the Government Administrations & Elections Committee Concerning the Connecticut Commission on Aging (SB 28)

March 17, 2010

The Center for Medicare Advocacy, Inc. (the Center) is a private, non-profit organization headquartered in Mansfield, Connecticut with offices in Washington, DC and throughout the country. The Center provides education and legal assistance to advance fair access to Medicare and quality healthcare. We represent Medicare beneficiaries throughout the state, respond to approximately 6,500 calls and emails annually, and host two websites. The Center also provides written and electronic materials, education, and expert support for Connecticut's CHOICES program, and provides a vast array of other services for Medicare beneficiaries throughout Connecticut and the United States.

THE COMMISSION ON AGING IS UNIQUE AND CRITICALLY IMPORTANT TO THE STATE'S OLDER PEOPLE AND TO THE ORGANIZATIONS THAT SERVE THEM

The Center for Medicare Advocacy has a longstanding and extremely productive working relationship with the Connecticut Commission on Aging (the Commission). The Commission provides effective education, advocacy and collaborative support on behalf of older people and for organizations that serve older people throughout the state. The services provided by the Commission are not duplicated by any other entity within or without government. When statewide public policy is being made, the Commission provides the voice for older people and the eyes and ears for organizations that provide direct services for elders. Given the limited resources available to these organizations, none of them could be as effective without the Commission. In this respect the Commission is truly indispensable.

We are all keenly aware that the Connecticut population is aging. How many warnings have we heard about the "graying of the Baby Boomers" and the increasing age of people who are living with chronic conditions? As Baby Boomers begin to turn 65, we are experiencing a profound shift in our elderly population in terms of numbers, ethnicity, economic status, needs, and expectations. We must ensure that these demographics are considered when public policy is being developed and when decisions are made about how to effectively meet these emerging social and economic trends.

This is not the time to eliminate the advocacy and education provided by the Commission on Aging. In the coming years the need for an independent Commission on Aging will be more, not less, important to the well-being of Connecticut's future, its families, and older people.

One of the most important things the Commission on Aging has done is to help the many individual organizations that serve Connecticut's older people partner in order to be heard in one cohesive voice on public policy matters affecting Connecticut's older citizens. For example, the Connecticut Elder Action Network (CEAN) is a coalition of over eighty Connecticut elder advocacy organizations which exists due to the efforts of the Commission on Aging.

As the Center's Executive Director, I serve on CEAN's Executive Committee. The organizations that belong to CEAN share information, expertise, and resources in order to develop and advance a responsible public policy agenda for all older people throughout Connecticut. The Commission on Aging founded CEAN, administers its efforts, keeps members abreast of statewide issues, leads the disparate member organizations to develop annual priorities, and guides us in implementing effective education and advocacy for and on behalf of older people. With the Commission's expert assistance, CEAN and its member organizations have been able to actively participate in public policy discussions and to educate other organizations and older Connecticut

residents about legislative debates and outcomes. None of us could do this on our own. CEAN and the Commission's work with CEAN have also helped member organizations develop important relationships and knowledge of one another's work; this in turn helps all of the organizations serve their clientele more effectively.

The Aging Services Division of the Department of Social Services (ASD), in contrast to the Commission on Aging, administers the State's programs and services that assist older adults, such as ConnPACE, the Elderly Nutrition Program and CHOICES. The Center for Medicare Advocacy serves as the lead training and legal support entity for the CHOICES program. The ASD administers the statewide CHOICES programs carefully and with commitment, as it does the other programs in its purview. That fact does not diminish the need for the Commission on Aging. ASD does not, and is not intended to, serve as an independent watchdog and educator for Connecticut's older people. This is the Commission's mission. ASD and the Commission on Aging have two very distinct, and two equally important, roles. Each one is stronger because of the other's existence and they work closely together to accomplish as much as possible for older people with the resources that are available. Unfortunately, both of these entities have felt the effects of major budget cuts in the past; now is not the time to abolish one of them entirely.

The Commission on Aging also serves as an important analytical resource center. It monitors the status of Connecticut's elder population, assesses the impact of current and proposed initiatives on this population, conducts activities that advance their interests, and reports to the Governor and the Legislature. The Commission and the information that it gleans through its activities have been, and should continue to be, valuable resources to the Legislature and Governor and to the development of sound public policy.

The Connecticut Commission on Aging represents a commitment to the citizens of Connecticut that the well-being of older adults will continue to be a significant concern to the State. The

Commission is the only Connecticut entity solely devoted to advancing the needs of older people when state policies and legislation are debated and decided.

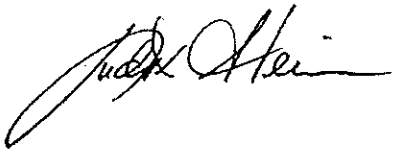
Without the Commission older people could easily be forgotten. More frequently frail and less able to speak for themselves than their younger counterparts, older people's interests could quickly fade into the background without the Commission on Aging. This is particularly true in financial times such as these, when diminishing resources have to be shared.

CONCLUSION

The Center for Medicare Advocacy urges the Legislature to reject the Governor's call to abolish the Commission on Aging. We are available to do anything we can to help.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding this important matter.

Respectfully submitted,



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