

Testimony in support of H7616 – Reinstating the Department of Healthy Aging

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May 17, 2022



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ATTN: Chairman Marvin Abney
Members, House Finance Committee

I want to thank the members of the House Finance Committee for this opportunity to voice our support for greater investments in our state’s human services programs, especially as they impact older Rhode Islanders. I represent the Senior Agenda Coalition of Rhode Island and am speaking in support of H7616 which would reinstate the Department of Healthy Aging. I want to thank the sponsors of this bill: Representatives Carson, Donovan, Ruggiero, McLaughlin, Cortvriend, Speakman, Ajello and Potter.

The time is long overdue for the state to re-invest in serving the needs of our aging population. A review of the demographic data underscores this growth in need. Rhode Island’s total population of 65 years and older has grown by 20% from 152,183 in 2010 to 182,486 in 2020¹, adding 30,303 people in this age group. Of this total, **those who live alone has grown by 4,817**, a 10% increase from 48,464 in 2010 individuals to a total of 53,281.

Seniors living alone will require greater outreach and services – the work of social workers, caregivers and senior centers -- to combat the negative health consequences of social isolation and loneliness. Senior Centers need the added resources to reach out to engage these elders into purposeful and supportive activity.

	2010	2020	% Change	% Change
TOTAL POPULATION	1,052,886	1,057,798	4,912	0.5%
TOTAL 65 Years+ Population	152,183	182,486	30,303	19.9%
% of Total	14%	17%		
In family households:	90,575	115,299	24,724	27.3%
In nonfamily households:	53,504	59,699	6,195	11.6%
Living Alone	48,464	53,281	4,817	9.9%
In Group Quarters	8,104	7,488	(616)	-7.6%

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 & 2010 table B09020 Relationship by Household Type of 65 years and older population

The RI Statewide Planning Program forecasts that people sixty-five and older will grow to over 240,000 by 2030. One out of every four Rhode Islanders will be in this senior age group.

This data clearly indicates that Rhode Island should be increasing plans, resources and services to meet the needs of our aging population, not cutting back.

Reinvestment in our seniors is especially important as they are increasingly being left out of the economic picture and are getting poorer in real numbers as well as relative to the rest of the state's population. According to the U.S. Census, the number of 65 years and older persons in poverty from 2010 to 2020 increased by 4.9%, from a total of 15,664 to 16,425, while RI's total number in poverty decreased by 4.5%.² The poverty rate of 75 years and older adults increased from 10.5% to 10.9%, with women in this age group having the highest poverty rate of 12.7% in 2020.

The Rhode Island state budget has not kept up with this growth in need. In FY2010, staffing totaled 31.0 FTEs in the Department of Elderly Affairs, down from 61.6 FTEs in FY2000. This dramatic staff reduction has not been corrected. FY23's proposed budget presents 31.0 FTEs – no change in 10 years, and half the staffing of 20 years ago.

This reduction and then stagnation of staffing levels for a population that has grown 20% over the past ten years and is projected to grow by another 58,000 individuals over the next ten years **makes absolutely no sense.** The neglect of the needs of our aging population presently and over the short term will undoubtedly incur huge increases in future health care costs and will diminish the quality of life for older Rhode Islanders.

Rhode Island needs to increase funding to address the current and projected needs of its older population. **Additional funding is needed for increasing the Department's staffing capacity and increasing the financial support of Senior Centers serving thousands of older Rhode Islanders every day.**

The time for corrective action is now. The FY23 budget needs to restore funds to support services for older Rhode Islanders so that we can all age with dignity and purpose in our Rhode Island community.

² U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 & 2010 tables B17001 Poverty Status in Past 12 Months by Sex & Age