



**Meals on Wheels & CANASP
Testimony to the Human Services Committee**

**HB 7338: AN ACT INCREASING FUNDING FOR ELDERLY NUTRITION,
ENSURING EQUITABLE RATES FOR PROVIDERS OF MEALS ON WHEELS
AND COLLECTING DATA ON MALNUTRITION.**

My name is Joel Sekorski, President of CANASP and Director of Services for the Elderly for the City of Torrington. Along with state advocacy for CANASP our program is an Elderly Nutrition provider for the Litchfield Hills region. We provide both Congregate and Home Delivered Meals in 18 Towns.

I am writing this letter in support of all ENP's in the State of CT. Although all our organizations have inherent differences, the one common denominator is the valuable service we provide to our state's elderly population, Home Delivered Meals. Our service goes beyond the meal delivery, in many instances the individual delivering a noon time meal may be the only person that meal recipient sees that day or that week. We are also a safety check on the meal recipient, able to alert an emergency contact or first responder to a situation that could be life threatening. In many instances, being able to respond to a senior in distress can avert a hospital or emergency room visit with a costly ambulance ride. In some cases, a worse tragedy can be averted. There is no denying the benefit ENPs provide our state's seniors with both Home Delivered and Congregate meals.

As funding is continually threatened with cuts at the Federal and State levels for Senior Services, the demand for our services as ENPs increases. We all have continued to provide these much needed meals despite level and diminishing funding. Meal unit reimbursement rates have remained flat as food prices and the expense of providing a meal has risen. Some ENPs have closed meal sites, some only deliver 3 days a week to help ease the burden of increased costs, and some have wait lists. Nonetheless, we continue to provide this valuable service for seniors in the state of Connecticut.

Our meal service not only is a benefit to seniors, it also has far reaching effects on a senior's ability to stay independent and in their homes without the fear of food insecurity. This benefit reduces nursing home stays, hospital re-admittances, and reliance on other forms of state aid, saving the state of Connecticut the costs associated with these institutional forms of care. Caregivers of these individuals also suffer from a loved one in an institutional setting. Absence from work for caregivers also has a negative effect on the economy.

The perception is that the state of Connecticut is a wealthy state and therefore there is not a need for much assistance from federal and state funding in delivering valuable senior services. Nothing can be farther from the truth.

It is my contention that if a senior is "in need" of a home delivered meal, their need is real despite the perception of wealth in certain areas of the state. In the Litchfield Hills Region where we deliver meals, it is a perceived area of wealth but in truth most seniors are perceived "land Rich" but suffer from low income. While trying to age in place they can be isolated for long periods of time; Meals drivers are their life line. They are forced to choose from the basics such as food, heat and medication. Meal delivery helps support these basic life choices for our seniors.

This Bill contains critical language for the Elderly Service provider's future. As we struggle to meet service needs, battle escalating costs and continue to fundraise at unsustainable levels, we face another challenge with the possibility of raising the minimum wage to \$15.00. While we all support a higher minimum wage, we struggle with the reality of what it will cost our programs. The majority of our part time employees, drivers, and site managers are paid at or near minimum wage. Our Programs are already battling severe losses every year and we have exhausted all of our creative cost saving options over the last decade in efforts to maintain present service levels. In my region this new minimum wage of \$15.00 would add an additional \$58,254.00 annual cost by 2023. The attached wage increase spreadsheet charts actual job wages and the proposed scheduled increases.

We cannot absorb this new wage without increased funding and language for future protection as proposed in HB 7338, as well as HB 7072's proposed increases to units of service.

It is time to recognize the ENP'S, and the value in the services they provide. It is time to address the funding of this service to ensure that no senior goes hungry. It is time to act on the "ask" of the state's meal providers and adequately fund senior nutrition for the future of our state and its aging population.