

Elderly Nutrition Program Task Force

MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, November 29, 2023

10:00 AM Zoom Remote Meeting and YouTube Live

The meeting was called to order at 10:06 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, Eugene Theroux, Michelina Buchino, Sarah Leathers, Joel Sekorski, Erin Estey, Stan Mingione, Bill Rybczyk

Absent were: Lena Rodriguez, Aleck Spinks

Remarks by the Chairs:

Co-Chair Senator Lesser made opening remarks and hoped that everyone had a happy Thanksgiving. He made note of scheduling and said that he wanted the meeting to mark the start of reaching a potential consensus on ways to improve the program.

Co-Chair Representative Gilchrest also hoped that everyone had a nice holiday and thanked the group for the amount of work that's been put into the conversation so far in preparation for the meeting.

Approval of Minutes – October 25, 2023:

Senator Lesser asked the group if there was a motion to approve the minutes from the last meeting on October 25th. Representative Gilchrest motioned first and Joel Sekorski seconded. Senator Lesser then asked if there was any discussion, and seeing none, he

called for a voice vote to approve the minutes. The meeting minutes from October 25th were approved.

Review of Follow-Up Questions from AAAs & ADS:

Moving on, Senator Lesser remarked that follow-up questions from AAAs were sent out and asked if everyone had received them. He then recommended that they go through them as a group. The Clerk of the Human Services Committee, Chandra Persaud, offered to share her screen. Senator Lesser then asked if the representative from the AAAs wanted to go over them, and Marie Allen offered to go through the questions and responses.

Marie read through the first question, "When on average during the fiscal year for the last 5 years (pre/post COVID) does the Area Agencies on Aging receive Title III funding from the State Unit on Aging?" and discussed the two payment scenarios that affect the timing of payment. Senator Lesser told the group that there will be time for questions following the presentation and asked her to go through the next question.

Marie discussed the second question, "Once the funds are received by the Area Agencies on Aging – what is the turn-around time in allocating and distributing the funds to the direct service providers for the same time period (5 years)?" Senator Lesser asked her to explain the third item.

Marie read through the third question and response(s), "What is the process for the Area Agencies on Aging to request grant funds from the State?"

Senator Lesser told the group that the fourth item had already been talked about, and asked Marie to discuss the fifth item, "Are there any processes that are arduous that complicate the submission of fund requests?"

Marie moved on to the rest of the questions and responses:

- "Of the total allocation of Title III funds from the Area Agencies on Aging received from the State of Connecticut, what percentage of the Title III funds are distributed to direct service providers?"
- "Who approves the RFP process that is established by the AAA?"
- "Does the State audit the AAA RFP process?"
"How are the evaluators of the RFP process of the AAA selected?"
- "What is the tool and scoring sheet that is used by the Area on Aging evaluators when reviewing and scoring the Elderly Nutrition Applications?"
- "Are the evaluators trained in the use of this tool for the purpose of reliability?"
- "Is the tool and the scoring methodology the same for all Area Agencies on Aging?"
- "Are the evaluators trained on how to apply subjectivity?"
- "What can be done differently to create efficiencies in the administrative process of the Elderly Nutrition Program?"

- "How are stakeholders engaged to inform the development of Annual Plans as it relates to Older Americans Act funding?"
- "Do you think that there is a need to engage our federal congressional delegation on the ENP program?"

Senator Lesser asked the group if there were comments or questions about the responses from the AAAs. Bill Rybczyk thanked Marie for the review of the questions and asked why additional information was required and/or if was there a time when it lined up with the minimum that's required by OAA. Marie said either two or three years ago, the State Unit on Aging created an additional eight or nine questions, as well as a new assessment, that was added to Form 5. She went on to say that the questions were difficult to answer for the people who had to fill out that form, and she asked Joel Sekorski if he had a timeline on that. Joel replied that according to his notes, it was definitely before the COVID-19 pandemic (possibly eight years ago), and echoed Marie's opinion that the questions were intrusive and redundant.

Senator Lesser called on Erin Estey, who spoke on the timing and explained that the new Form 5 went into effect on 10/1/2021. Joel Sekorski specified that while this was when it went into effect, they had been dealing with it for several years prior.

Senator Lesser then called on Representative Gilchrest, who was struck by how long it takes to get the funds out. She then asked if the 75% expended was a state or a federal requirement, to which Marie responded by explaining that it is a state requirement that's relatively new, beginning two years ago. Representative Gilchrest then asked that since that change went through, if it has caused bigger issues, and Marie responded that it has, as opposed to before.

Senator Lesser then asked if there were any additional questions, and said that he'd love to hear from Erin at ADS, who proceeded to discuss the ADS-SUA questions and responses:

- "When on average during the fiscal year (over 5 years pre/post-COVID) does the ADS-SUA receive Title III funding from the federal government?"
- "Once the funds are received by the State of CT – what has been the average time (over the last 5yrs) for allocating and distributing the funds to the Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs)?"
- "Has the 25% execution payment been issued to the Area Agencies on Aging in any of the last 5 contractual years?"
- "What are the required steps to distribute funds to the Area Agencies on Aging?"
- "How are the funds distributed to the Area Agencies on Aging?"
- "Of the total allocation of Title III funds from the federal government, what percentage of the Title III funds are distributed to Area Agencies on Aging?"
 - Senator Lesser asked that for clarification, what percentage of the overall funding is expended on food, to which Erin responded that she would be happy to get that information for Senator Lesser and didn't want to misspeak.

- "Do OAA Title III funds need to be administered through the Area Agencies on Aging?"
- "What is the State of Connecticut's role in monitoring and oversight of the Area Agencies on Aging?"
- "Are there regular program, performance, and financial monitoring performed by the State of the Area Agencies on Aging? If so, when are they done?"
- "What is the scope/process for these monitoring visits?"
- "Does the State review and approve the Area Agency on Aging procurement/RFP processes?"
- "Does the State audit the RFP process at any time?"
- "Are the Area Agencies on Aging subject to reviews by the State Contracting Standards Board?"
- "Does the State monitor the contractual relationships between the Area Agencies on Aging and their grant subcontractors?"
- "What can be done differently to create efficiencies in the administrative process of the Elderly Nutrition Program?"
- "How are stakeholders engaged to inform the development of the Annual Plan as it relates to Older Americans Act funding?"
- "Do you think that there is a need to engage our federal congressional delegation on the Elderly Nutrition Program?"

Senator Lesser followed up and asked if ADS had had a chance to review the recommendations put forth by the AAAs from a few weeks ago, to which Erin responded that she did have a chance to look at them. She explained that payment processing is a major concern and that the Deputy Commissioner is looking into it, as well as the processes going forward. She went on to say that they will be considering some of those recommendations. Senator Lesser explained the two separate sets of issues that he has seen. He then asked if we generally know what we're going to get in terms of funding, or if it changes from year-to-year. Erin responded that federal funding remains flat, but that the question would be better suited for the Office of Policy and Management (OPM). Senator Lesser then reiterated his question from earlier about how much of the overall funding goes towards the food itself.

Representative Gilchrest asked Erin about the agency history, why they moved to the 75% number, and what were the goals. Erin responded by stating that she believes it was created due to an audit finding. Representative Gilchrest thanked her, then explained that she thinks it would be helpful if they consulted with the Department of Social Services (DSS) due to LIHEAP's holding of money that they use to keep the program going, knowing that there will be a lapse until federal dollars come in.

Senator Lesser added that he appreciates that ADS is looking into those questions, and that his hope is that they can identify specific recommendations in this task force that can go to the legislature in the future. He then asked if other members of the group had questions for Erin, to which Bill Rybczyk asked about the funding formula, specifically if service levels are factored into that formula, and Erin replied that there is not. Bill then asked about the contracts that are required to go to the AAAs, and if there is some sort

of special waiver due to the COVID-19 pandemic that was given out, to which Erin responded that those were ARPA funds and were not Older Americans Act funds, meaning that there was more flexibility.

Discussion of Possible Recommendations for Next Legislative Session:

Senator Lesser then asked if Bill could present the recommendations, to which he replied that he could go through the ones from CAA that had been worked on with Lena Rodriguez. Bill then gave a presentation of the recommendations, which he explained he put into four separate areas: streamlining operations; payment processing; request for proposal process; and advocacy efforts.

Joel Sekorski then gave a presentation on recommendations, which were also grouped into four separate sections: realign state funding to precede federal fund release at minimum 80% of prior year federal contribution; increase funding to Elderly Nutrition Program (ENP), encourage the State Unit on Aging (SUA) to continue to advocate and support with the Administration for Community Living or ACL and federal government to increase Older Americans Act funding; streamline the reporting process and Form 5 in order to speed up access to contracted funds; assess the possible reform of Form 5.

Senator Lesser thanked Joel and Bill for their suggestions.

Planning December Meeting:

Senator Lesser brought up the next meeting date (Tuesday, December 19th) and said that he hoped to narrow these down to specific recommendations that there would be a consensus on moving forward. He then asked if the AAAs had questions or comments.

Marie Allen responded by stating that it was surprising how similar the recommendations were across the different categories, and that she's hopeful that there will be a consensus that will lead to substantial changes in the future. She thanked everyone and stated that she believes that they've identified common issues across the board that could lead to some positive changes.

Senator Lesser then asked Erin Estey if she had any questions for Bill or Joel on the recommendations, and she said that she did not and that she understood the recommendations that were put forth.

Michelina Buchino asked if she could have a couple minutes at the end of the discussion, which was granted by Senator Lesser.

Joel Sekorski informed the group that pre-COVID, CANASP would have joint meetings with the AAAs. He explained that more meetings had been planned, but the pandemic disrupted those communications.

Maureen McIntyre echoed what Joel had stated, with regards to enthusiastically working together. She went on to highlight how well done she felt the recommendations were because she felt that they captured what consumers have been saying and thinking. Additionally, Maureen recognizes that further exploration with DSS and with OPM would be necessary and that this follow-up be the purview of the Chairs/Legislature.

Senator Lesser then asked Michelina to weigh in on the conversation, and she thanked everyone for all of their work and expressed how grateful she was. She then discussed the quality of the food that she's received, as well as what other people have told her about it. She also discussed the problem of lack of donations and the number of senior citizens who now need the resources that are offered by the program. Senator Lesser thanked Michelina for her input and spoke on the importance of her testimony regarding the quality of food.

Alison Dvorak thanked Michelina for her remarks and referred to them as "poignant," calling her words a great source of feedback.

Senator Lesser moved on to questions regarding the decision-making process and suggested that ADS respond to each of the recommendations in preparation for the next meeting, where they will have time to review each of the recommendations and responses and hold a vote. He then asked ADS when they would be able to get those recommendations to the task force. Erin responded that she'll bring it to the attention of the rest of the team and will aim for at least a week before the next meeting. Senator Lesser then asked if anyone had any questions, if this goal was feasible, and/or if the date should be pushed back to January.

Announcement of Time and Date of Next Meeting:

Senator Lesser specified that the next meeting date would be set for Tuesday, December 19th at 10:00 AM.

Adjournment:

Seeing no other discussion, Senator Lesser adjourned the meeting at 11:28 AM.

Next Meeting: Tuesday, December 19th at 10:00 AM via Zoom.

Chandra Persaud
Task Force Administrator

Austin Hyatt
Minutes Prepared by