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Written Testimony before the Appropriations Committee

Elizabeth B. Ritter on behalf of the State Department on Aging

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Good afternoon Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Senator Kane, Representative Ziobron and members of the Committee on Appropriations. I am Elizabeth Ritter, Acting Commissioner of the State Department on Aging. I am here today to provide the committee with information about the Governor's budget for the State Department on Aging in the next biennium. I thank you for the opportunity to do so.

The State Department on Aging was formed in January 2013 as the state's lead agency in serving older adults. We deliver services to our population through a network of five Area Agencies on Aging, senior centers and municipal agents for the elderly, service providers, and dedicated volunteers and advocates.

There is little argument that the aging population (residents aged 60 and over) is the fastest growing sector of our state's population. With our aging network partners, and supported by our state and federal funds, we provided services to 90,000 consumers last year. As Connecticut continues to grapple with the challenging budget, I am pleased to reiterate our commitment to meet our mission to empower older adults to live full independent lives, and to provide leadership on aging issues on behalf of older adults, families, caregivers, and advocates.

Our new State Plan on Aging went into effect this past October, with focus areas including promotion of healthy aging, prevention of elder abuse, and coordinated planning across aging and disability networks. The State Plan on Aging provides vision and a strategic direction for the department and our aging programs. The agency carries out its mission along with its partners through a variety of important programs, including home and community based services, congregate and home delivered meals, health and wellness promotion, caregiver support, elder abuse prevention, senior employment, health insurance counseling, Alzheimer's respite care and many others.

The Governor's budget ensures ongoing support to critical programs for Connecticut's older residents. We are grateful that the budget continues to support our department's programs, including elderly nutrition, fall prevention, the CHOICES health insurance counseling program and the state match for our federal Older American Act programs.



Statewide Respite Care Program

The Governor's budget calls for a 25% reduction, or \$544,917, to the Connecticut Statewide Respite Care Program. The Respite Care Program is designed to be the first point of entry for stressed families with limited resources needing assistance in caring for their loved one with Alzheimer's disease at home. It provides respite, or a break in the form of direct services such as adult day care or home health services, to relieve stressed caregivers or to address a crisis situation. As it focuses specifically on individuals with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, it provides targeted information, support and services and prepares families for the often long trajectory of this difficult disease.

In FY 2014, 713 families received services through this program. We know that Alzheimer's does not discriminate based upon age. Program participants range in age from 53 to 105. Seventy percent of caregivers are under 70.

It has been well documented that maintaining an individual with dementia at home is a much less costly option than institutionalization, and that the long term health ramifications of caring for someone with this type of disease are substantial without some type of support system or care intervention.

As a program developed and funded through the State Department on Aging, the department does not maintain any administrative funds for the Respite Care program. The Area Agencies on Aging maintain only a small portion of the state funds that they receive to support staff. By design, the program is integrated into the aging services system so that clients are seamlessly connected to all services available to them and to long term supports that they may likely need as they also age, thereby maximizing the use of state funds for the direct provision of services.

Though a reduction of program funds will be challenging, we will utilize our existing priority scale, as well as the expertise of our seasoned Care Managers, to determine what services are critical for each family while serving the maximum number of individuals in need. The program is not of an entitlement nature. Applicants must meet eligibility criteria, including income and asset levels as set forth in statute. The average award is about \$3,000 per case.

Las Perlas Hispanas

The Governor's budget eliminates \$20,000 in annual funding for the Las Perlas Hispanas Senior Center in New Britain. This program provides case management and information services to low income minority adults, age 60 and older, who are in need of assistance in accessing additional community services and socialization. In FY 2014,



the program served 56 older adults, who received 430 hours of individual case management, and 1,790 hours of monthly group educational activities (Medicare Workshop, Nutrition Workshop, etc.).

Senior centers in Connecticut provide a wide variety of services to older adults. They serve as an entry point to obtain information, providing linkages and access to key community services that help older adults stay healthy and independent at home. Senior centers, including Las Perlas, provide meals, information and assistance, health and wellness programs, public benefits counseling, and many more services. One program in particular, the elderly nutrition program, is supported by both federal and state funds made available to the SDA. Meals are provided in participating senior centers. In accordance with the federal Older Americans Act, the five Area Agencies on Aging in CT designate senior centers as focal points to provide information and access for older persons.

The State Department on Aging's FY 2015 budget does not include state funding for senior centers, with the exception of Las Perlas. However, senior centers may apply for federal Older Americans Act funds from Area Agencies on Aging. Although limited, funding specifically for senior centers is available through this federal source. Las Perlas availed itself of this opportunity and has received \$15,800 this year in federal funding through the North Central Area Agency on Aging.

Health Promotion

The Governor's budget calls for a \$136,988 reduction, approximately 46%, in health promotion programming. Through December 2014, the department funded Elderly Health Screening services. This year, SDA redirected the focus from health screening to evidence-based health promotion programs. The purpose of this shift was 1) to reach targeted under-served chronically ill older adults in the community with Healthy IDEAS, an evidence-based behavioral health program, and 2) to sustain and continue the dissemination of the Stanford Chronic Disease Self-Management Program (CDSMP), an evidence-based program the SDA offers through an established statewide infrastructure.

Despite the reduction, the department will be able to continue its plans to fully fund the Healthy IDEAS behavioral health program and begin services on July 1st. This evidence-based program is designed to detect and reduce the severity of depressive symptoms in older adults with chronic health conditions, through existing community-based care management or caregiver support services. Healthy IDEAS will help build much needed partnerships between social service care managers and existing behavioral health providers. As highlighted in the regional focus group results of the



SDA and DMHAS-led Older Adult Behavioral Health Asset Mapping Workgroup, “even persons identified with behavioral health needs.....often need additional help”. Healthy IDEAS can provide the much needed linkages, family and caregiver education and the empowerment of older adults to manage their depressive symptoms by engaging in meaningful and positive activities through behavior activation.

SDA currently dedicates federal grant funding to the Chronic Disease Self-Management Program, or CDSMP; however this funding ends on 8/31/15. It had been anticipated that the state health promotion funds would allow for this initiative to be fully sustained. The Governor’s recommended budget provides a small amount of funding, \$11,500, which will allow for minimal sustainability of the CDSMP statewide delivery system. This will ensure that the CDSMP infrastructure will be maintained by supporting necessary costs associated with program license fees, required training and educational materials. Additionally, most of our regional CDSMP partners will have access to a small amount of Federal Older Americans Act Health Promotion funds to cover part of the gap for the coming fiscal year.

Personal Services

Funding is removed for two positions – a Secretary and a Planning Analyst – that, although important to our long-term growth and future plans, are not currently filled. The agency is grateful for the ongoing support provided by our sister agencies in the areas of administrative services (human resources, information technology, payroll, contracting, and finance). SDA will continue to enter into MOUs with these agencies to ensure that our operational needs are met.

The Governor’s proposed budget preserves funding to support the core mission of the State Long Term Care Ombudsman. However, ongoing funding for a pilot program intended to serve home and community-based care recipients in Hartford County (approximately \$28,000) is removed.

I appreciate the challenging task the legislature faces in this difficult budget year and recognize that there are tough decisions to be made. I am committed to maximizing the resources provided to the department in the delivery of aging services. Thank you again for the opportunity to address the Committee today. I will be happy to take any questions you may have at this time as well as to provide additional information upon request.

