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## OUR TURN

# Seniors at risk in R.I. budget crisis

By William F. Flynn Jr. and Jack Reinholt

Rhode Island faces a looming budget crisis in the fiscal year that began on July 1. Governor Raimondo has been candid about the situation, warning that unless Rhode Island receives additional federal funds, layoffs of state workers and drastic cuts to state services will be among the inevitable results.

We have been here before. In 2008, the stock market crash, housing bubble and meltdown of major financial institutions rocked our state's economy. Part of Rhode Island's response was across-the-board budget cuts to all community services grants for essential services provided by nonprofit agencies. (These were not the controversial "legislative grants.") All grants were cut by the same 50%, without regard to the needs or demographics of the populations they served. The governor and legislative leaders framed their actions as being fair, equitable and sharing the burden.

Essential services for seniors were hit hard. Meals on Wheels had to establish a waiting list that grew to 180. By the time seniors on the list became eligible, a number of them had passed away or had become stuck in nursing homes. All funding for information specialists at 23 senior centers was eliminated. These staff helped seniors understand their options for homecare, health insurance and other vital supports. Medicaid reimbursement rates to homecare agencies were frozen. Six years later, despite an improving economy and a rapidly growing senior population, many of these cuts remained in place.

We are very concerned that Rhode Island is heading down the same path as in 2008. For example, the state's Office of Healthy Aging was required to submit a proposed budget with 50% cuts to Meals on Wheels, senior centers and respite care for caregivers. It's a reasonable assumption that funding for a host of other Medicaid-funded senior services, including home and community-based care, will end up on the chopping block. The end result would put many vulnerable seniors at risk.

We believe that across-the-board reductions in services at this time would be more disastrous for seniors than any other population. Any cuts should be data-driven, because the pandemic has hit seniors the hardest. Rhode Island has the fourth-highest state rate of nursing home deaths per capita in the country. Seniors have been more likely to be hospitalized and to end up in ICUs. In addition, while we lack data on this, anecdotally we know that many seniors in nursing homes have been hit especially hard by lengthy isolation from their families and friends. Isolation is the leading social determinant of health for seniors.

Our senior population (age 65+) is growing rapidly, from 152,000 in 2010 to an estimated 180,000 in 2020. In 2021, an age wave of baby boomers begins turning 75, when they face odds of 1 in 2 that they will need some services in their lifetime. These are all factors that should be taken into account when cutting services. Cutting Medicaid-funded homecare at this time will almost surely result in waiting lists and push more seniors into costlier nursing home services that are an entitlement under Medicaid.

The governor and General Assembly must recognize that equal across-the-board budget cuts to all human services are neither equitable in terms of need nor wise based on their established goal of enabling more seniors to age in the community. We urge them to protect essential services — senior centers, Meals on Wheels, respite care for caregivers, and no-fare bus passes — for our most vulnerable seniors.

We ask concerned Rhode Islanders to call the offices of the governor (401-222-2080), the president of the Senate (401-222-6655) and the speaker of the House (401-222-2466) and ask them to protect vital senior services in the revised budget.

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