

Patricia Wrice

Testimony to the General Assembly's Appropriations Committee Re Opposing the Proposed Elimination of the Connecticut Commission on Aging: Bill 6354, Section 90--OPPOSE

**From: Patricia Wrice, Executive Director, Operation Fuel;
Chair, Connecticut Low-Income Energy Advisory Board
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Distinguished Committee Members:

I appreciate this opportunity to once again reach out to your influential committee concerning the Governor's proposed elimination of the Connecticut Commission on Aging (CoA).

I ask you in all sincerity and for the good of the people of Connecticut, to continue supporting the Legislature's Connecticut Commission on Aging by doing all you can to ensure that it is allowed to continue in its important mission. I would also like to state that I am opposed to "consolidating" the other Legislative Commissions as I believe their important work could not be accomplished with even fewer staff and without the autonomy and independence they now enjoy—and which the Legislature envisioned when creating them.

The CoA is unique in state government. Its work is duplicated nowhere else. It touches the lives of hundreds of thousands of Connecticut residents in meaningful

and substantial ways while recommending fiscally responsible solutions in these very difficult financial times. It is one of your most important resources.

The Commission provides important independent and autonomous oversight over numerous Executive Branch programs and services. It was created by the General Assembly in 1993 to carry out this important work—non-partisan, independent and objective public policy and research—and it has served admirably ever since.

As our state's population of older adults has grown—we are the seventh oldest state in the nation-- the Commission on Aging's importance has grown has well.

In working with the Commission's three-person professional staff for many years, I have developed a deep appreciation for the value that they, and the 21 unpaid "volunteer" commission members from throughout Connecticut, 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 services and supports system also benefits thousands of persons of all ages who have disabilities.

Further—and increasingly important in these very difficult fiscal times—the Commission, whose annual budget is only about \$240,000, returns many more times to the state in real dollars than it costs taxpayers. Two years ago, 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 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—not eliminated.

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.

The Commission on Aging's partnership with and support of so many Connecticut organizations—including Operation Fuel—is indicative of its forward-looking leadership in advancing programs and policies that directly fulfill its mandate from the General Assembly. The Commission is also represented on the state's Low-Income Energy Advisory Board, which I chair, and I am very appreciative of their support in this work as well. In fact, in its oversight role and as a member of the Advisory Board, the Commission for several years has provided valuable counsel in structuring the state's low-income energy program to ensure that it is serving as many eligible people as possible, as efficiently as possible.

Again, I urge you to support the Commission on Aging—and certainly not eliminate it—so that it may continue moving ahead with its critically important work.

Thank you very much.

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