

**New Opportunities, Inc.
Meals on Wheels of Western CT
Testimony to the Aging Committee
February 19, 2019**

HB 7072: An Act Increasing Funding for Elderly Nutrition Services

Good morning Senator Maroney, Representative Serra, and members of the Aging Committee. As the Director of New Opportunities' Meals on Wheels Program of Western CT, I am writing in support of HB 7072.

Meals on Wheels of Western CT provides meals in Waterbury and 12 surrounding towns, encompassing the Central Naugatuck Valley Region of CT. As of this writing, our program has a waiting list of 150 people. Existing Meals on Wheels recipients were reduced from 7 days of service to 5 days of service. Those receiving meals 5 days were reduced to 4 days or less. We have a fleet of 24 refrigerated trucks with paid drivers and a network of over 100 volunteers who deliver meals daily. However, more than 70% of our truck fleet is over 10 years old. Our drivers and administrative staff have not received pay increases in over 5 years.

The above dilemma facing Meals on Wheels of Western CT is the result of our federal, state, municipal, client donations and fundraising dollars not being able to keep pace with the growing population and need for home delivered meal services. Participant donations have particularly declined over the last 5 years while recipients struggle to pay for prescriptions, heat, and other basic needs. In an effort to compensate for these shortfalls meal services have been cut, new referrals are on a waiting list, funds for new truck purchases have been reallocated to meals, administrative staff has been reduced, and COLA raises have been sacrificed in an effort to shift funds towards the purchase of meals.

Even after these efforts, the establishment of a waiting list has been unavoidable while existing recipients are left with an inadequate level of nutrition services necessary to maintain their independence in their own home. Our failing fleet is costing more money in maintenance and repairs, leaving the program and our recipients vulnerable when multiple breakdowns occur. In the last 5 years, minimum wage has increased \$1.30 yet our staff has been held to level wages, again in an effort to shift to the purchase of meals. The food cost to provide nutritious meals has also increased over the last 5 years.

Additional funds provided under HB 7072 are desperately needed by Meals on Wheels of Western CT to eliminate the waiting list, restore needed services to our existing recipients, and replace some of our aging fleet.

There is no doubt, Meals on Wheels keeps our most frail elder population independent, living in their own homes at the most reasonable cost to the state. Anyone contemplating this bill is welcome to contact me to arrange for a delivery ride-along to see the program and its recipients first hand.

Thank you for your past support and current consideration of HB 7072.

Lisa LaBonte, Director
Meals on Wheels of Western CT
203-575-4208
llabonte@newoppinc.org