

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

FEBRUARY 4, 2005

My name is Charles Agenes and I am Director of the Area IV Agency on Aging based here in Helena and the current President of the Montana Area Agency on Aging Association, an organization that represents all ten of the Area Agencies in Montana.

Area Agencies are direct providers of a wide range of services to senior citizens in Montana. Funding through Area Agencies supports congregate meals in Senior Center, "meals on wheels" to frail elderly who are homebound, senior transportation rides to meals, healthcare or so foster grandparents can get to work, and respite care so the caregiver can get a break are some of the more commonly known services. No less important is Information & Assistance staff where seniors can get answers to most of their questions, Long Term Care Ombudsman providing a voice for residents of nursing homes and assisted living homes, Elder Abuse Prevention and Home & Community Based Waiver which allows care at home rather than in a nursing home. There are many other services too, but almost all of our efforts are intended to help our elders have long, healthy, productive and independent lives.

What happens when elderly Montanans do not receive basic help such as good nutrition, warm homes, transportation to health care etc? Fairly often they end up in nursing homes much sooner than they need to (and at a much greater cost). Some suffer from illness that could be prevented, from depression through lack of socialization, from abuse or neglect because they don't know where to seek help. Some seem to give up on living because of isolation.

Who are these senior citizens who need help? Area Agencies on Aging provide services to people of any economic status but it is primarily the poor or low-income population that seeks help. About 38 percent of our population aged 65 and over are categorized as poor or low income. Most of these people have worked hard all of their lives at middle-income jobs but their earning years were before the time of 401K's and IRA's, we all can now employ. Many of these elders are people who, through no fault of their own, have lived beyond their savings. In addition, a disproportionate share

of women are low income and it is surprising how many of them sort of get by on as little as \$600 to \$700 per month.

What more needs to be done for our seniors? A number of years ago senior programs were advised by legislators that if we could find a funding source for senior services the legislature would likely be helpful to fund these services. With that in mind we have at least twice introduced a "pop tax" and are supporting SB332 this session. But we can't rely on what all might happen to a "pop tax" in the legislature. We are asking you to fund at least \$6 million additional dollars each year to meet these critical senior services. If the "pop tax" passes that will provide the funding to meet these needs. If it doesn't pass then we will have the funding necessary to care for this growing senior population.

Funding for senior services in Montana has not kept pace with increasing costs and certainly not with the increasing number of Montanans who live past 65 and especially those living past 85. Now is the time to appropriate added money for current senior service needs.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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