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Governor's 2009-10 Budget Sends Mixed Signals to Pennsylvania Seniors

Harrisburg – Pennsylvania's Senior Support Coalition today said Governor Rendell's 2009-10 state budget proposal sends mixed signals to older residents waiting for long-term living alternatives to nursing homes.

The coalition of senior advocacy organizations commended Governor Rendell for reversing a three-year trend by proposing to transfer only \$175 million from the state Lottery Fund to help balance the state's Medicaid long-term care budget. Last year's spending plan moved \$300 million from the lottery fund, and \$250 million was transferred in each of the two preceding years.

By taking less money from the Lottery Fund to meet Medicaid long-term care obligations and making prudent changes to the way the PACE programs pay for medications, the state Lottery Fund is expected to generate a 2009-10 surplus exceeding \$200 million. Unfortunately, the Governor's budget proposal does not increase allocations for lottery-funded programs that could reduce waiting lists for home and community care or provide much-needed funding for senior centers that have already cut back services.

"Our senior home and community programs have fallen behind other states and are stretched to the breaking point," said Crystal Lowe, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of Area Agencies on Aging. "Right now more than 90% of state Medicaid long-term care funding for seniors goes to nursing homes, which means we have a long way to go to reach the administration's goal of an even split between home-based and institutional care by FY 2011-12."

"The Governor's proposal means older Pennsylvanians will continue to wait for in-home healthcare, meals, personal care, transportation and other services that can mean the difference between staying at home and being forced into a nursing home," said Vicki Hoak, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Homecare Association. "We call on members of the General Assembly to use a portion of the projected \$200 million surplus in the Lottery Fund to help neglected home and community care programs serving older Pennsylvanians, something that can be accomplished without using tax dollars or impacting the state's General Fund spending plan."

(more)

Senior Support Coalition/Add One

Coalition members said they also need to see more details concerning the Governor's plan to create a new Department of Aging and Long-Term Living by combining the current Department of Aging with elements of the Department of Public Welfare.

Administration officials are advocating the new agency as a way to improve the balance between nursing home care and less expensive home and community programs preferred by seniors and save the state money in the long run.

"We are pleased the Governor recognizes the need to re-balance our long-term living system and reduce our dependence on expensive nursing home care," said AARP Pennsylvania State Director Dick Chevrefils. "We look forward to reviewing proposed legislation and working with the General Assembly and the administration to develop a long-term living system that considers both cost efficiencies and providing safe and compassionate care for our older residents."

However, any proposal to create a new Department of Aging and Long-Term Living must also include safeguards to ensure older Pennsylvanians remain the beneficiary of state lottery funds, according to coalition representatives.

"Pennsylvania's lottery law was created to provide a dedicated funding stream for programs benefiting older Pennsylvanians," said Lynn Fields Harris, President of the Pennsylvania Association of Senior Centers. "Broadening the scope of a proposed new agency must preserve and protect the lottery's ability to serve seniors in the state with the nation's third oldest population."

Pennsylvania's Senior Support Coalition includes Alzheimer's Association, AARP Pennsylvania, Center for Advocacy for the Rights & Interests of the Elderly (CARIE), PA Homecare Association (PHA), PA Adult Day Services Association (PADSA), PA Association of Area Agencies on Aging (P4A) and the PA Association of Senior Centers (PASC). Visit www.seniorsupportcoalition.net to learn more about the coalition and its members.

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