

Testimony before the Senate Taxation Committee, February 2, 2005

Senator Elliott and Senators: My name is Barbara Spring. I am a PhD gerontologist and co-founder of Life's End Institute: Missoula Demonstration Project, in Missoula County.

As many of you have or will be, I have been a family caregiver. My mother came to live with me after nearly dying under the strain of caring for my Alzheimer's father for eight years. She felt very virtuous for having accomplished such a huge caregiving task nearly single-handedly. After major rest, several healthcare interventions and regular support, she was able to function semi-independently for 4 years. Then came her need for 24 hour care. When I was not home I needed help to do all of the basics: prepare her food, bath, get her dressed. She was extremely grateful for the help—each night when I managed to get her into bed and tucked away for the night, she said, "Thank you very much. I don't know what I would do without you. I love you."—and that was all I needed to keep going with the daily challenge that went on for a year and a half. We fortunately had money to hire some help, so I could continue my job and not put on the Medicaid roles. Friends made a Caring Circle of support around us that took a bit out of the burden.

Caring for our loved ones through chronic and terminal illness is one of the most important things we can do. But with the ability of modern medicine to help us live longer, it is often one of the most difficult jobs we are called upon to do—caring for our frail and chronically ill elders—24 hours a day, 7 days a week for an average of 5 years.

Caregivers need support. We are willing to work hard and dedicate our lives to the care of loved ones when we are called upon to do that. However, it undermines our social systems to have caregivers get sick or lose their jobs, because there is not adequate support for the family unit. The stress level is inversely correlated to income. Two-thirds of all caregivers are employed and 40% report that their caregiving responsibilities impact their ability to do their job well and to advance their career. On average, each caregiver is estimated to lose \$659,139 in wages over their lifetime. This makes the 5 cent pop tax very insignificant.

At Life's End Institute we believe that it takes a broad community approach to support family caregiving. Our data illustrated that community members widely recognize that aging and dying are important life stages and value caregiving as a responsibility. Both our data and national data document the stress that primary caregivers often experience. Our Area Agencies on Aging represent an ideal central community agency to maintain systems of care.

PLEASE SUPPORT SB 332 AN EXCISE TAX ON SOFT DRINKS. This is the fairest way to ease the intense burden experienced by the ever-growing number of family caregivers and their loved ones and make it possible for our elders to not be institutionalized. THANK YOU!

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