



Empowering Older Vermonters Through Advocacy and Education

August 26, 2020

My name is Ruby Baker and I am the Executive Director of Community of Vermont Elders. COVE is a grassroots and membership based organization and has been advocating for the rights of older Vermonters since 1984.

Thank you for making this bill a priority during this unusual session. We know there are many priorities weighing on this committee, and we are grateful for your commitment to Vermonter Elders.

About H.611, the Older Vermonters Act: we believe this bill will improve the quality of life for Vermont elders by increasing safety, security, and self-determination.

This bill is the result of much collaboration. Many stakeholders and older Vermonters have weighed in throughout this process. First the Older Vermonters Act Working Group and then through conversation and suggestions offered on this bill during its draft stages in the House. Vermonters opinions and experiences have been sought and heard. Thank you.

There are several areas of H.611 that I want to highlight some areas where COVE supports change or sees specific strengths in this bill:

First: In the House, we supported the original language in the bill which included a path to secure appropriations that would begin to build financial parity and stability for our Home- and Community-Based services that are historically underfunded. Unfortunately, this language was replaced with a study. We do not think we need another study. COVE supports the reinsertion of the original rate setting language.

In light of COVID, we are given the opportunity to see just how fragile our Long Term Care system is. As we respond and repair our HCBS system, we must fortify our programs so they can be responsive and flexible, whether in response to a global crisis or to the realities of a changing world. We must ensure that our providers have the resources they need to compete in the marketplace for employees, that they can remain up to date on training and safety regulations, and that their facilities are kept to the level necessary to provide the best care. Without recognition of the true cost of doing business, we can never hope to have a robust and coordinated system of services and supports that has the capacity to address the needs of our growing older population. We must invest in our service providers and guarantee stability of funding for them or we will continue to see closures in some of our most important care sectors.

The need for funding goes beyond HCBS as defined here. Senior Centers are critical and have been neglected. They have done incredible work to expand their Meals on Wheels offerings in the face of reduced volunteers, limited financial increases, and increased health and safety requirements.

They have risen to the challenge in creative and powerful ways. The Older Vermonters Working Group spent a fair amount of time trying to identify and address the funding disconnect that Senior Centers face across the state. While they are a vital part of the health and wellness of older Vermonters, they are not recognized through any state funding mechanism. Somehow, we need to acknowledge the vital role of our senior centers and establish some financial stability for this statewide network.

Second: the bill highlights the protections that older Vermonters need and deserve. COVE supports a stronger stance on the need for coordinated systems of protection for older people. Here we have an opportunity to set expectations for oversight and coordination among Adult Protective Services, Licensing and Protection, law enforcement, victim services, and state attorneys. The network of protective services extends far beyond APS and must be strengthened. Vermont has one of the oldest APS statutes and as such is working in extraordinary times with outdated guidelines. At a time when many older adults are isolated and cut off from their normal supports and services, a robustly functioning and comprehensive system of protections is vital to ensuring the safety of our most vulnerable older people.

Third: the bill recognizes that while self-determination, safety and protection may occasionally be at odds, they are equal partners in granting the essential right to grow old with dignity. This sets the tone for what aging might be like as Vermont steps forward into this new demographic reality.

Fourth: section 3 begins to explore the idea of a Master Plan on Aging, or as it is called here: Vermont Action Plan for Aging Well. During COVID, and even long before, older Vermonters have been the victims of benevolent, negligent, and hostile ageism. The things we do now (travel, work, sing, hike, raise children) may very well be the same things we are doing when we are 70, 80, or 100. And the systems that support us now (Agency of Transportation, Department of Fish and Wildlife, Department of Health Access, the Department of Public Safety, or any other office in state government) are the same ones that will be supporting us as we age. As we grow older we do not transfer all of our needs to the Department of Disability, Aging, and Independent Living. We remain unique and diverse individuals with a broad range of needs. Older adults should be considered as part of the planning in all agencies, departments, and divisions, instead of relegated to one small department. A statewide plan that establishes a thoughtful, integrated approach to aging in Vermont could do just that. **This section is the next evolution of aging policy in Vermont and COVE strongly supports it.**

In closing, we ask that you help Vermont to once again become a leader for Vermont elders. We must improve safety, security, and increase self-determination for older adults. We must assess and prepare for shifting demographics that are already a reality here in Vermont. And we must rebuild in a way that lifts up those who are vulnerable, disadvantaged, or at risk.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today, and please don't hesitate to call on COVE if you have further questions or concerns relating to older Vermonters or this bill.