

## **Testimony to the Human Services Public Hearing on February 21, 2023.**

Good afternoon, Senator Lesser, Representative Gilchrest, and members of the Human Services Committee.

AgingCT is the Association of the five regional Agencies on Aging. Established under the Older Americans Act, AgingCT is designated as the State's Health Insurance Program providing information, assistance, and support to Medicare beneficiaries. AgingCT blends funding from the Administration of Community Living with State funds to support older adult, caregivers and persons with disabilities to help them live with independence, in the care setting of their choice.

### ***Raised Bill 1052 An Act Concerning Area Agencies on Aging***

AgingCT **supports SB 1052**. As written, the funding would support one staff person at each of the five regional Agencies on Aging (AAA). As an employee of the Southwestern CT Agency on Aging, I know firsthand about the need for information, assistance and enrollment faced by older residents and residents with disabilities. The volume of phone calls increases year after year. In the Southwestern region, four staff persons field over 50 calls each day with some callers requiring hours of support to assist them. The level of frustration from older adults and caregivers is palpable as the caller has typically tried numerous other resources like 2-1-1 and state customer service lines before reaching the AAA service navigator. The help needed goes further than a list of potential agencies or an automated response. Service Navigators are Community Health Workers and social workers who provide the connection to the services along with the guided assistance of how to pay for and apply to assistance. Through the statewide 800#, we receive calls for everything from eviction and abuse to questions about local adult day care or senior centers. When there is a problem accessing Medicare Savings benefits, Medicaid, CT Home Care Program, housing, food, or in-home care, clients enter a maze of disjointed service options. State and federal data systems can leave residents without hope of finding or correcting application errors or requests for additional information. They are told to use web-based portals or email to address the problems. Many of our clients neither have computer literacy nor access to equipment. Arthritis, low vision, hearing deficits, Parkinson's disease, dementia and other cognitive issues hamper their efforts.

Agencies on Aging blend funding from the Federal Older Americans Act with State funds to support emergency needs like food, housing or prescription drugs. This allows us to work with our local senior centers and human services staff to support Connecticut's residents and connect them to the services they need. Together, we weave the safety net for older adults and other vulnerable populations. CHOICES, CT's State Health Insurance Program, provides access to State systems that help AAA staff untangle errors and restore benefits. We are instrumental in supporting older and disabled residents. We work with the legislative aides throughout the region to help older residents find the services they need to remain in the community. Without the additional funding, the resources of the Agency on Aging are not able to meet the demand. This leads to delays in enrolling and informing clients of the options related to care in the community. Please help add capacity to this system and support the aging network.

**Raised Bill HB 6703 *An Act Concerning the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program.*** AgingCT supports HB 6703 and its intent to make changes in the low-income home energy assistance program payment practices to ensure an adequate pool of fuel vendors and assistance meets the needs of low-income households. Older adults on a fixed income and vulnerable low-income adults are at the highest risk of heat and energy insecurity. This is compounded by inflation and the limited number of fuel vendors willing to serve individuals in the program. The financial assistance does not solve the problem if there are no vendors willing to provide the fuel.

**Raised Bill H.B. No. 6702 *An Act Concerning a Consumer's Right to Repair a Powered Wheelchair.*** AgingCT supports the recommendations from the advocates regarding a consumer's right to repair a wheelchair. The advocates have proposed revised language as follows.

- The wheelchair supplier must come out to assess the equipment within 3 business days of a call regarding a need for repair, timely repair it, and, in the case of items under warranty only, provide a loaner wheelchair starting on the 4<sup>th</sup> business day if repair is not possible by then.
- What is a "timely" repair will be determined through a broad stakeholder group.
- The Department of ADS will be responsible for promulgating regulations regarding what is "timely" repair by March 1, 2024 based on the "best interests of consumers."

- Both the consumer and the AG have the right to bring an action in court if a supplier does not comply with the timely repair requirement in the ADS regulations.
- The delivery of a custom wheelchair must include prominent written notice about the rights in #1 above.
- Manufacturers must stock parts or have a contract with another company to provide needed parts overnight, wherever feasible.
- The suppliers must have a staffed 24-hour call center for receiving calls about urgent wheelchair repair needs if they are multi-state entities.

***Raised Bill 6701 An Act Concerning Funeral Assistance for Persons of limited Income.***

AgingCT supports Raised Bill 6701. Increasing the current assistance of \$1,350 to \$1,800 would have a significant effect on limited income residents. The average funeral cost in Connecticut is over \$9,000. Legally liable relatives, especially Medicaid enrolled couples with less than \$3,200 in assets, find themselves incurring significant debt to have a loved one buried. The recommended bill language reduces the assistance by any prepaid funeral contracts, life insurance and liquid assets. This results in the assistance going to residents with no other options for the payment of burial expenses.

***Raised Bill 6612 An Act Concerning Nonprofit Health and Human Services Providers.***

AgingCT supports Raised Bill 6612. We continue to advocate for fair and equitable health & human services compensation so that nonprofit Providers have the funds to meet the needs of Connecticut's vulnerable residents. Residents who may have conditions that include, but are not limited to, intellectual, developmental, physical or mental disabilities or autism spectrum disorder greatly benefit from health & human service providers' staff who guard client health and welfare. Low pay and high caseloads challenge the workforce and put quality at risk in the care of highly vulnerable populations. Regular increases based on the CPI would help correct inadequate funding in the nonprofit, health & human service sector.

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