



Building a Safe Harbor for Vermont Elders through Advocacy and Education

COVE Testimony to House & Senate Appropriations Committees on FY '18 Budget - February 16, 2017

Good evening. My name is Gini Milkey and I am here as the Executive Director of the Community of Vermont Elders. I would like to address two important issues in the FY 18 budget and appreciate very much the opportunity to do so.

First, we would note that the Governor's FY '18 budget contains no state funds for the LIHEAP program, an essential program that helps keep Vermonters warm and safe. We would encourage the committee to go back to the practice from a few years ago in which the State's LIHEAP portion was included in the base budget. That would provide certainty for those elders and vulnerable Vermonters who depend on this important funding. We would encourage you to ensure that LIHEAP recipients maintain at least the same level of purchasing power, or greater, as they had last year.

- *Last year 41% of the 26,812 households receiving seasonal fuel assistance benefits had at least one member 60 or older (up from 29% in the prior year). 33% had at least one member receiving permanent disability benefits, and 20% had at least one member under the age of 6. 94% of the households had at least one member in any of those three categories. (Those numbers are from Vermont's Fuel & Utility Assistance Office)*

Second, we would ask you to provide full funding for the Choices for Care program as follows:

1. Additional reinvestments into Home and Community Based Services (HCBS), including reinvestment of the approximately \$2 million in savings generated by the underutilization of nursing homes. That underutilization indicates that Choices for Care is working, and reinvesting more funds in it will support more services for more elders in their homes and the community.
2. Statutory parity regarding annual funding increases for nursing homes and Home and Community Based Services. While COVE supports the annual increase for nursing homes, there needs to be parallel statutory language requiring an annual

increase for HCBS. It is important to remember that Choices for Care was a program for Medicaid long term care services conceived to equalize the entitlement to home and community based services with that of nursing home care.

3. Utilization of CFC funds for home-delivered meals, with no reductions in other CFC services.
4. One other important issue that continues to be a problem for the CFC program is delays in financial eligibility determinations made formerly by DCF, now by DVHA. While the legislature has directed reports on the topic, we have yet to see any tangible steps to reduce waiting times. As a result, Vermonters awaiting eligibility determinations are frequently forced to seek more expensive care in institutional settings or hospitals. That is neither economically prudent nor reflective of the desire of Vermonters to age in their communities.

We appreciate the questions committee members have already raised on this issue, and we encourage you to seek further explanation and answers to this vexing problem. There was a successful pilot program with two Area Agencies on Aging that did reduce wait times, but it was not re-funded. Funding to support that effort statewide would help to alleviate the delays, but there also need to be other changes to speed up the financial part of the determinations. Presumptive eligibility, as I am told is the policy for nursing home eligibility determinations, would be one option to consider.

Thank you for your consideration of these important issues impacting elders across Vermont. If you would like any further information from COVE, my contact information is on the written testimony provided electronically for your website.