

## THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

Although I have written several times about how we use storytelling as a means to learn about issues related to aging in community, I was recently struck by how it can also change one's perception about another person. The Senior Agenda Coalition held our third annual Legislative Leaders Forum on March 5. Before a large audience we asked Senator Dominick Ruggerio, President of the RI Senate, and Representative Joseph Shekarchi, the House Majority Leader (representing the Speaker of the House) to respond to our six top priority legislation and budget requests for this session. We had shared these with them in advance.

In priority order, these requests were: 1) Continued funding of the No-Fare RIPTA Bus Pass Program serving 18,000 low-income seniors and persons living with disabilities; 2) Funding for an Independent Provider (IP) homecare option under Medicaid. This would create a registry of qualified and vetted care individuals whom recipients could hire and supervise directly; 3) Expanding eligibility to more people for a "Co-Pay" homecare program where individuals and the state would share the costs; 4) \$185,000 in funding for respite care for seniors' volunteer caregivers; 5) Elevating the status of the RI Division of Elderly Affairs to an "office" reporting directly to the Governor; and 6) Increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates for agencies providing homecare.

We were very pleased that this year Governor Raimondo has included funding for all of these requests, except respite care, in her FY 2020 budget that is now before the General Assembly. As a legislator once told us, "it's easier to vote for something already in the proposed budget than to vote to add something." The Senate President and House Majority Leader spoke very positively in support of all our requests that were already in the budget. The Forum concluded with questions from the audience. Several questioners asked about funding for other senior programs. The leaders repeated the phrases, "tough budget year" and "structural deficit," while reminding us that our requests needed to be balanced with other needs.

The final audience question, however, was a game-changer: "What do you think your own old age and retirement will be like?" One of the leaders told a moving story about his family history of aging: a grandfather who lived until age 93, but a mother who had died very young due to diabetes---an illness that he shared. He spoke about his efforts to live a healthy lifestyle in order to reach old age. Behind these political requests are deeply personal stories that we all share about trying to "age in the community" for as long as possible. In sharing his concerns with the audience, he sounded much less like a politician and more like the many other people whose stories we have heard. I could feel the audience changing their opinion of him. His story made the point that "the personal is political." Aging is a very personal experience that we all share, but with challenges that we must address as a community through the political process.