

## WE'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE

Rhode Island faces a huge budget crisis in this fiscal year that began on July 1. The economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is the principal cause. It is also coupled with an ongoing “structural deficit” that means the state has fixed expenses that increase annually and outstrip existing revenue sources. Governor Raimondo has been candid about the situation that unless RI receives additional federal funds, major layoffs of state workers and drastic cuts to state services will be inevitable.

We have been here before. In 2008 the stock market crash and meltdown of the housing bubble and other financial institutions rocked our economy and its near-term prospects. Part of the state budget response was across-the board 50% cuts to grants for human service agencies providing essential services. Cutting all services by the same percentage, regardless of demographics or need, was framed by state officials as being “fair and equitable.” Essential senior services were hit hard. All 23 information specialists at senior centers, people vital to helping seniors understand homecare options, were eliminated. Meals on Wheels had to establish a waiting list that grew to over 200, and by the time many seniors became eligible they were stuck in nursing homes or had passed away. Medicaid reimbursement rates to homecare agencies were frozen. Worst of all, despite an improving economy and a growing senior population, almost all of these cuts remained in place six years later.

Right now Rhode Island is headed down the same path. The state’s Office of Healthy Aging has been required to submit a proposed budget with 40% cuts to Meals on Wheels, senior centers, and respite care for caregivers among other

services. It's a fair assumption that a host of other Medicaid-funded senior services also face major cuts as well.

So what's different now than in 2008? A lot: 1) The pandemic's impact has not been "fair and equitable". It has hit seniors and their caregivers much harder than the rest of the population, and it is far from over. 2) It has exposed the vulnerability of nursing homes, and even the Governor has asked why we have so many seniors in nursing homes compared to other states? Two reasons are a fragmented homecare system with an underpaid workforce and a powerful nursing home lobby. 3) Our senior population has grown significantly, from 152,000 in 2010 to an estimated 180,000 in 2020. Most significantly, in 2021 the age wave of "baby boomers" start turning 75, with odds of 1 in 2 they will need some services in their lifetime.

We need the Governor and our General Assembly leaders to recognize that "across the board" budget cuts to all human services are neither equitable nor wise. We urge them to protect essential services for our most vulnerable seniors: senior centers, Meals on Wheels, respite care for caregivers, and the no-fare bus passes. All of these help seniors delay or avoid ending up in a nursing home.

You can help make a difference. Please call the Governor (222-2080), President of the Senate (222-6655) and Speaker of the House (222-2466) and leave a message: "Protect Senior Services." Please do it now---every call is logged.

**William F. Flynn, Jr. MSW**  
**Executive Director**

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