

## Older Vermonters Act Testimony to House Human Services Committee

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Thank you, Representatives serving on the House Human Services Committee, and others present, for receiving testimony from service providers and participants as you consider H.611 legislation for an Older Vermonters Act. I am pleased to see this bill making progress, along with the continuity of the Older Vermonters Caucus that meets Thursdays at noon this session.

My name is Janna Clar, and I work for the City of Montpelier as Director at the Montpelier Senior Activity Center. I served on the Older Vermonters Act Workgroup that made recommendations for H.611. As I was in the workgroup, I am here today representing many of my colleagues who work at the dozens of senior centers and meal sites around the state. We established the Vermont Association of Senior Centers and Meal Providers (VASCAMP) about five years ago with the mission: to provide senior center and meal provider advocacy on a statewide level, promote the growth and quality of all centers, and strengthen the professional skills of their staff and volunteers.

VASCAMP has no staff, budget or office. It does have a steering committee of members committed to continuing our advocacy and building on professional development and networking opportunities we have created in recent years with some great support by DAIL, including most recently from Angela Smith-Dieng who has been a great advocate. We have also had several opportunities to work with Janet Hunt of V4A and the AAA directors, though there is inconsistency in how that looks around the state.

Senior centers are not part of the DAIL funding stream, and if the Older Vermonters Bill ended up being limited to supporting services funded or administered by DAIL, then senior centers would be among the vast network of vital community-based services not adequately included in the important broad-based work going forward. We all rely on a strong system of interconnectedness, as individuals and as organizations, whether private or public.

Vermont's senior centers are on the *front lines* of supporting socialization and engagement and preventing isolation. They are essential in the state's effort to support healthy aging and prevent or delay institutionalization. They are the ones who provide meals, activities and lifelong learning opportunities for little or no cost to participants. These include classes, health clinics, trips, educational initiatives, multigenerational initiatives, technology training, and so much more. Movement classes are among the most important services offered. Senior centers play key roles and are essential, in fact, for successful outcomes for the State of Vermont's Plan on Aging, as they are also the sites for most senior nutrition programs including

production and distribution of congregate meals and home delivered Meals on Wheels. Additionally, many of the State's Fall Prevention efforts rely on senior center located and managed programs such as Tai Chi for Fall Prevention and Arthritis and Bone Builders strength training and exercise classes.

Many people are surprised to learn--and so we are compelled to raise awareness-- that Vermont's senior centers receive no state funding, or that funding they receive from their local communities is inadequate. While centers do receive federal Older Americans Act funded reimbursements, through AAA contracts, that cover a *portion* of senior meal costs (only a third of the actual meal cost at some sites, and some meals are totally unfunded), all centers struggle to raise money to maintain and meet the demands of their nutrition programs and other services offered. This includes meeting the expenses of staffing, facilities, insurances, and more.

Capacity and sustainability of senior centers and meal sites--especially with growth in older adult population and demand--is stretched. Unlike the Area Agencies on Aging, there is no state or federal funding that goes directly to senior centers or meal sites for operations or administration, and most rely on small, often unpaid or underpaid personnel, to fundraise to meet operational expenses. 65% of senior centers serve between three and ten towns, and 25% serve over 15 towns. With an average budget less than \$100,000, many senior centers are hindered in their ability to reach more people and provide more services. We have evidence that those centers who are better staffed and funded by their local communities and skilled fundraising efforts do more and serve more – including the examples of Thompson Center in Woodstock and Montpelier Senior Activity Center. Only four centers in the state are municipal departments, most are tiny non-profits, and many have staff who will be retiring in coming years without succession plans or adequate budgets to attract skilled workers. Indeed, some are staffed entirely by volunteers.

For Vermont's senior centers to thrive into the future and continue to help Vermont meet the goals of its State Plan on Aging, senior centers and meal sites need to transform and evolve, but they cannot do this alone. They need more support to build capacity, so our ultimate goal is to have senior centers receive better recognition and additional funding support for the vital and valuable role they play in supporting healthy aging, keeping people in their homes and reducing social isolation. More work remains to be done at a state level to understand and support the needs of senior centers and meal sites.

Please pass the Older Vermonters Bill, as it includes so much we need to be thinking about and addressing. And, please be sure to include in it the comprehensive network of community-based services like senior centers that are vital to Older Vermonters and to successful outcomes for DAAL, the AAAs and the State Plan on Aging. The Older Americans Act gives great recognition to the importance of senior centers and other community sites. If H.611 only supports the work of DAAL and the AAAs, it will miss the mark on hundreds of community based services like senior centers. We all strengthen each other and are making great progress

in serving older Vermonters, and more remains to be done! Please ensure the Older Vermonters Act reflects that well!