

Testimony to the Appropriations Committee

March 3, 2021

H.B. 6439: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR

Good afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Erin Harkrader and I write in my capacity as the Director of the Senior Nutrition Program for LifeBridge Community Services in New Haven. I am also the Vice President of the Connecticut Association of Nutrition and Aging Service Providers (CANASP). I write to offer my testimony regarding the Governor's budget proposal as it concerns DSS and ADS appropriations, and to urge adoption of rate increases for meals delivered as part of DSS waiver programs such as the Connecticut Home Care Program for Elders (CHCPE). In a time where Elderly Nutrition Providers (ENPs) have continued to provide service throughout a pandemic and pivoted services to serve as many seniors as possible, it is only appropriate that reimbursement rates would increase to reflect increased costs, as well as yearly minimum wage increases that will continue to go into effect through 2023.

When COVID-19 became a part of our reality a year ago, the nine ENPs of CANASP did not miss a beat. Programs delivered shelf stable emergency meals to clients in case of a shutdown, and several providers shifted their service to serve more seniors. With few exceptions, not a single day of service was missed. When senior centers had to close their doors, our program worked with senior center leadership and staff to modify the lunch program to continue providing meals to their seniors.

The pandemic has provided other challenges for ENPs as well. Food and supply availability issues have meant that modifications had to be made to menus. Costs continue to increase. Personal protective equipment had to be purchased for staff and drivers. In September, minimum wage increased – a well-deserved increase for staff, but one that impacts every program's ability to meet their bottom-line obligations. In addition, with greater demand for service, programs have had to institute wait lists due to funding and capacity issues.

ENPs are committed to providing meals to seniors who are in need. However, every meal that is delivered has attendant costs associated: food, supplies, trucks, drivers, gas and time all go into the figures for every meal delivered. More than one ENP has found it necessary to discontinue their contract with CHCPE due to losses as the result of the low reimbursement rate. Other programs have considered doing the same. For programs with a wait list due to capacity issues, eliminating service to CHCPE clients could clear up space for homebound Title III clients who have no other resources available to them. This is certainly not a road that any of our programs want to go down, however, absent reimbursement rates that reflect cost of living increases for the programs, it may be the future.

Time and again, ENPs are told how important the work they are doing is. Unfortunately, though we may believe deeply in the work we do, and the importance to our senior population, the

reality is that those services have an associated cost, and that cost continues to increase. Without budgetary support in the form of an increased reimbursement rate for waiver programs, we risk providers being able to continue that important work. Senior nutrition programs provide a wellness check, combat social isolation, provide nutritionally balanced meals that help avert malnutrition, allow seniors to stay in their homes and prevent expensive hospital and nursing home stays. The benefits are clear and quantifiable. Please help our programs continue to do the important work that we have always done and will continue to do.

Thank you for your time and support.