

Testimony to the General Assembly's Appropriations Committee

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Distinguished Committee Members:

I appreciate this opportunity to reach out once again to the General Assembly and to your influential committee.

I implore you, in the strongest terms possible, to support the Connecticut Commission on Aging by doing all you can to ensure that its present budget is not further eroded.

In working with the Commission's four-person professional staff for four years, I have developed a great appreciation for the value that they, and the 21 unpaid "volunteer" commission members, bring to our state.

This is true both in terms of the objective, non-partisan groundbreaking research and information the Commission provides and for its steadfast support for our hundreds of thousands of older adults and soaring numbers of my fellow baby boomers. Increasingly, the Commission's work in recommending actionable steps that can be taken to restructure our state's long-term care system also benefits thousands of persons of all ages who have disabilities.

Further—and increasingly important in these very difficult fiscal times—the Commission returns many more times to the state in real dollars than it costs taxpayers. The Commission has, for example, 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 its diligent and proactive 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 nearly \$1 billion every year. These are not insignificant numbers. The Commission deserves to be congratulated for this work—and to have its modest budget retained—at the very least.

As you know, the Commission's already modest budget was, unfortunately, reduced by 55%. Its budget represents a tiny fraction of the state's budget. More important, in view of what it returns to the state as mentioned above, the Commission 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. 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. More recently, the City of Bridgeport has adopted the curriculum for a number of its schools. We are confident that more will follow.

I believe this program has a direct and positive effect on the health status of older adults. A 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 support the Commission on Aging so that it may continue moving ahead with its critically important work.

At the very least, please do not erode its present budget.

Thank you very much.

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