

AARP Day at the Capitol
May 20, 2010

Introduction

Good morning. I have to say—I am honored to be here speaking to you today as the guest of AARP. Just when I think of the name—AARP—it conveys a certain tradition...a tradition that is really the hallmark of advocacy in America.

Through its magazine, its mailings, its lobbying, its town halls and discussions like this one—AARP embodies a true advocacy organization...especially with its presence in health care. And I certainly recognize that.

So it gives me great pleasure to be here as the new Health Commissioner of the State of New Jersey in the presence of so many proud AARP members. Thank you to all the seniors that came today, I appreciate your efforts to engage policy leaders and promote a better quality of life for all New Jersey's seniors.

You all make this organization—its voice—stronger, louder. So thank you for that.

I want you to know that as Commissioner, I will do everything I can to ensure that seniors are treated fairly and equitably by any state policies that affect health care access...to honor the great tradition of AARP and its solemn message: that seniors are the backbone of our society that helped build it into what it is today.

It's no accident that my department is called the Department of Health and Senior Services—we are committed to the distinct health-care needs of the senior community.

We obviously live in a time of diminished resources, and I commend Governor Christie for making tough choices—and making them in a way that still preserves our ability to ensure health care access for everyone, especially seniors.

Governor Christie's Leadership

I want to thank Gov. Christie for his strong leadership for our seniors and his true understanding of the financial struggles of our seniors—especially in these trying economic times. Even in the face of an extraordinarily difficult budget, Gov. Christie made it a priority to ensure that the most vulnerable in our society—our seniors—have the same access to life-saving medications that they have always had. The Governor put our seniors first by identifying alternatives to maintain the benefits seniors currently receive under the popular PAAD and senior Gold programs.

We have the oldest and one of the most generous PAAD programs in the country. Not only has the Governor identified alternatives to maintain the program, but he has also ensured that eligibility is maintained so that the seniors who have come to rely on these important programs will be able to do so. The Governor has also demonstrated how programs like this can operate more efficiently and effectively. One of the key reasons why the Governor's budget was able to fund the Medicare Part D deductible for seniors enrolled in the PAAD and Senior Gold programs is because of all the

strides this program made to move seniors in Medicare Part D's Low Income Subsidy program this year. So on behalf of all of the seniors in this room, I want to thank Gov. Christie

I also want to tell you about a few things the Department is doing, under the leadership of the Governor—that can benefit seniors around New Jersey. Some of them you might not even know about, but they can help you remain in your community as you age.

Independence, Choice & Dignity

We have all heard the expression “Home is Where the Heart Is.” Well, for most people, home is also where family, friends, neighbors, houses of worship, fond memories and other trusted sources of comfort and support reside. It is no surprise that older adults in need of long-term care prefer to get help in their homes and communities rather than in a nursing home. And studies have shown that it is the best option if possible. Staying in community helps seniors remain engaged.

In my years working at the VA, I've seen how important it is for seniors to keep contact with loved ones. Whether it is reading, watching movies, or playing with grandchildren it is critical to remain as active as possible. Keep your life filled with youth and engagement, this will ensure you remained fulfilled as you age.

Taking Control of Your Health

Part of staying engaged is taking control of your health. Take time to speak to your doctor, find out what your care plan is and how best to protect your well-being. Your doctor, as a primary care physician, has the ability to take care of you as a whole patient and not just treat your disease. Take measures to protect your health, for instance, using a cane is better than having a hip fracture.

Another great resource that can ensure you are supported in taking care of your health is local Area Agencies on Aging. The Department supports their efforts in each of New Jersey's 21 counties. They can point you to resources in your community that can assist you in remaining independent, such transportation and mobile meals.

Although all seniors want to remain in their community, there may come a time where you need to make a longterm care plan and the Area Agencies on Aging can help you decide what setting is best for you.

Long-term Care options

In New Jersey, we've made significant progress in giving seniors options to nursing home care and in shifting the State's spending from predominantly nursing home care to a balance of nursing home and “home and community-based services”—that is, home care, adult-day care and assisted living.

Since January 2009, the Department of Health and Senior Services has used the Global Options (or “GO”) for Long Term Care program to provide a cost-effective alternative to nursing home placement. GO, the Medicaid home and community-based waiver program, was designed to meet the care needs of participants, yet control overall spending. Governor Christie has demonstrated his support for the GO program with additional funding of \$14.4 million in this year's budget.

This investment is not only wise fiscally, the average Medicaid rate for a nursing home is \$63,541 per year vs. \$17,112 for the Medicaid GO waiver, it will give a greater number of seniors access to a wider range of in-home long-term services and the ability to live in the community as long as possible with independence and dignity.

Another option the state offers for seniors to stay in the community is an innovative program called the Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly, or PACE. PACE allows elders at highest risk of nursing home placement to get a full range of services, both at home and at a PACE center, that will allow them to live safely in the community. We are about to open our third PACE site and hope to ultimately serve up to 3,000 people.

Closing

The Department will continue to focus on ensuring our residents have the best healthcare possible and that we continue to provide seniors with increased options for aging with dignity and independence.

As always, we will continue to work with AARP to ensure the voice of consumers is reflected in the work we do at the Department.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share with you some of the Department's priorities. Now I'd be happy to take any questions you may have.