

FAIRNESS MUST FIT OUR VALUES

While it's certainly true that the current epidemic puts us in uncharted waters, in one respect it's quite similar to a situation from twelve years ago---when we faced the challenge of crafting a state budget during the massive economic downturn of the Great Recession. Back then, despite a large turnout of over 600 seniors that we helped organize at the State House, state funding for vital senior services was cut drastically. These services included Meals on Wheels, senior centers, information and referral, and respite care for caregivers. Under the banner of "fairness," our elected officials slashed by fifty percent across the board services to seniors and other vulnerable groups. Making matters worse, this was followed by years of legislative and gubernatorial amnesia when these cuts were not restored despite better financial times and a rapidly growing senior population as the baby boomers began reaching age 65 in 2011. Many of their pensions plans and other retirement savings had not recovered from the recession.

Today a headline read "How to Balance a Budget with a \$400 Million Shortfall? " That number is uncertain, and may be a worst case scenario. However, some numbers are certain. During the next state budget year that begins on July 1, members of the large baby-boomer contingent begin turning 75. At that age, they will have a one in three chance of needing supportive care in the future. Data show that this epidemic is not treating all age groups equally. It's hitting seniors very hard, with over seventy-five percent of the coronavirus deaths in Rhode Island occurring among residents of nursing homes and other congregate settings.

Fairness requires our elected leaders to take these facts and outcomes into consideration when crafting the next budget. The data should help convince them not to make drastic cuts to services that help seniors age in the community whenever possible rather than in nursing homes. If our leaders take the easy way out and cut all programs equally under the guise of "fairness", their action will bring to mind a famous quote from the French poet Anatole France: "The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread."

Many agencies and causes are already making their cases of why their funding should be spared from cuts. Our case as seniors is extremely strong. If large public gatherings were not prohibited, we would have held our annual Legislative Leaders Forum by now and hundreds of people would have turned out to support senior programs. Since we had to cancel the event due to the pandemic, we need you to reach out to the Governor, your State Senator and State Representative and ask them to “protect homecare services for our growing population of older seniors and their caregivers.” Your voice is more powerful than you may realize, especially in an election year for the General Assembly. To contact the Governor send an e-mail to Governor@governor.ri.gov or call 222-2080 and leave a message. If you don’t know who your state senator and representative are, go to www.sos.ri.gov , click on “elections and voting” and enter your address.

As many have noted, a state budget is a document that reflects our true values as a community more accurately than high-minded statements. The Senior Agenda Coalition will continue to fight hard for a system that gives us all a better chance to age in the community with dignity and independence. That is our core value. If you share that value with us, please speak up and join us in this effort.