

House Aging & Older Adult Services Committee
Impact of Aging Baby Boomers – Public Hearing Part I
January 30, 2008

Good Morning. My name is Gary Drapek and I am the President of the United Way of Lackawanna County. I also serve as Vice Chairman of the Board of Directors of United Way of Pennsylvania...so I am here today wearing two hats....representing my own community and representing the 84 other United Way organizations throughout our Commonwealth.

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to each of you for allowing me this opportunity to express my thoughts...but more importantly...for your outstanding work and desire to assist our Commonwealth's most vulnerable citizens...our current and future senior population.

You've heard it many times throughout today's session, but I think this simple fact bears repeating...the Baby Boomer generation... which includes many of us in this room today...is the most active, educated, and healthy generation our nation has ever known. We are living longer, working longer, active in our communities and, a fact that sometimes goes unnoticed....we are even continuing to raise children...our own or our grandchildren...well into our 50's, 60's and beyond.

As you know, Pennsylvania ranks third in the nation for its senior population at 15.2% overall. In contrast, my community of Lackawanna County is 3 points above the state average at 18.2% and well above the national average of around 13%. Estimates place this percentage to balloon in my community to over 20% of the overall population by the year 2020. Compounding this situation is the stark reality that our community's younger demographics overall is on the decline....meaning that those of "working age" are migrating out of our region.

Organizations like the United Way primarily depend on donations from those in the workforce to provide services for those who are not. The demographics tell us that, as the Baby Boomers enter retirement, many will be seeking services, yet fewer individuals will be available to support them.

In addition, United Ways across the country are experiencing a phenomenon of designated corporate giving. In other words many corporate donations are now tied directly to a certain cause or program, such as education or community development. Our pool of discretionary funds, or in United Way terms, "allocatable dollars", is dwindling. These are the funds that usually would be used to support the less known but vitally important programs, such as adult day care or in-home visitor services.

Obviously we all must do a better job in educating our citizens and corporate America on the great need that exists today and even greater need that will exist tomorrow to support aging-related programs. As a United Way, we are struggling to get this message to our constituents. A concerted educational effort on the current and future need for aging related services using the resources of the Commonwealth and other collaborative partners can only serve to enhance this effort and improve funding options for needed programs and services.

As mentioned throughout this hearing, The Baby Boomer Generation will certainly not go quietly into the night. Research indicates that most will not only remain active in their retirement years, but have a great desire to remain productive and involved. This provides an outstanding opportunity for non-profit organizations like the United Way as well as for educational institutions, businesses and corporations. What a gold mine....a vast pool of hard working, knowledgeable and energetic individuals wishing to stay involved and in many cases stay in the workforce....although possibly in a different field than that which they left.

In order to take full advantage of this gold mine, we must take a hard look at the current support services that are available. What can we do to make it more palatable and financially possible for our retirees to remain active? Job retraining programs, volunteer training services, and other support services must be enhanced to meet the particular needs of this group.

I'd like to take a moment to put a face to this issue to underscore my point.

I know of an 83-year old, incredibly active woman in my community. For 22 years she has worked at an organization that serves individuals afflicted with Alzheimer's Disease and other dementia. Many times she even provided care for her own friends and contemporaries. 12 years ago, her husband passed away, leaving no pension and a meager life insurance policy that barely covered burial costs. Her total income at that time consisted of social security and, a few hundred dollars a month from her three day a week job at the Adult Day Care Center. And believe me...she is not ready nor willing to "retire", even in her eighth decade. Her job provides a steady, needed income as well as personal fulfillment.

Two years ago, she was forced to cut-back her hours from three days per week to one day. The problem wasn't downsizing or lack of funding. You see, she was a few dollars above the income guidelines for other support services critical to her financial stability, such as PACE, Medicare Supplements, Energy Assistance and a few others.

Cutting back her hours was a painful experience for her. Not only did the weekly paycheck help her over the hump with everyday expenses like groceries and utilities, the three days of work per week gave her purpose, independence, socialization with others, and provided a needed service to people with whom she worked.

Now I must admit to you that I know this story very well... as the woman of whom I am speaking happens to be my mom. She still works her one day a week, and is receiving support services since she has reduced her other income.....but at what cost to her and to those whom she helps?

Luckily mom has a family support network surrounding her...but how many do not and how many more will be facing this same situation in the years to come.....some wanting to work.....some needing to work....desiring to give back...yet stymied by the need to obtain services that are tied to a stringent set of guidelines.

How many more individuals will be seeking out Senior Centers for socialization, exercise classes or even hot meals, only to find that they are filled to capacity...or in the case of many in our region...have not gotten an increase in funding for the past six years.

Obviously, this dilemma will not be solved today at this hearing. But it is an outstanding beginning. We have the opportunity to lay the foundation for programs and services that will enrich individuals and communities throughout our Commonwealth. But this will only happen if we work together....as no one government entity nor any single non-profit or social agency can resolve this issue alone. It is too massive and all too important.

The United Way holds a unique position in communities throughout Pennsylvania. As proven many times, we have the ability to bring together diverse groups of community leaders to sit around the table as one. We are able to accomplish this without the boundaries of political ties, special interests, faith, race or ethnic bias. We form partnerships and collaborative programs for no other reason but to solve the problem at hand.

In my own community, we have formed an outstanding partnership with the Area Agency on Aging and its director, Teresa Osbourne, and I know other United Ways have done the same in their communities. I am confident that this should and will continue in the months and years ahead.

A society is judged on how it treats those in the beginning of life and those in the so-called "Golden Years. On behalf of my United Way and the 83 others throughout our Commonwealth, I pledge our collective continued support to all those who have worked hard, raised families, served their country and served their communities in many ways but notably by supporting the generations that came before them. It is our responsibility, our duty and our obligation to ensure that the work of these individuals has not been in vain.Thank You again for this opportunity!

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