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Testimony to General Assembly's Appropriations Committee Concerning the Connecticut Commission on Aging February 18, 2010

Testimony by
Joelen J. Gates
Connecticut Legal Services, Inc.

My name is Joelen Gates and I practice elder law at Connecticut Legal Services, in Willimantic, Connecticut, a private, non-profit law firm. I am also a member of the Long Term Care Advisory Council which provides assistance and support to the state Long Term Care Planning Committee.

I am here today to urge you to support and restore the funding for the Commission on Aging, an independent advocacy organization in the legislative branch. Governor Rell proposes to eliminate the Commission on Aging as well as most other citizen advocacy organizations such as the Commission on Children, African-American Affairs Commission, Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission, Commission on Women, and others.

I realize these are difficult economic times and the governor and legislature must make tough decisions to reduce state expenditures. However, eliminating the Commission on Aging, in a time when the baby boomer population is aging and causing a rise in demand for long term care services, is not wise state planning. The state spends about \$2 billion or 14% of the state budget for long-term care services and this number will increase as more baby boomers become eligible for and need long term care.

The Commission on Aging has been instrumental in formulating the state long term care plan that aims to shift the balance of state resources from expensive nursing home care to home care services for the elderly. State funding for more long term care support and services in community settings will save the state even more money as Connecticut's population ages and the demand for long term care grows. The Commission on Aging has also promoted needed long term care services for younger people with disabilities who are not served by the state Medicaid waivers for the elderly.

The Commission on Aging provides invaluable assistance to the legislature and aging community and is not duplicated by any other state agency or office. As an independent, non-partisan voice for older Connecticut residents, it provides reliable information based on unbiased research and state-wide surveys on the needs of Connecticut's population for long term care.



I have personally worked with Julie Evans Starr, the Executive Director of the Commission on Aging, who chairs and provides strong leadership for the Long Term Care Advisory Council. The Council is comprised of advocates from consumer organizations, long term care providers, caregivers and employees in the long term care field. As Chair, Ms. Starr organizes and holds monthly meetings for the council where members discuss and consider proposals to recommend to the State Long Term Care Planning Committee for the State Long Term Care Plan. Guided by Ms. Starr's leadership, the Advisory Council advocated for and the legislature passed funding for a long term care needs assessment which was needed to inform state policy decisions. Ms. Starr played a critical role not only in shepherding this legislation to fruition, but also later in guiding the research that followed.

The Governor proposes to make the Commissioner of Social Services a member of the Long Term Care Advisory Council in place of the Commission on Aging. This would be inappropriate since the Commissioner of Social Services is already a member of the Long Term Planning Committee. The Long Term Care Advisory Council is reserved for long term care stakeholders such as consumers and their advocate organizations, long term care providers, caregivers and employees in long term care. The members of the Long Term Care Advisory Council need the independence and freedom to oppose policies of the Department of Social Services at times. Therefore we need an independent nonpartisan chair with the strong leadership skills that Julie Evans Starr and the Commission on Aging provide.

In the context of the Commission on Aging's modest budget Ms. Starr and her staff brought over \$11 million to the state through a provision in the Money Follows the Person funding. It allows the state to maximize matching Medicaid funds, something that would not have been completed and utilized without the Commission's diligent work.

Therefore, I am asking you to support and restore funding to the Connecticut Commission on Aging so they may continue to be a voice in state government for the elderly.