

Elderly Nutrition Program Task Force

Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, August 30, 2023

10:00 AM Zoom Remote Meeting and YouTube Live

The meeting was called to order at 10:03 AM by Co-Chair, Senator Lesser.

The following task force members were present: Representative Jillian Gilchrest, Senator Matt Lesser, Maureen McIntyre, Alison Dvorak, Marie Allen Short, Lena Rodriguez, Eugene Theroux, Michelina Buchino, Sarah Leathers, Joel Sekorski, Erin Harkrader, John "JB" Marchesseault, Bill Rybczyk

Members not in attendance: None

Opening Statements & Introductions:

Co-Chair Senator Lesser made opening remarks and discussed the reason that the task force came to fruition, from what he stated was a "significant drop in federal funding" due to the pandemic and inflation, which is causing a stress on elderly nutrition programs. He explained that it would be helpful for stakeholders from across Connecticut to better inform policymakers on how to properly set up, fund, and create the best program moving forward.

Co-Chair Representative Gilchrest introduced herself as the State Representative of the 18th House District. She stated that she is interested in how to better support these programs in Connecticut.

Maureen McIntyre introduced herself to the task force. Maureen is the CEO of the North Central Area Agency on Aging.

Alison Dvorak introduced herself to the task force. Alison is the Executive Director of the Agency on Aging in Eastern Connecticut.

Marie Allen introduced herself to the task force. Marie is the Executive Director of the Southwestern CT Agency on Aging.

Lena Rodriguez introduced herself to the task force. Lena is the President of the Community Renewal Team (CRT) and a provider of nutrition services for Hartford and Middlesex counties.

Bill Rybczyk introduced himself to the task force. Bill is the President of New Opportunities, Inc., which is the senior nutrition provider for the greater Waterbury area.

Eugene Theroux introduced himself to the task force. Eugene is the Director of Nutrition Services at Thames Valley Council for Community Action (TVCCA), which provides meals to seniors throughout Eastern Connecticut.

Michelina Buchino introduced herself to the task force. Michelina is a resident of Stratford and is the "user of the program representative."

Sarah Leathers introduced herself to the task force. Sarah is the founder and CEO of Healing Meals Community Project, which is a nonprofit that serves people in a health crisis, many of whom are elderly. Healing Meals covers Hartford, Litchfield, and Middlesex counties.

Joel Sekorski introduced himself to the task force. Joel is the President of the Connecticut Association of Nutrition and Aging Service Providers (CANASP), a representative of the elderly nutrition program for northwestern Connecticut, and the senior center director and elderly service director for the City of Torrington.

Erin Harkrader introduced herself to the task force. Erin is the social service program manager at the State Unit on Aging (SUA). She oversees the elderly nutrition program from an older American act perspective.

John "JB" Marchesseault introduced himself to the task force. JB is a resident of Vernon, a senior caregiver for his mother, a participant and user of HUSKY Health, and a member of the Advisory Work Group.

Co-Chair Senator Lesser made a note to everyone that there is one vacancy on the task force and asked the attendees for recommendations.

Review of Special Act 23-17:

Co-Chair Senator Lesser read through Special Act 23-17 to determine parameters for the task force.

Discussion on the Goals for the Task Force:

Co-Chair Senator Lesser began the discussion by asking if there were things that the task force needed to focus its attention on specifically, or if anything was left out of the statute.

Joel Sekorski wanted to discuss the "compressed" timelines for reporting (usually 7-10 days).

Lena Rodriguez wanted to focus the task force's attention on the increase in the need for home delivery of meals, so much so that there's a waitlist. She asked what this program was going to look like moving forward and highlighted that the Community Renewal Team had to cut back to one meal per day (instead of two) and end the meals

on weekends program, even though the need is growing "through the roof." She concluded that while there are many miscellaneous issues, the bottom line is helping seniors.

Co-Chair Senator Lesser highlighted the fact that seniors *need* to have access to these services/resources.

Following up on what Lena had said, Maureen McIntyre stated that the task force should focus on finding more funding opportunities for meals and thought that it would be a disservice if the task force didn't do a deep dive into every single avenue that's available. However, she acknowledged that funding is always going to be a year-to-year conversation.

Co-Chair Representative Gilchrest asked about the amount and quality of the meals, how it works, and if there are any concerns in that regard.

Joel Sekorski said that there's a myriad of providers (contractors, at-home, subcontractors, etc.) that distribute meals. He highlighted that even though prices are going up, you have to make cuts in other places.

Lena Rodriguez added that even though prices have gone up, you still have to meet certain nutritional standards.

Eugene Theroux wanted to look at the timeline of payment and/or reimbursement for programs and to look at other funding streams. He asked if there are other areas that money can be siphoned off from because the bottom line is that payments have deadlines.

Michelina Buchino explained that the food is "wonderful" and that her mother also thinks so. She also said that some people have a preconceived idea of what's "good" and "bad." She appreciates the salad option that was recently developed, but there seems to be a lack of vegetable options. She specified that raw broccoli isn't good for seniors, and people just end up throwing it away. She highlighted that cafeteria-style distribution keeps food much warmer. Overall, she loves the program, and the people who work with her are "great." The program provides a boost to seniors' mental health.

Co-Chair Senator Lesser agreed with Michelina's observation on raw broccoli.

Alison Dvorak said that she worked as a dietician for the last 13 years for home deliveries. She highlighted that the program received tremendous use during the pandemic, but explained that due to rising costs, money unfortunately doesn't go too far.

Lena Rodriguez recommended establishing subcommittees to research specific issues and concerns.

Co-Chair Senator Lesser believed that there are two groups of concerns in the group: direct service providers (contractors); and overall funding of the program.

Lena Rodriguez wanted to discuss the bottom line of what the program will look like with the funding that's available right now and specified that all of these facets have to require a deeper dive.

Co-Chair Senator Lesser then discussed the six (6) parts that are statutorily required to be looked into. He suggested that the first five (5) can be put in one bucket (subcommittee), and the sixth can be put in its own bucket (subcommittee).

Bill Rybczyk believed that there should be three (3) subcommittees, divided into the future of the program, the current status of the program, and then the contracting. He highlighted that what the future looks like is a foundational piece to this.

Co-Chair Senator Lesser explained that the first 4-5 buckets could be one subcommittee. Then the contracting piece is its own bucket, followed by the future, funding streams, and making this program sustainable. Finally, chartering a future for elderly nutrition in the state. He went on to say that there will need to be chairs of each subcommittee and they need to meet on their own. He then discussed the names for each subcommittee and asked for recommendations.

Bill Rybczyk recommended calling this subcommittee the "current status of the program."

Lena Rodriguez followed up with the name recommendation being "quality programming."

Co-Chair Senator Lesser told the group to send an email to Chandra with their subcommittee preferences.

Marie Allen explained that all of the subcommittees may be influenced by the "first buckets." Most, if not all, of those issues inform the future of the program.

Bill Rybczyk said that the main thing that we need to be thinking about is the increasing demand. He also highlighted the other elements of this are the congregate programs, and the people that transitioned to home delivery programs. He concluded by saying that those elements are foundational for the future of the program.

Co-Chair Senator Lesser asked about the possibility of going from three subcommittees to two. He also recommended sending out a poll regarding the "two big buckets": making contracting easier; and how this program works as we come out of the pandemic and with rising food prices.

Michelina Buchino asked what slot as a user of the program that she was most fit for.

Co-Chair Senator Lesser told Michelina that he recommended that she join the subcommittee on the future of the program.

Joel Sekorski highlighted that we need opinions on cost, and how to get more money to get a higher quality of items.

Co-Chair Senator Lesser reiterated the consensus that most members of the group dislike broccoli.

Michelina Buchino said there aren't home delivery representatives present in the task force, and maybe there are people out there who are not part of the congregate program that can offer valuable insight. She said she would try to find those people.

Announcement of Time and Date of Next Meeting:

Co-Chair Senator Lesser discussed the next three dates and specified that each meeting will start at 10:00 AM: Wednesday, September 27th; Wednesday, October 25th; Wednesday, November 29th.

Lena Rodriguez asked if the subcommittees should meet prior to the next meeting.

Co-Chair Senator Lesser told the task force members to Chandra, the administrator of the task force, know what their preferences are for subcommittee assignments by the end of this week.

Adjournment:

Seeing no other discussion, Co-Chair Senator Lesser thanked the task force and stated that he is looking forward to the next meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 10:49 AM.

Next Meeting: Wednesday, September 30th at 10:00 AM via Zoom.