

Senate Testimony

May 1, 2017

Pennsylvania Council on Aging

Out of an unfilled need for a distinct voice for and recognition of the growing needs of a growing elderly population, the Older Americans Act was passed in 1965. From that, the Pennsylvania Council on Aging was created in 1973. Through positive and decisive action by the General Assembly, the Pennsylvania Department of Aging was formed in 1978 in response to that advocacy.

Prior to the creation of the Pennsylvania Department of Aging, Aging services in Pennsylvania were under the aegis of the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (formerly the Department of Public Welfare). As such, aging advocates in that era contended that a focus on the expanding demographics of this elderly population was lost in the much larger Department of Human Services which also had (and still has) responsibilities for a myriad of other policies and programs serving the needs of various populations. Those advocates vigorously petitioned the Governor and the General Assembly for the creation of a new Cabinet level department, one that would have a distinct representation for the elderly and their families in the Commonwealth, without its voice being filtered or diluted through a parent or umbrella entity.

Unarguably, the subsequent creation of the Pennsylvania Department of Aging enabled a heightened awareness of this distinct population, their rapidly growing proportions, and their unique needs and contributions. Likewise, through the creation of this new Department, the expanded visibility and transparency afforded to the General Assembly facilitated the significant expansion of aging services and programs, especially for those in greatest social and economic

need. Remarkably, unlike other service populations, aging services had little demand on the state treasury due to the availability and designation of state Lottery resources coupled with federal Older American Act funds.

From the early 1980's and for the next three decades, the Department of Aging built upon a network of case-management services through Area Agencies on Aging at the county level. This enabled the aging network to effectively assess the individual needs of older persons seeking home and community based services, as well as facilitating the establishment of a sophisticated and effective older adult protective services system for elderly experiencing situations of abuse, neglect, exploitation and abandonment. And as the Commonwealth secured and expanded the Medicaid Home and Community-Based Services waiver program, Pennsylvania Department of Aging played a key responsibility, facilitating the State to furnish an array of home and community-based services that assist Medicaid beneficiaries to live in the community and avoid institutionalization. This enabled more persons to receive care at home at significantly less cost to the State.

The current proposal before the General Assembly flies in the face of this original, highly successful, effort. The new department would consolidate four existing departments, creating a body of profound size and certainly much larger than the earlier Department of Public Welfare of 40 years ago. The current Secretary of Aging, who now has direct access to the Governor, would become one of 10 Deputy Secretaries, each of whom would then answer to the Secretary of the new Department. Only the new Secretary would have access to the Governor, and would have to try to adequately represent the needs and interests of the 10 Deputies and their respective populations.

Lost forever would be the direct and distinct representation to the Governor, the state legislature and the millions of Pennsylvanians the Department of Aging has served. Lost forever would be the benefits to the Governor, the state legislature and our citizens which that direct and distinct representation has provided. Lost most assuredly, in this new bureaucratic maze, would be the direct review, oversight and transparency now available to the Legislature and stakeholders. The perceived value of a "one-stop shop" for seniors ignores their need for a single department focused solely on them. The size of Pennsylvania's aging population is expected to grow exponentially in the next 25 years with a 65 percent increase in those aged 70 and older. Today, there are more than 1.2 million Pennsylvania's over 65 years of age; a population that will be potentially depending on senior programs.

We believe that the inclusion of the Pennsylvania Department of Aging in such a consolidation will dilute the role of the Department to see our seniors as more than merely "numbers served," but rather as resources to our Commonwealth, ready and available to help provide many of the home and community supports that will be absolutely vital to helping our more vulnerable aging neighbors maintain their independence and choice to age in place as long as possible.

While the proposed consolidation suggests significant cost savings will be gained by including the Pennsylvania Department of Aging in the configuration, it challenges us to understand how. Funding for the Pennsylvania Department of Aging does not come from the state treasury, but from the state Lottery and federal funds by way of the Older Americans Act. The funding is 78 percent from the Lottery and 22 percent from federal fund, taking nothing from the state. Further, Pennsylvania Department of Aging has maintained the significant expansion and delivery of services while operating as one of the smallest Cabinet level departments in

Pennsylvania. Questionable also, is how this proposed legislative repeal and upheaval and departmental consolidation is necessary for savings in state expenditures for the various pharmaceutical benefits the state provides. Surely that can be separately addressed through other methods while preserving the state's well delivered and respected PACE and PACENET programs.

If the need for a separate Department of Aging was convincingly determined in the 1970's, how much more that need should exist today and into the future with an exploding elderly population. All projections confirm that the numbers of retiring Baby Boomers are already having a profound shift on the demographics of our state, and will have even more so over the next 20 years. This alone should demand an even more pronounced and distinct focus on the service needs and challenges we will face. The need for a singularly-focused Pennsylvania Department of Aging addressing those needs is more important than it has ever been. A Pennsylvania Department of Aging with such a focus demonstrates that Pennsylvania STILL places the highest priority on it's senior citizens.

Thank you for your time, consideration and work in regarding this proposal.

Estella Hyde, Chair

Pennsylvania Council on Aging

