

Senior Digest – May 2009 Column

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Themes from a Conference:

Recently I had the opportunity to attend “Aging in America 2009”, a national conference co-sponsored by the National Council on Aging and the American Society on Aging. This is the largest and most diverse conference in the country on senior issues. It was enormously stimulating and motivating, particularly for me as a “newcomer” to senior matters. Despite the recession, over 3,500 seniors and other professionals gathered for five days that offered hundreds of workshops and presentations.

Several of the conference’s major themes really caught my attention, and they will help drive the future work of the Senior Agenda Coalition. These were:

The “Silver Tsunami”: Beginning in 2011 and continuing over the next 30 years, the largest cohort of citizens the nation (and Rhode Island) has ever seen will turn 60. The vast numbers of the aging population and their longevity will increase demands on not only social services and health care systems, but housing markets, family caregivers, senior centers and countless other areas.

Civic Engagement: Perhaps the most important key to keeping seniors “aging in the community” is creating and expanding opportunities for them to be involved meaningfully in the community. Research shows that adults approaching retirement age are concerned about the future of the country and want to give back, but in new ways that make greater use of their skills and will have more impact. Numerous emerging models of civic engagement were presented at a day-long workshop: self-directed groups of volunteers who work as a team; a hospital where over 200 seniors volunteer and are integrated into departments in a variety of roles; increasing use of seniors as mentors; political activism as a growing volunteerism opportunity.

The Crisis in Caregiving: Families and friends provide over eighty percent of all caregiving for seniors and disabled persons of all ages. Studies have estimated the national value of these “free” services at over 390 billion dollars a year. Family caregivers are facing a crisis. Ill and disabled persons are discharged from institutional care “sicker and quicker”, there are few sources of consistently reliable information about available services, disease progressions, and proven methods for coping with the stress of caregiving. Increasingly, caregivers’ own health, employment, and financial status are being compromised by the demands of providing care. Fortunately there are emerging models for supporting caregivers, such as California’s Caregiver Resource Centers and a variety of Web-based networks. This is an area where Rhode Island needs a lot of improvement.

Rebalancing Long-Term Care: Driven by demographics and the high cost of residential care, many states are struggling to shift Medicaid funding to home and community-based services for seniors and disabled adults. Rhode Island has lagged badly in this area, and

as we are seeing, addressing this issue through a “global Medicaid waiver” is proving complex and challenging. The national recession has slowed the pace of rebalancing, particularly since states are finding that to rebalance requires “up front” investment in systems and expansion of home and community-based services. (On May 28 the Senior Agenda Coalition, in partnership with AARP, will sponsor a Community Forum on Rebalancing Long-Term Care: Lessons Learned from Other States. For details and to register see our Website www.senioragendari.org).

I came away from this conference with a feeling of hope. I realized that for Rhode Island to improve, we do not have to “reinvent” many of the approaches that have been field-tested in other states. I was energized by some excellent networking connections I made with professionals from other states. Our challenge, as a Coalition and a state, is to overcome our provincialism and resistance to change as we work to meet the challenge of “the silver tsunami.”