



To: Joint Fiscal Committee
From: Dolly Fleming, Executive Director of Community of Vermont Elders (COVE)
Date: August 18, 2009
Re: Proposal-FY 2010 Budget Rescissions

Thank you kindly for the opportunity to comment on the proposed budget rescissions made public earlier this month. We are well aware of the tremendous fiscal challenges and the tough decisions that are before you. We would like to comment on two specific concerns: Choices For Care (CFC) and Foodstamp Outreach and advise that you honor the original intention and laws that guided these critically needed programs. Your decisions will impact vulnerable Vermonters who rely upon policy makers to ensure the basics of food security and essential supports and services for folks clinically eligible for nursing home level of care. We are grateful for your willingness to consider our concerns and input.

Choices For Care (CFC): We all can be proud as a state to have envisioned and implemented CFC. Vermont has nationally expounded on the merits of CFC which was designed to increase flexibility and access to long term care options, save funds otherwise primarily spent on costly institutional care, and strengthen home and community based services. This is a wonderful theory and program, but here in practice in Vermont, Choices For Care is at serious risk.

It is important that we not overstate the success of CFC to the public and policy makers, lest we insulate ourselves from the serious challenges and responsibilities required to fortify, fund and make it truly effective and responsive to the needs and the original intentions of the program. COVE has been vigilantly monitoring CFC over the years and has been made aware of countless problems that will only be exacerbated if additional funding cuts are approved. Previous funding cuts, waiting lists of clinically vulnerable citizens, reduced hours of essential supports, eligibility determination denials, unnecessary and avoidable hospitalizations, inadequate reimbursements, have already eroded the integrity of this program and the service system and resulted in personal hardship and additional costs rather than true savings. It is inappropriate and fiscally imprudent to ask the vulnerable folks intended to be served by this program to bear the brunt of further service erosion and the state to ignore the unintended, additional and true costs and expenses.

We know of folks denied eligibility, which resulted in repeated hospital emergency visits, hospitalizations, nursing home placement, repeated cycles and unnecessary costs to the state. There are too many sad and troubling stories to tell in a brief memo. Providers, advocates, families and concerned citizens are asking you to consider the lives of those who would be negatively impacted by further reductions. Vermont's capacity to provide long term care options must be preserved and strengthened not programmed to mediocrity or failure.

We recognize the temptation of considering reallocating the estimated \$750,000 to fill the budget deficit, but believe the cost of doing so would: 1) be contrary to legislative intent and language requiring reinvestment of savings in the program itself; 2) result in far greater costs to the state; 3) jeopardize the wellbeing of our loved ones, friends and neighbors; 4) lose the leveraging of federal monies designated for this very purpose; 5) further undermine the plight of low wage

direct care workers upon whom we all will rely; and 6) erode Vermont's commitment to aging in place with dignity, and protecting our most vulnerable citizens.

Food Stamp Outreach: We remain very concerned that only one third of eligible seniors are now enrolled in the food stamp program, now called 3squares VT. Much effort initiated by the state has been underway to recognize the problem of food insecurity and strategize about how best to ensure that older Vermonters take advantage of the food stamp program. \$2.8 million in federal benefits would provide the most basic of human needs, prevent further health erosion and costs and bolster the economy. Food stamp outreach for poor, hungry elders is not a marketing luxury; it is a wise investment and socially responsible necessity.

There are many difficult and necessary ways to reduce state expenses and increase state efficiencies, while preserving the essential role and higher purpose of government. Undermining the stability, health and dignity of vulnerable older Vermonters is not a strategy or response that should be among the selected alternatives. Thank you for your past support and your willingness to serve as public servants and leaders. Please let us know if we can be of any assistance.