

Older Vermonters Act Testimony to Senate Health and Welfare Committee

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Thank you for providing this opportunity for receiving testimony from aging service providers as you consider H.611: legislation for an Older Vermonters Act.

My name is Deanna Jones, and I have worked as the Executive Director of The Thompson Senior Center in Woodstock for the past 10 years and serve as the Co-Chair of the Vermont Association of Senior Centers and Meal Providers (VASCAMP) with Janna Clar from the Montpelier Senior Activity Center. I am here today representing the dozens of senior centers and meal sites around the state. The mission of VASCAMP is 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 lobbyist. It does have a dedicated volunteer steering committee, with members from around the state who are committed to continuing our advocacy and building on the networking opportunities and best practices we have created in recent years, with some great support from Angela Smith-Dieng at DAIL and Ruby Baker from COVE. The Covid shutdown has given us further momentum in gaining more engaged members from around the state as we work to shine a spotlight on the critical work of senior centers and meal sites as essential services.

VASCAMP asks that you support H.611. In your consideration of this bill, we would like to see language that provides a pathway for senior centers to be considered, along with all of the other health and wellness services for older adults, for state funding and regular increases.

Senior centers are not directly part of the DAIL funding stream. People are often surprised, as we are the ones making and distributing Meals on Wheels, hosting exercise, and a myriad of other services, many of which are defined in H.611. Many of us subcontract with Area Agencies on Aging for our nutrition services and some for limited transportation. Senior centers and meal providers are absolutely essential to a Vermont where older adults can age with dignity, and we appreciate the recognition of having the senior center voice included in the future planning for the state of aging in Vermont as written in the bill.

With the enormous surge in home delivered meals on wheels, the transition of congregate dining to curbside meals, friendly calls & buddy programs, grocery delivery, and many other creative ways that senior centers pivoted and quickly served our newly homebound older population beginning in March, it is more evident now than ever before that Vermont's senior centers are on the *front lines* and are absolutely essential in the state's effort to support healthy aging. Senior centers provide meals, activities, Tai Chi for fall prevention, exercise for wellness, and lifelong learning opportunities for little or no cost to participants. We provide socialization and engagement programs that help

prevent isolation and have continued providing these programs virtually and in tents when our buildings were closed.

Many people are also surprised to learn--and so we are compelled to raise awareness-- that Vermont's senior centers receive no state funding. While centers do receive federal Older Americans Act funded reimbursements, through AAA contracts for senior meals, these cover only a *portion* of 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, in normal times and even more so now. This includes meeting the expenses of staffing, facilities, insurances, and more. And, although OAA Title IIIB funding is intended for things beyond nutrition like fall prevention, hosting tax clinics, and socialization opportunities, senior centers are not receiving funding for these activities and must subsidize the cost of those programs with limited budgets and staffing. 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.

In Vermont, 65% of senior centers serve between three and ten towns, and 25% serve over 15 towns. With an average annual 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. Only four centers in the state are municipal departments, most are small non-profits, and many have staff who will be retiring in coming years without succession plans or adequate budgets to attract skilled workers. Recently one of our thriving senior centers lost an excellent staff member due to the inability to provide health insurance and more hours, even though the additional staff hours are greatly needed. Capacity and sustainability of senior centers and meal sites--especially with growth in older adult population--is stretched. We appreciate that conversations have recently started about how these important services are provided and funded. And, we hope that a better understanding our situation and environment lends support for the need of this legislation.

For Vermont's senior centers to thrive into the future and continue to help Vermont meet the goals of its State Plan on Aging, the priorities laid out in H.611, and the inevitable needs that will be part of the Master Plan on Aging, senior centers and meal sites must transform and evolve, but we cannot do this alone. Senior centers need to build capacity, so our ultimate goals are to have senior centers receive better recognition for the work we do and additional funding support from the state and our partners to acknowledge the vital and valuable role we play in supporting healthy aging, keeping seniors living at home, and reducing social isolation. More work remains to be done in our state to understand and support the needs of senior centers and meal sites and connect all of the aging services to maximize our collective impact.

As an excellent first step in coordinating and strengthening all of the amazing services that do already exist for Older Vermonters, please pass the Older Vermonters Act. It includes so much we need to be thinking about and addressing.