



Age-Friendly North Jersey

AN ALLIANCE OF LEADERS STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES FOR ALL AGES

November 2, 2022

Testimony of Age-Friendly North Jersey, c/o Althea Pestine-Stevens
Regarding the November 3, 2022 Human Services Virtual Budget Listening Session

Dear New Jersey Department of Human Services,

Thank you for this opportunity to offer testimony. Our Age-Friendly North Jersey alliance includes leaders from age-friendly community initiatives across Bergen, Essex, Morris, Passaic, Somerset, and Union counties, who work in partnership with each other and with other state and local partner organizations. With leadership and philanthropic support from Grotta Fund of the Jewish Community Foundation of Greater MW New Jersey and The Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation, as well as research and organizational support from The Rutgers School of Social Work, our alliance works to advance the cause of aging in community settings. Our work centers on building broad public- and private-sector coalitions to address the housing, transportation, health, social inclusion, and other challenges routinely faced by older New Jerseyans. Just this past September, we organized the first-ever Age-Friendly Virtual Fair. More than 260 government, community, business, non-profit and academic leaders shared strategies to foster more collaboration toward our mutual goal of making the Garden State a more supportive environment for older people and, in fact, residents of all ages and abilities.

As the Department of Human Services begins the task of writing a new fiscal year budget, we urge you to allocate resources toward crafting and implementing a system-wide plan for the future of aging in New Jersey.

In the view of our alliance members and based on our experiences working with NJ's oldest residents, we encourage the Department to prioritize the following:

- 1) Strengthen local and regional capacity to offer more inclusive, healthy, and age-friendly environments.
- 2) Expand the sphere and impact of the statewide Age-Friendly Advisory Council to include regular engagement with all state government departments and key decision-makers.
- 3) Rebalance the Medicaid long-term-care system away from its current reliance on institutional care by fostering innovation in the delivery of home- and-community-based services.

Strengthen local and regional capacity. Our Age-Friendly North Jersey alliance is primarily led by community leaders, elder-care service providers and residents. We speak from

experience in saying that an important first step to making our communities healthier and more hospitable to aging residents and those with disabilities is to invest in more locally informed coordination of state, county and community resources. **There are many community-driven efforts underway to build healthier, more inclusive communities, and, in our view, they are succeeding through the spirit of cooperation. What's sorely missing from these community-led movements is the state's leadership and commitment to being a catalyst for community change.** The COVID-19 pandemic spotlighted the challenges that underserved populations routinely face in accessing everything from vaccines to food to state benefits – barriers that leave too many struggling and isolated in communities that fail to reach an inclusivity ideal for New Jersey. It's imperative that New Jersey heeds those recent lessons now. The population is aging rapidly. We must strengthen the locally guided public-private systems that will better protect New Jerseyans through the next health crisis. Engaging those with boots-on-the-ground in decisions about population needs, resource delivery and communication strategies is the best way to identify and implement innovative solutions to the many transportation, housing and social service access barriers experienced by older and disabled adults.

There are many good models for improving both outreach to at-risk residents and local coordination of resources. The Inclusive Healthy Communities Grant Program is an example of a program that already exists within the Department that empowers local leaders to engage in policy, systems, and environmental change for persons with disabilities. This program can serve as a model for similar work on aging-in-community. We are encouraged that such programs can have a great reach across New Jersey's diverse communities. A good start to implementing such a model could be with the 20 communities and two counties in New Jersey that have demonstrated their commitment to improving their social, service, and built environments by achieving the AARP/WHO "age-friendly community" designation.

Our Age-Friendly North Jersey alliance strives to work together in a collaborative, forward-looking way. Our goal is to grow and strengthen our network, sharing resources and strategies with all who can benefit, including like-minded initiatives such as Dementia-Friendly, Sustainable Jersey, New Jersey Healthy Communities network, and Inclusive Healthy Communities. We urge you to focus more attention and allocation of funds into strengthening the community spokes in the wheels of our public health, human services, and social infrastructure systems.

Expand the statewide Age-Friendly Advisory Council. We are gratified at the state's formation of this council under the Governor's Executive Order, and the ongoing efforts to develop a comprehensive plan toward an Age-Friendly New Jersey. The Department's leadership in these planning efforts needs to continue. Greater representation from other divisions and state departments with more key decision-makers, as well as broader representation outside of state government, should also be included in the Advisory Council and participate in the plan development. For example, it is our understanding that there is no representative on the Council from the Division of Medical Assistance and Health Services, which leads NJ Medicaid, nor philanthropy. Older adults' lives are impacted by all departments

and agencies of government. By expanding the Council with representatives from Public Health, Transportation, Community Affairs, Labor and Workforce Development, the Division of Taxation and beyond, DHS would send a message that older adults in NJ matter to all departments and agencies with a shared commitment to making an impact. **The Age-Friendly Council can set an example of inclusion if it is empowered to create a systems-wide plan that has both input and buy-in from key decision-makers in all areas of state government.** Greater investment in the Council also would enhance its capacity to gather data and engage a greater diversity of voices in developing its “blueprint” for age-friendly communities.

Rebalancing Medicaid long-term-care spending. As we strive to achieve truly age-friendly communities, we need the state’s leadership in cultivating a long-term-care system that enables individuals to receive needed care and support in their own homes or in community-based settings. We think it’s time for the Administration to take a more active role in advancing innovative solutions, rather than trying to adapt solutions from the managed-care-led long-term-care system that just don’t work for most people. More innovative and well-regarded alternatives include Assisted Living Programs and PACE programs. However, these programs are currently available only to a limited number of people and in only a few NJ counties. Yet, these programs offer demonstrable quality and cost savings to the state. The transition to a managed care MLTSS system has not yielded the range of new community-based care options that were initially envisioned. A recent report by Justice in Aging estimates that 79 percent of MLTSS spending for older adults and people with disabilities goes to far-more expensive institutional care. Yet, time and time again, studies show that older adults want to receive care at home and in their community.

In addition, the growing workforce shortage is in danger of reducing the already-limited choices of affordable community-based care. We encourage the state to work closely with the growing number of public-and-private-sector stakeholders tackling this issue as they research and identify innovative strategies to grow the direct-care workforces and boost the number and variety of community-based care alternatives.

We also encourage the Administration to incentivize cross-sectoral and inter-departmental programs that address social determinants of health like transportation, housing, food security and social inclusion. **We need a system that enables low- and middle-income older adults to afford long-term care. This will save the state money in the long run by reducing unnecessary hospitalizations and preventing premature nursing home admissions.**

Thank you again for this opportunity and for your work on aging through the leadership of the Department of Human Services and beyond.

Sincerely,

1. Beth Abbott, Age-Friendly Ridgewood
2. Dr. Emily Balog, Occupational Therapy Doctoral Program, Rutgers University School of Health Professions

3. Mary Barchetto, Glen Rock Borough Council
4. Lisa Bontemps, Westwood for All Ages
5. Liliana Branquinho, Township of Livingston/Livingston for All Ages
6. Sheila Brogan, Age-Friendly Ridgewood
7. Renie Carniol, Grotta Fund for Senior Care at the Jewish Community Foundation of Greater MetroWest New Jersey
8. Elizabeth Davis, The Bright Side Family/Age-Friendly Teaneck
9. Colleen Diskin, Age-Friendly North Jersey/Age-Friendly Teaneck
10. Jill Dispenza, Jewish Family Service of Central NJ
11. Jacqueline Gifuni-Koutsouris, Partners for Health Foundation
12. Dr. Emily Greenfield, Rutgers University School of Social Work
13. Jacqueline Kates, Age-Friendly Teaneck
14. Alexandra Kritikos, The Bright Side Family/Age-Friendly Teaneck
15. Katherine Kuzma, NJV HUB Village/North Jersey Villages
16. Shannon Lyons, Generations for Garfield
17. Lisa MacClements, Fair Lawn for All Ages
18. Jeanne E. Martin, Meals on Wheels North Jersey
19. Dr. Althea Pestine-Stevens, Age-Friendly North Jersey/Rutgers University School of Social Work
20. Darleen Reveille, Generations for Garfield/Harpour Group LLC.
21. Cheryl Ricci-Francione, Greater NJ Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association
22. Dr. Cathy Rowe, New Jersey Advocates for Aging Well
23. Dorothy Sanders, Aging Well West Orange
24. Janet Sharma, Age-Friendly Englewood
25. Kathleen Smith, Partner for Health Foundation
26. Dr. Lauren Snedeker, Rutgers University School of Social Work
27. Barbara Sullivan, Village to Village Network
28. Marisa Tarateta, Borough of Westwood
29. Kristen Tyler, SOMA Two Towns for All Ages
30. Laura Van Dyke, Aging Well West Orange
31. Kathi L. Viola, Garfield Prevention Coalition/Generations for Garfield
32. Elester Joyce Vizzi, Age-Friendly Teaneck/The Bright Side Family
33. Jennifer Walker, Livingston for All Ages