

March 29, 2022

TO: The Honorable Alex Marszalkowski, Chair
Members, House Finance Subcommittee on Human Services

FROM: Maureen Maigret, Chair
Aging in Community Subcommittee, Long Term Care Coordinating Council
Senior Agenda Coalition Policy Advisor

RE: OFFICE OF HEALTHY AGING FY2023 BUDGET

As a former Director of the Department of Elderly Affairs, Chair of the Aging in Community Subcommittee and Policy Advisor to the Senior Agenda Coalition, I write to express my concern about the serious underfunding of the Office of Healthy Aging at a time when our older population will experience significant growth over the next two decades.

The Office of Healthy Aging started out as a Department of Elderly Affairs in 1977. In its purpose statement it reads: “That upgrading and maintenance of services and programs pertaining to our elderly citizens deserves priority consideration as a means of preventing ineffective responses to their health, safety and welfare needs.” (RIGL: 42-66-1(3.)

In its list of duties, it called for the department to be “the principal agency of the state to mobilize the human, physical, and financial resources available to plan, develop, and implement innovative programs to ensure the dignity and independence of elderly persons, including the planning, development, and implementation of a home- and long-term-care program for the elderly in the communities of the state.”

In 2011, the department was changed to a Division in the Department of Human Services; its name was changed to the Office of Healthy Aging (OHA) in 2019. Since its creation, additional duties have been added to its responsibilities. The older population of Rhode Islanders has been steadily increasing going from 14% of the population in 2000 (152,000)¹ to 18% (187,155) in 2019² and is projected to reach 21% in less than a decade. Regrettably, state resources in terms of both funding and personnel have not kept pace with this growth. For example, when I left the department in 1994 we had 60 FTE’s; now there are 31.

Investing additional state dollars to strengthen the Office of Healthy Aging and the work of its community partners is a smart investment for taxpayers. OHA programs and services offered through OHA keep older persons healthier longer and able to live in their own homes and the community without resorting to spending down to Medicaid’s strict \$4,000 resource allowance and resorting to expensive residential placement.

At the very least, I urge you to increase the line item in the OHA FY2023 budget from \$1million for Senior Services Support to \$1.9 million to provide \$10/person age 65 and over to each community to support local senior centers and senior programs. Such an allocation of resources was called for in bills submitted by Representative Ruggiero and Senator DiPalma in 2018 (S2198&H7098.) It is time to make this type of investment as a beginning toward providing OHA with the resources needed to address our growing older population’s needs, to help them to thrive in the community and to show them you value their contributions over the years to the social and economic fabric of our great state.

Thank you for your continued support of our older population and for consideration of this request.

1. RI State Plan on Aging, October 2007-September 2011
2. US Census Table S0103 RI Population 65 years and over