

Elderly Nutrition Program Task Force

MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, September 27, 2023

10:00 AM Zoom Remote Meeting and YouTube Live

The meeting was called to order at 10:02 AM by Co-Chair, Senator Lesser.

The following task force members were present:

Members: Representative Jillian Gilchrest, Senator Matt Lesser, Maureen McIntyre, Alison Dvorak, Marie Allen Short, Lena Rodriguez, Eugene Theroux, Michelina Buchino, Joel Sekorski, Erin Harkrader, Stan Mingione, Bill Rybczyk, Aleck Spinks

Absent were: Sarah Leathers

Guests: Jenn Proto

Remarks by the Chairs:

Co-Chair Senator Lesser made opening remarks and explained that he and Co-Chair Representative Gilchrest have been conducting a "deep dive" into the program's finances and understand how the funding works. Furthermore, he informed the task force that he had sent letters to the Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) requesting details to understand the relationship with the providers.

Representative Gilchrest explained that at the last meeting on August 30th, the task force had discussed having subcommittees, but most members wanted to serve on the subcommittees, so the task force will continue to address these issues amongst the full task force.

Approval of Minutes – August 30, 2023:

Senator Lesser asked the group if they had all received the draft of the minutes from the last meeting on August 30th. He asked for a motion to adopt the minutes, to which Joel Sekorski motioned first and Erin Harkrader seconded. He then asked if there was any discussion, to which he added that the meeting minutes were accurate. After, he called for a voice vote to approve the minutes. The meeting minutes from August 30th were approved.

Conversation and Discussion:

Senator Lesser initiated a discussion on the elderly nutrition program design. Jenn Proto of Aging and Disability Services (ADS) deferred to Erin Harkrader on a presentation of the format of the program at the next meeting.

Senator Lesser specified that it is vital to the group to discuss the Older Americans Act, the structure of the AAAs, and how they intersect with other programs that intersect with elderly nutrition programs. He asked if this would be an opportunity to hear from the providers about the program, specifically with regard to deficits, contractual elements, etc.

Michelina Buchino asked what the qualifications or criteria are for someone to participate in the program. Erin Harkrader explained that for someone to be eligible, the individual has to be 60 or older, can be the spouse of an eligible recipient, or can be an individual with a disability living in a facility where congregate meals are served. She also explained that besides the age qualification, there was no income qualification.

Senator Lesser and Erin Harkrader discussed the differences in funding between the Older Americans Act and through the State of Connecticut.

Michelina Buchino asked if "spouse" also meant to include sole caregiver, and Erin Harkrader explained that the definition of "spouse" is written in the Older Americans Act.

Lena Rodriguez asked if a spouse that's younger than 60 years old would be eligible for a congregate meal, and Erin Harkrader explained that yes, if the individual is there with their spouse that qualifies.

Lena Rodriguez explained that to qualify for home-delivered meals, you have to be 60 and over and "home-bound." Senator Lesser asked about the definition of "home-bound;" Lena Rodriguez explained that it means you can't go out shopping, are unable to cook, and have little to no access to food. Senator Lesser asked if there was someone who made that determination, and Lena Rodriguez said that it was based on an assessment. Joel Sekorski discussed those who are "nutritionally at risk," to provide those individuals with meals. Michelina Buchino asked if there was a social work connection or occupational therapy, and Lena Rodriguez explained that services were based on the assessment of the Community Action Agencies. Alison Dvorak added that

that also carries over to work with the agencies on aging and specified that "home-bound" does not mean "bed-bound."

Senator Lesser and Erin Harkrader discussed the uptake in congregate settings and home-delivered meals, as well as the funding process and formulas that service these individuals and area agencies. Erin Harkrader explained that at the beginning of every fiscal year, there is no budget, so if the federal government does not allocate any funds, then the funds are not there. Joel Sekorski added additional details to the discussion regarding federal funding, AAAs, and action agencies.

Lena Rodriguez discussed that providers are waiting on hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars. She asked Erin Harkrader what the oversight process is and what happens when AAAs "when they get stuck."

Representative Gilchrest offered that the task force examine the LIHEAP program and check with the Department of Social Services (DSS) on how they utilize those funds.

Senator Lesser introduced Aleck Spinks of DSS, a new designee, as well as Stan Mingione of the Estuary, a provider.

Marie Allen discussed further funding details, specifically agreeing with Joel Sekorski's input. She said that for the task force to take a serious look at what the issues are, the group should start by looking at the payment cadence and figure out a way to support it to get as many meals as possible to the people who require them. She explained that there are no means of testing like DSS has, so they are going off of what the senior tells them. As costs rise, both statewide and nationwide, the expenses increase and the individuals using this program are negatively impacted.

Senator Lesser initiated a discussion with Marie Allen over the lack of means testing and meal allocations throughout towns across the state. They also discussed the prospect of a needs assessment, and if/how individuals are prioritized.

Alison Dvorak and Lena Rodriguez agreed that the situation in Marie Allen's region would be similar across the state if the funding was available. When there's no funding available there has to be a mitigation plan put in place, according to Lena Rodriguez. William Rybczyk explained that programs are "custom-tailored" to the individuals and "reimbursement-based," but it sometimes feels like playing catchup.

Lena Rodriguez asked Erin Harkrader about the administrative and oversight processes that help AAAs when they're in need of funds/resources.

Michelina Buchino and Senator Lesser then discussed if there was any way that suppliers could offer more lenient/extended terms. Lena Rodriguez brought up the LIHEAP program and oil vendors/provider payout programs.

Senator Lesser and Erin Harkrader discussed why there's a considerable variation in the number of meals and/or when they're delivered, depending on what region you're located in. Erin Harkrader explained that some of it comes down to budgeting, funding allocations, the number of meals that people want, the number of meals that can be offered, how different programs target different populations and parse out the equitability piece, population sizes, rules and regulations imposed by the Older Americans Act, etc.

Senator Lesser asked if we had standard budgeting practices, and Erin Harkrader deferred to AAA. Marie Allen said that the budget package is the same throughout the state, but these programs are based on an economy of scale, meaning the larger the elderly nutrition provider, the more they can take those fixed expenses and spread them among the unit.

Senator Lesser and Marie Allen discussed the additional funding allocations in the state budget for AAAs.

Senator Lesser asked how many nutritional providers there were in Connecticut, and Erin Harkrader stated that there are 11 (11 across five AAAs). Erin Harkrader explained that two are congregate-only programs, and the rest are a mix of congregate and home-delivered.

Senator Lesser asked if bulk purchasing was a driver of inequity among providers or if there were other differences as well. Lena Rodriguez explained that buying in bulk is the most economically feasible option, but it also depends on which region you're in and delivery.

Senator Lesser asked why we wouldn't want to have just one nutritional provider in Connecticut. Erin Harkrader explained that it's a competitive bid process, as well as a complex program in general. Lena Rodriguez added that it benefits local agencies. Joel Sekorski added that the City of Torrington provides a plethora of free resources, and there would be too many pitfalls in trying to get a cheaper price by an economy of scale.

Senator Lesser discussed with the group what the state could do to streamline things to make dollars go further. Joel Sekorski explained that there is coordination among some regions, and Maureen McIntyre added that one of the most important regional differences is the ability to meet not just the nutritional needs of older adults, but their cultural preferences as well.

Lena Rodriguez asked Erin Harkrader a question on the formula, and if data is updated annually, as well as where it comes from. Erin Harkrader responded by stating that the data is updated every three or four years and that it comes from census data.

Senator Lesser thanked Maureen McIntyre for outlining the long-term challenges to these programs and summarized that the contracting process needs some reforms to ease the burden on providers, which he said sounds fair, but wondered if it would

actually save people money. He asked the group if there were other avenues that could be explored.

Michelina Buchino asked if technical schools still had culinary classes that could benefit these programs, and Senator Lesser said that this program doesn't exist anymore, but asked if there were any programs that allowed for the donation of food to these individuals in need. Erin Harkrader said that they must comport with federal guidelines and donated food gets into a "murky" area. Maureen McIntyre said there are schools in the state that do make food for individuals in need that are based on vocational training.

Maureen McIntyre agreed with Senator Lesser on the "flow of payment" being an issue that people should brainstorm solutions on, as well as how to reduce costs. She also made note that one of the areas that are being looked at, in terms of streamlining, is data entry collection, which she described as a lengthy, massive undertaking.

Lena Rodriguez agreed with Maureen McIntyre and offered to work together and with others in the group to take a deep dive into addressing these concerns.

Marie Allen added that AAAs are going to be applying for funds from the Office of Policy Management (OPM) and explained what those funds would be for.

Lena Rodriguez stated that the group should take the initial step of ironing out the entire process and seeing where there can be efficiencies created in the short term.

Senator Lesser and Lena Rodriguez further discussed streamlining reporting elements.

Senator Lesser mentioned additional funding streams and asked if there were other places to look to supplement the program. Marie Allen said that these meals are based on donations. Senator Lesser asked Marie Allen how many individuals are served by the Home Healthcare program, who said that there are 15,000 statewide, but she deferred to DSS for how many individuals actually receive meals.

Alison Dvorak added that volunteers do help to decrease labor costs, and wanted to highlight the importance of nutritional providers by abiding by the contracts that are in place right now.

Senator Lesser and Marie Allen discussed if there was consistency across the state in program administration and overhead. He asked if there were any further questions or concerns among the group members.

Senator Lesser, Lena Rodriguez, and Marie Allen then discussed next steps, as well as plans for the next meeting.

Eugene Theroux discussed the differences between the timing of the funding, and the budget itself. Senator Lesser, Eugene Theroux, and Lena Rodriguez discussed details

about the new contracts that are coming out in October, as well as contractual negotiations.

Announcement of Time and Date of Next Meeting:

Senator Lesser specified that the next meeting date would be set for Wednesday, October 25th at 10:00 AM.

Adjournment:

Seeing no other discussion, Senator Lesser asked for a motion to adjourn the task force meeting, to which Erin Harkrader motioned first, and Representative Gilchrest seconded. The meeting was adjourned at 11:30 AM.

Next Meeting: Wednesday, October 25th at 10:00 AM via Zoom.

Chandra Persaud
Task Force Administrator

Austin Hyatt
Minutes Prepared by