

# BERGEN *County* NEW JERSEY

## Department of Human Services Division of Senior Services



## PUBLIC HEARING ON THE NEEDS OF OLDER ADULTS

April 30, 2024

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*Bergen County Executive*

**Bergen County Board of Commissioners**

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## TRANSCRIPT

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LORRAINE JOEWONO: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the Public Hearing on the Needs of Older Adults in Bergen County. We have this hearing every year to get feedback from the community and seniors of what is important to you so that we, as an agency, know what we are going to do to help the needs that you have. We have a wonderful panel here today which I will introduce in a little while. If we cannot answer your questions, I'm sure they can answer your questions. But I would like to start the program, and if everyone would please stand and pay honor to America, the greatest country in the world.

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all.

Thank you. I want to introduce some very important people, especially to us, that are here with us today. Our County Executive James Tedesco could not make it, but I would like to call up Vice Chairwoman Mary Amoroso.

(Applause).

And we are very honored to have Assemblywoman Shavonda Sumter with us also.

(Applause).

May is Older Americans Act Month, and it is a special month for us because it highlights what we do as an agency. We are having some special

things for the month of May. I know we're still in April, the last day of April, but we are going to use this as a kick off for tomorrow starting May 1st.

I'd also like to call up the Department Director of Human Services, Melissa DeBartolo.

(Applause).

We're happy she could make it today because she's carrying a little one. I would like Mary to say a few words.

MARY AMOROSO: This is a very important listening session for Bergen County. And I am so glad to be here. One fifth of the population in Bergen County are senior citizens. We have raised our families here, worked here, or commuted from here, played here, and we are still here. Enjoying life, and happy to remain near our now grown children and grandchildren. Residents 65 years or older make up 17 percent of New Jersey's population on par with the national average. Ten percent of New Jersey's residents are between the ages of 65 and 74. And five percent are between 75 and 84. Two percent are 85 or older.

Our numbers and our commitment to voting give us political power. But life in Bergen and in New Jersey has to bend to our needs and our lifestyle. We are more frequently staying in our oversized family homes because to tell the truth, it would cost more to move to a downsized unit. I'm hearing about more seniors who switch homes with their children so they move back to a smaller starter home. Jim Tedesco did this and their children moved into the upsized home and we are now finally focusing on accessory dwelling units. Tina is doing that right now, to create more housing on existing residential lots.

But building is always expensive. We can link people to resources for home maintenance as well which is something that was done this weekend through the Rebuilding Together initiative. Transportation is a huge issue. We have the king of community transportation with us back here, Dominick, along with managing declining driving and vision skills that can come with getting older. I am so proud of Community Transportation's organizing of thousands of rides for senior citizens, not only to medical appointments but also things like hair salons. Home held aides are in short supply and families worry about supervising health aids and companions from a distance. I'm proud of our Meals on Wheels program. Melissa was just telling us about the tens of thousands of meals provided each month. We have the Senior Farmers Market. We are working to keep seniors safe in homes and on workable streets and online against the fraudsters who seem to target seniors. We are proud of our educational institutions in this County. And we are committed to lifelong learning.

And let us not forgot that many of us are still working. Roughly one in five Americans age 65 and older were employed in 2023. Nearly double the share of those who were working at that age 35 years ago. Many seniors who consider themselves retired actually work part-time. We are healthier and better educated, so why not use our job skills in the ways and times that suit us?

Our seniors have built Bergen County. And they continue to provide economic strength, passion, and purpose for our neighborhood of one million people. We welcome what you have to tell us about being a senior and what you need in Bergen County. Thank you.

(Applause).

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Thank you, Commissioner. I'd like to call up Assemblywoman Shavonda Sumter.

(Applause).

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SHAVONDA SUMTER: Thank you. Good morning, everyone. I'm Assemblywoman Shavonda Sumter, and I can tell you that I've spent my career working on services for seniors, the disabled and vulnerable children. I'm also President and CEO of Children's Aid and Family Services. What's important to me is you all have a quality of life and that there's a community of property. One million people here in Bergen County. That's a big community. But it's important for us in the State of New Jersey to be sure that you're able to age in place, and that those who choose your loved ones and neighbors are able to age in place. The U.S. surgeon general did a report identifying loneliness as a public health crisis. So when we think of seniors who have lived in a community all of their lives and the ability to drive, it really is muscle memory. I have ages aunts and uncles who are able to drive to houses of worship because it's muscle memory at 92. By the time it gets to 6 o'clock they need to start heading home.

Because I get concerned. But the quality of life, social engagement and interaction makes a difference. For my 12 years in office, I hosted programs in the district for seniors in the winter months before COVID because that's when you're in the house the longest. And it's important that Meals on Wheels is available, the transit is available, because to get to doctors' appointments,

have socialization, someone to check on you, also a wellness visit. In the State of New Jersey, we've also expanded the prescription program, anchor program so you can stay in your homes and have additional assistance with the tax burden bill. We were very conscious of the needs of our community and aging in place. I say that from Cape May County all the way up to Bergen County. So, as we listen today, I'm interested in hearing more about how we can support you, learning more about how the state can be a help and not a hindrance to individuals staying in their communities, having quality of life and socialization within these spaces. Thank you for having me today.

(Applause).

AMANDA KARPINSKI: Good morning. My name is Amanda Karpinski and I have the honor of serving as Bergen County's Public Information Officer and Coordinator. First, I want to thank you for holding the hearing. Thank you to the panelists for taking the time to be here and thank you to all of you being here today and planning to testify. Today's event is our kickoff to the month of May and Older Americans Month. I think there is no better way to celebrate Older Americans Month than officially signing our much anticipated Age-Friendly Task Force. County Executive Jim Tedesco will be signing the executive order, and the committee will have its first meeting in the month of May to discuss goals and how we plan to continue to work towards a more age-friendly Bergen County.

Today also marks the last day of global intergenerational week, and I wanted to thank the Harper Group for helping the County to begin a new intergenerational program. Thanks to Shannon and Darlene of the Harper

Group we were able to connect Ramapo Nursing students with our senior centers to assist our seniors with various tasks. We're looking forward to continue this partnership this fall.

While we are here at an event hosted by our Division of Senior Services, this division is not the only agency that provides services to our senior population. I want to take a brief moment to recognize the hard work that our various departments have put into making Bergen County more age-friendly. Our Division of Nursing has visited over 40 senior centers throughout the County providing critical wellness checks and programming. In the last year, our Department of Parks installed six new tennis courts, 8 pickleball courts, and two basketball courts with more on the way this year. Thank you to our Community Transportation unit for providing hundreds of life saving rides to our seniors, to doctor appointments, to grocery stores and other critical services. This is a small snippet of the hard work of our Bergen County departments.

Thank you to everyone here to testify. While we are very proud of the services that we provide here in Bergen County, there's always room to grow, improve, and enhance our programs. And now on behalf of the County Executive and Governor Phil Murphy I'd like to present two proclamations recognizing Older Americans Month.

I won't read the whole thing. But, whereas on behalf of the nearly one million residents of Bergen County, I, James Tedesco would like to proudly recognize Older Americans Month and urge all residents to celebrate older adults in our communities, and continue to provide them with the support and services they need to thrive and age with dignity. Assemblywoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN SHAVONDA SUMTER: Thank you. This is from the New Jersey department signed by Governor Phil Murphy and the Lieutenant Governor Tahesha Way. Whereas they are recognizing New Jersey's home to 1.8 million individuals aged 60 and older and we recognize the contributions and success of older adults encouraging ongoing participation and further accomplishments. Congratulations and thank you.

(Applause).

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Okay. I'd like to continue with our program. In case anyone asks about the synopsis from last year, we have it on our website, the whole written document. So, you can read the synopsis. And when we are finished with 2024's synopsis it will also be posted on our website.

I would like to just do a little PowerPoint right now, very short one that talks about the Division of Senior Services, Older Americans Month, and what actually we do.

Bergen County Division of Senior Services was established in 1966 under federal legislation of the Older Americans Act. It is the primary planning, coordinating, and funding agency for senior programs and services promoting the well-being, health and independence of Bergen County's 227,158 older adults. The division targets especially those vulnerable and in greatest social and economic need and prepares for the rapid growth of the senior population and continued increase in longevity and diversity. As the lead agency for the Bergen County's Aging and Disability Resource Connection, the division helps older adults, individuals with disability over age 18, and caregivers access the complex long term care community-based Health and



Human Services.

And I always like to brag that after President Lyndon Johnson signed the Older Americans Act in 1965, Bergen County was the first Area Agency on Aging in the nation. So, I'm very proud of that.

(Applause).

We all are. So, when I'm on a national level and I go out to US Aging I make it known we were the first. I do the groundwork. We promote the well-being of Bergen County's older adults, especially identifying and targeting those vulnerable and the greatest social and economic need. We reach out and help seniors and especially caregivers. We have two Caregiver Conferences every year to reach those over 100,000 caregivers in Bergen County that are looking and helping their loved ones to remain in their homes. That is our target, to keep seniors in homes as long as possible.

So, a little bit about the Older Americans Act structure. It was set up as a framework for partnership among the levels of government and the public and private sectors with a common goal to improve the quality of life for older Americans.

Older adults age 60 and over -- yes, 60 is the age to be eligible for all our services -- and people with disabilities over the age of 18.

No fees for most of these services, but donations are welcome. And I told you who our target population was. So, the state units on aging are on our state level and they are responsible for developing and administering multiyear state plans that advocate for and provide assistance to older residents. And their families in many states. For adults with physical disabilities also.

There are 56 state units on aging and over 622 Area Agencies on Aging which we are called throughout the United States. The state unit oversees the AAAs which that's us. And funding is allocated to each state Unit on Aging based on the number of persons over the age of 60 in that state. The Area Agencies on Aging is a private nonprofit agency designated by a state to address the needs and concerns of all older persons at the regional and local levels. The AAA is a general term name of many local AAAs. Sometimes they're called Division of Senior Services, Office on Aging, similar names but all do the same work. In New Jersey there is an AAA in each of the 21 counties and the Division of Senior Services is the designated AAA in Bergen County. This is really odd because most states -- even the bigger states may only have two or three Area Agencies on Aging. While New Jersey has one for each County.

So, the Triple As prepare, develop, carry out and administer the contract on aging approved by the State Unit on Aging. And the AAA is the lead County on aging and central source of information. Visible focal point for advocacy, coordination, monitoring and evaluation. And our funding is broken up into Access, which is our information and assistance, transportation, assistive technology, assistive transportation, care management, public awareness, and outreach. Our Nutrition supports our Meals on Wheels, congregate lunches, nutritious education, Meals on Wheels for people with disabilities, and nutrition counseling.

Home Support. We fund, certified home health aides, home sharing and matching, housing assistance, friendly visitor services, emergency residential maintenance, housekeeping, and telephone support. Community support is

Adult Protective Services, legal assistance, money management, physical activity, education, adult day care services, counseling, mental health, and physical health. And socialization and recreation is so important.

Caregiver Support is support groups, group education, socializing, recreation, in home education and support, information assistance, public awareness, care management, mental health counseling, outreach, and adult day services.

And also, this is our contact to contact the Division of Senior Services, for all of our seniors' needs.

So, I just want to say one more thing. Older Americans Act Month, the theme of Older Americans Act Month this year is *Powered by Connection*. Which recognizes the profound impact that meaningful relationships and social connections have on our health and well-being. And I know that during COVID we learned very well about how much socialization was so important that people who were isolated during that time, and we try to make sure with our senior centers, activity centers, and that we constantly checkup on our seniors, home delivered meals. There's that face that they see every day. Socialization is such an important part. So, I think that the theme this year was so appropriate for Older Americans Act Month.

I would like to introduce our panel from your left we have our Assemblywoman Shavonda Sumter who was nice enough to be with us today, our Commissioner Mary Amoroso. We have Dominick Azzolini, Director of Community Transportation and this is his first public hearing. Be very gentle with him.

(Laughter).

We have Scott Modery Director of the Board of Social Services. And next to Scott is Sonia – I'm sorry, next to Dominick – I'm sorry, I'm going the wrong way – Sonia Aufiero, also at the Board of Social Services. And then we have Noreen Best – I'll come this way. Noreen Best is our Chairwoman of the Human Services Advisory Council. And next to her is Suryakant Shukla, head of Division of Senior Services Advisory Council. Next to Suryakant is Anika Davis, the head of Division of Disability Services in the County of Bergen. Next to her we have Brian Fitzgibbons, CEO and President of Heightened Independence and Progress. And next to Brian we also have a newcomer this year, Kathy Pisco. And she is also new, so be easy with her so she comes back next year. And our last person on the dais, last but not least, Robert Esposito, Director of Community Development for the County of Bergen.

I also want to recognize my Deputy Director Kerri Sherer. And we also have Legislative Aid to Assemblywoman with us today and representatives from Senator Holly Schepisi's office. I will call up by the cards I have people to come up and testify.

And you have five minutes to speak. If you go longer I will give you a warning. (Bell rings).

And if you don't stop you will hear (bell ringing multiple times).

Thank you for coming. We really want to hear what you have to say. Thank you. We will start.

We also have Councilman from Garfield, Councilman Pawel Maslag is here. Thank you for coming today.

(Applause).

The first person I'd like to call up is Pawel Maslag. Please come up to the podium.

>> Good morning. First up on the list which I was not prepared for. I'll do my very best. Good morning, everyone. Also, good morning to the panel. Very happy to be here, very honored to be here. As was mentioned I'm an elected member of the Garfield City Council. Among the other things I also do, I am currently – okay, and slower. I'll do my very best. Cofounder of Garfield Neighbors, a nonprofit organization focused in Garfield by support for Garfield residents. Also, cofounder of the AI Social Impact Lab. I've had the incredible pleasure of doing AI workshops in different senior centers around Bergen County which has been really amazing. Also, a graduate from the university for undergraduate studies, studied social and behavioral sciences at Yale. And in less than a month I'll be starting a masters and doctorate program at Columbia with a future goal becoming a family practitioner working with patients (inaudible).

I'll provide two key points I really want to bring up. One as a member of Garfield City Council as many people here will definitely be bringing up, housing is an incredibly important issue for many seniors. In terms of support, Garfield, we're very fortunate to have public senior housing but we need more support. From the County, I know Assemblywoman Sumter is doing incredible work at the state level. But one of the biggest issues right now is aging in place for our seniors in Garfield, and also providing social support for the seniors.

Two, I'll be speaking on behalf of my father. One aspect that is really

important, and as Assemblywoman Sumter mentioned, is loneliness. Surgeon General declared loneliness as an epidemic. One key aspect is for older men. We know in terms of research that men are experiencing loneliness at higher rates than women are. That could be becoming care taker of women who are more likely to develop Alzheimer's and dementia, and also in terms of having less of a social network compared to women. My mom has a thriving social network. She has friends. She is always on the phone with someone. However, my father not as much.

Especially from a County perspective, senior centers, it would be really great to have programs for men. I'm not totally sure if there are programs right now but it's something I've definitely noticed when it comes to visiting senior centers, even here. Women are highly representative which is really, really important. But when it comes to men they're not as highly connected socially which could lead to other impacts and outcomes, whether chronic illness or their own mental health.

Two key things I want to bring up is more housing support for local municipalities like Garfield, and two, focus on loneliness especially for aging men. Thank you.

(Applause).

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Thank you. Our next speaker will be Patrick Fallon from the Bergen County Office of Food Security.

>> (Bell DINGS).

Just kidding.

(Laughter).

>> I used to work at Senior Services so Lorraine knows she can mess with me a little bit. Good morning, everyone. I'm Patrick Fallon. I oversee the Bergen County Office of Food Security in Human Services. Some of you may know it as the Food Security Task Force. We're new. That's our new name. We're one of the newest offices in the Department of Human Services, resource connector, support for the network of about 75 food pantries operating in Bergen County on a daily basis. Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

I'm going to talk very briefly about the issue of food insecurity here in Bergen County. How it's affecting our seniors and what available resources there are for seniors who may be experiencing food insecurity. We should all know there are resources in all of our communities that can help those in need. Like I mentioned we have this network of over 75 food pantries in Bergen County. If there's not one in your town there's going to be one in the town over. I believe there are 35 or more municipalities that have one or multiple food pantries. You're never going to be further than one town over from getting what you need.

While the darkest days of the pandemic are long behind us today, many in our communities are still feeling the crunch of inflation and rising prices, especially at the grocery store. The group that is feeling the effects of these more than anyone else are seniors, folks living on fixed incomes, relying on Social Security, and other benefits each month to sustain themselves. And those dollars are not going as far as they used to. Certainly, when it comes to purchasing food.

So, we want to help people not have to make those difficult choices,

whether to pay my rent or pay a medical bill or have the food I need to sustain myself. The numbers are up across the board. The need for food assistance we saw in the last year at our pantries from 2022 to 2023 was up 22 percent. And we expect that number to rise in the survey we have in the field at the moment. One of the largest groups of people accessing food pantries are seniors. In that same survey, almost 30 percent of guests going to Bergen County food pantries are 60 and over. I just want to let everyone know, if you ever have questions about accessing a food pantry, what resources are available in your community, please reach out to our office. We're happy to connect you with local food pantries if it's something you need, or if it's for a friend, neighbor, loved one, these exist in the community to help those that are struggling and do it with dignity and respect. Unfortunately, there is a stigma attached to going to a food pantry. That's one of the barriers for people accessing this vital assistance. We really want to change the conversation about that here in Bergen County and let people know this is something that can happen to anybody. There are so many people, not just here in Bergen County but across the country, that are one adverse event away from falling into food insecurity. We're lucky to have the kind of resources we do. I've had the opportunity to visit many pantries in all different regions of the County from the pantries that are serving thousands of families a month, to the handful of volunteers working out of a church basement serving 30 or 40 families a month. It all goes to helping those in the community that are struggling.

And again, people working at these pantries are giving out this assistance without judgment and treating folks that come in to the pantry with



dignity and respect.

I can share my contact information with the Division of Senior Services. If you ever have questions about these resources, please contact the Bergen County Office of Food Security. And we also encourage everyone, particularly when it comes to food assistance, to make sure that you are accessing all the benefits that you're eligible for. I think it's great we have folks here from the Board of Social Services today. Our senior population in particular is sorely underrepresented in SNAP. That's a program that we try to push whenever we're at pantries, whenever I'm out in the community, it's such a vital resource. It's something that can be additional dollars coming in every month to help you stretch that grocery bill a little further. There's even some organizations, one called City Green in particular, where there are certain farmers markets and grocery stores in Bergen County where if you're receiving SNAP, they will match your benefits specifically for fresh produce so that everyone has access to healthy and fresh items. Which is something that a lot of food pantries receive too. If you're going to a pantry for assistance, it's not just going to be nonperishable items, dry goods, shelf stable items. Those are certainly still very common. But over 80 percent of our food pantries in Bergen County have some kind of refrigeration capacity. They are able to distribute dairy, fresh produce, meats, eggs – things that are really vital to sustaining yourself in a healthy and meaningful way.

Please access these resources if you ever need them. If you have questions, please feel free to contact our office and if you're able to, whether it's with food items or with your time, try to support your local food pantries. If you have time to volunteer, there is really a crisis at many of our pantries.

Volunteers moving away, unable to do the things they were used to doing. Many of our pantries during the pandemic went from serving a handful of families to serving hundreds of families every month. Really growing the size of operations and that's what we hear the most in every single food pantry we go to, no matter where it is, no matter how many people we are serving, the need for volunteers is so great. It's not just helping out on distribution day. You can lend your skills, whether you were maybe an accountant helping with budgeting, maybe you worked in marketing or public relations can help the pantry get themselves out in the community, advertise what they're doing. Make sure everyone in their town or region knows what they have going on. There are ways to support pantries more than just dropping off bags of food which certainly is still very important and I encourage everyone who is able to do so to do that and support your local pantry. But you can do it in other ways which are so vital, especially when it comes to volunteering.

Again, any questions about resources, food pantries, nutrition assistance or food assistance here in Bergen County, please contact our office. We have a great relationship with the Division of Senior Services. Our pantries make referrals for folks who need Meals on Wheels, information about nutrition programs which we're really lucky to have that relationship. And the folks and seniors receiving these referrals from pantries making sure people can get the resources they need. Thank you for your time, and again please support your local food pantry if you're able to.

(Applause).

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Thank you, Patrick. The next speaker is from the

Human Services Planning and Contracting, Robert Sibi, who will be reading on behalf of the Adult Services Committee. Also, I invite the panel if you have anything to say or if you hear someone has an issue you'd like to respond to, you're more than welcome.

>> Hi. I'm Robert Sibi with the Bergen County Department of Human Services. And I'll be reading this testimony that was prepared by Brian Fitzgibbons, who is the Chairman of the Bergen County Human Services Advisory Council's Adult Services Committee.

The adult services committee targets the needs of adults age 60 and over, and individuals with disabilities who are 18 and older. The goal is for these individuals to live at home as independently as possible for as long as possible rather than in more costly long-term care facilities. This committee is comprised of individuals who work in the provider community along with County staff to analyze trends, identify needs, and offer suggestions within the delivery of services as part of the Human Services Advisory Council. Members of the committee come with a great deal of knowledge, and a variety of lived experiences shared at each meeting. As part of the planning for older adults, we have four areas of concern that we'd like to discuss. The first is transportation. There is an ever present need to improve existing mass transit options throughout the state, and Bergen County is no exception. The County continues to work with state and federal partners on the Bergen Hudson Light Rail Expansion to Englewood Hospital and the proposed Hackensack bus terminal will help accommodate bus service as it connects bus routes through the County. The Route 17 bottleneck project will also help seniors and others who travel on state highways spend less time in traffic.

One of the realities facing the ever-growing numbers of seniors is the fact that various age-related limitations are causing them to surrender their personal vehicles. The desire to stay active and engaged in community life can be limited by difficulty accessing established bus routes and the high cost of taxi services. The Bergen County Division of Community Transportation offers a valuable service providing rides to medical appointments and various activities. The recent addition of the Bergen County Division of Senior Services Mobility Manager who oversees the expansion into Uber and Lyft options has been encouraging as well as Community Transportation's recognition of continuous improvement through grant opportunities.

New Jersey Transit's Access Link is a great service for those with disabilities as it shadows local bus routes. However, as we have recommended in past testimony, Access Link needs to expand their routes to include the shadowing of New York bus routes and travel local streets and trains which will create more options for our residents. They should also include the bus routes operated by independent carriers that operate under the New Jersey Transit banner.

In the committee's discussions with the Access Link Director, we learned there are no immediate plans to alter the policies of the commuter lines. But we were encouraged to learn that New Jersey Transit was exploring the use of innovative entities such as Uber and Lyft. The challenge will be the ability of these entities to provide transportation options that include wheelchair accessible and lift equipped vehicles. The Adult Services Committee will continue to follow a federal transportation administration grant that was awarded to New Jersey Transit that supports public/private partnerships and enhances

multimodal travel access.

On a more local focus, excuse me, the County's municipality should be encouraged to share vehicles and possibly use off duty school buses to tackle the transportation challenges that confront our folks with disabilities and seniors every day. Recently the Bergen County Community Transportation division created the Transit Connector which offers free transportation during business hours around Hackensack. It follows a fixed route that includes stops at two rail stations, Hackensack University Medical Center, senior housing, local food markets, and medical appointments on the route.

The second topic is senior housing. Aging in Bergen County is perhaps the one issue that affects the entire service delivery system. There are over 220,000 individuals over 60 living in the County, and many of them are not prepared to face rising property taxes beyond their fixed incomes, housing that no longer suits their changing physical needs and the scarcity of affordable housing. There have been multiple discussions to promote and encourage the use of such advanced concepts as universal design, residential adaptations, and the possibility of shared housing to maximize the use of their assets.

Seniors have become more vulnerable and fearful for their health and well-being as a result of their experiences during the pandemic. This often leads to mistrust of efforts to assist them, and they very often choose to isolate to protect themselves which further delays progress in making necessary adaptations.

That's halfway. How are we doing on time? Is this going long? Okay. I'll try to read faster. All right, I won't do that. We're halfway.

>> We'll shave some off of our time so you can have time.

>> Number three is certified home health aide services. Certified home health aide services make it possible for our very frail residents to remain at home as long as possible by providing assistance with activities of daily living such as bathing, dressing, exercising and light household chores. Home health aide services are funded with area funds from the County's Division of Senior Services and peer grouping funding from the County's Department of Human Services.

Peer grouping funds help individuals live independently in the community and avoid nursing home placement. These funds are allocated to those individuals in greatest need up to 250 percent of the poverty level. The focus is on nursing home prevention services for those who do not qualify for Medicaid. Over the course of the past several years, there have been state led advocacy efforts to increase the salaries of the home health aides and other caregivers, but it has not been enough to keep an adequate supply of workers to meet the ever-growing need. Some of the challenges continue to include the hourly wages are similar to retail jobs that do not require the same sensitivity and skill levels so many agencies find it difficult to attract qualified applicants. The income of home health aides is based on the number of hours worked without a guarantee of payment for cancelled appointments. Travel time is often not included.

The members of this specific workforce cannot afford to live in many of the communities where there is a great need. A home health aide who needs to take two buses to get to work, to the work assignment, becomes easily discouraged. A good portion of the workers continue to be reluctant to return to their jobs, and many of the seniors they serve are choosing to go without

much needed services out of fear for their health.

The Adult Services Committee continues – I'm sorry, the Adult Services Committee supports continued wage increases but recognizes that agencies will need a state subsidy so that they can offset the salary increase. This may be achieved through higher reimbursement rates and other creative solutions like funded transportation programs.

The committee acknowledges the outstanding work being done by the Bergen County Division of Senior Services and the community agencies that they support, but would like them to consider other services such as housekeeping, assistance with moving, and hoarding prevention. The last number here is going to be seniors at risk.

Bergen County seniors are increasingly falling into homelessness and poverty, which has become a great concern. The Bergen County Housing Health and Human Services center has experienced alarming uptick in homeless seniors. Over 50 percent of their population now is over age 60. The Bergen County Office of Food Security has been helping those who may be newly needy or find themselves in need of food assistance get connected with resources. With the increase in food, housing and other costs of living, being able to alleviate food burdens allows tight finances to be devoted to staying in homes.

Alzheimer's Disease and related dementias are profoundly debilitating conditions in later life, significantly impacting individuals' well-being. According to the Alzheimer's Association, in 2023, 6.7 million Americans age 65 or older were living with Alzheimer's Disease and related dementias. This is projected to rise to 13.8 million by 2060. In New Jersey, 185,000 people age

65 and older are living with this condition.

Mild cognitive impairment represents an early stage of cognitive decline affecting individuals' ability to carry out daily tasks independently. The Alzheimer's Association reports that approximately 12 percent to 18 percent of individuals age 60 or older have mild cognitive impairment.

With the population aging, the numbers of people who are living with mild cognitive impairment and Alzheimer's Disease and related dementias are expected to increase rapidly.

We appreciate the efforts of the Division of Senior Services Dementia Friendly Initiative to build inclusive communities for people living with dementia and their care partners to improve opportunities for meaningful social interaction, community awareness, education, and training, and their upcoming work with libraries in Bergen County.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer these comments.

(Applause).

BRIAN FITZGIBBONS: Thank you for doing that for me, Robert. Thank you very much.

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Our next speaker is Colleen Diskin from Age-Friendly North Jersey.

>> COLLEEN DISKIN: My name is Colleen Diskin. I serve as Communications Manager for both the Age-Friendly New Jersey Alliance and the Teaneck Community Initiative. Our alliance is about 8 years old now and we are continuing to expand our efforts to help Bergen County become a more supportive and equitable environment for people of all ages. We hosted a



major conference last fall that attracted nearly 200 participants including four dozen municipal leaders interested in learning about forming age-friendly initiatives. We also host bi-monthly age-friendly roundtable meetings that attract community stakeholder representatives. Our efforts is to stoke collaboration. We receive considerable support from staff at the Division of Senior Services. We are gratified by the Division's effort to seek and respond to feedback to Bergen's older residents and from our alliance members. We credit DSS also for its work to continually enhance its work and programs. The Housing Navigator and Ride Connect programs stand out as two innovations that provide the information and one-on-one support older residents often need to learn of housing and transportation options.

Indeed, few counties across New Jersey have as rich an array of senior services and resources as Bergen County. Despite all that, Bergen County remains a very hard place to grow old. With alarmingly high rates of economic insecurity, housing cost burden, social isolation, disability, and chronic health conditions. All while the population of older adults continues to grow at double digit rates.

Is Bergen County prepared for the next decade when the population of people over 65 will for the first time be greater than the population of people under 18? We believe not. For more than five years the county administration and the Board of Commissioners have pledged to plan for the challenges and opportunities of the aging population through the creation of a County government led age-friendly effort. For that same amount of time leaders of that alliance have offered support to devise a plan to truly achieve systems wide change. One in which all departments of County government

participate.

Older adults' lives are impacted by most County departments in some way, health services, housing, transportation, public safety, parks, and planning, and engineering.

All of those agencies should be a part of planning for a more age-friendly future, and we hope that the committee that was announced today will include representatives from all County agencies, and also harness the efforts of private sector social service providers, municipal government officials, age-friendly community leaders, philanthropic organizations, academic and partners, and of course older residents themselves. What's needed is something akin to the Bergen County food insecurity task force, an overarching group of leaders on these issues. Creating a county-led organizational structure on food security brought about immediate results through connecting local food pantries to new resources and funding streams, and it opened new communication and resource coordination channels. The same can happen if we create an age-friendly community task force to work in partnership with the County Age-Friendly Coordinator. Clear goals can be set with clear deadlines for meeting them. Strong leadership from the County can also bring more of Bergen's 70 communities on board and it could help address critical problems such as lack of affordable housing, limited transportation options particularly for those who use wheelchairs, and the lack of accommodation of public facilities for people with hearing loss or other disabilities.

What's more, Bergen County - the most popular county in the state - could use its megaphone sized voice to become an advocate for change. It could egg on the fixes so desperately needed to the broken parts of

New Jersey's aging system. Such as the chronically poor performing Board of Social Services, which has a months long backlog and whose employees routinely shame and frustrate applicants. Or the Medicaid system that hails from another imagination-free era, still routinely forcing people into institutions instead of funding more affordable care options. If Bergen County were to truly embrace an age-friendly future it could become a shining example for the state and the forerunner it has been in creating programs such as Housing Navigator and Ride Connect. As always we stand ready to partner with County administration on such an effort and we're glad to hear it's starting next month.

(Applause).

>> Thank you to all the testifiers. Some of you we have your testimony up here but if we do not, do you mind submitting it so we can email it to all. We're trying to take notes. Thank you.

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Next speaker is Janet Sharma, coordinator of Age-Friendly Englewood.

>>JANET SHARMA: Good morning. Thank you for allowing me to make these remarks. I'm going to read to you a letter I sent to the County Executive dated March 1st. Some of this was already addressed this morning, but to date there hasn't been a task force. This is addressing the needs as of March 1st.

Dear County Executive Tedesco, I was pleased to attend your State of the County address Wednesday afternoon at Two Bergen County Plaza. Your presentation highlighted many of the outstanding accomplishments across the

full range of County government under your tenure as County Executive in 2023. Judging from the well-deserved applause, the audience particularly relished your comments regarding congestion pricing, the coming FIFA World Cup, and the huge celebration anniversary that is planned for Overpeck Park in 2026.

However, what was missing was any information about Age-Friendly Bergen County. You gave one sentence to the Division of Senior Services establishment of the Dementia Task Force but that's all. The 227,000 adults over age 60 not even including their caregivers who reside in Bergen County, nearly one quarter of the County's population, deserve more.

More than five years ago in November 2018 you held a press conference to announce that Bergen County intended to become an Age-Friendly County and a member of AARP and World Health Organization's network of age-friendly communities. The Division of Senior Services has been fully engaged in age-friendly initiatives and has been working closely with age-friendly communities in Bergen County, Englewood, Fair Lawn, Garfield, Ridgewood, Teaneck and Westwood. The County has done little to advance age-friendly planning or implementation across departments and systems.

I stated to you at that press conference I would hold your feet to the fire, and you can consider this letter exactly that. I, and my age-friendly colleagues, have offered repeatedly to work with various members of your staff as well as Commissioners to advance age-friendly planning at the County level but our collaborations have been limited primarily to the Division of Senior Services. With the older adult population of the County already at 25 percent and projected to grow significantly in the years ahead, the time is now to put in

place collaborative age-friendly plans across all departments. It is imperative that departments review and plan their work through an age-friendly lens with the goal of ensuring that older adult residents can successfully age in Bergen County aware of and with access to the range of services available to them. Interest in age-friendly initiatives is key.

Over the past year, my colleagues and I have convened four meetings of the age-friendly Bergen roundtable. Each attended by leaders of more than 50 senior serving organizations. We also hosted the Discover Your Town's Age-Friendly Future conference in September attended by nearly 200 representatives of municipalities and nonprofit organizations. It's clear that it is an important leadership role the County can play. Meaningful change and progress across all areas of County government can only occur with the full buy-in and stewardship of elected officials and high-level administrators, and in my view it has not occurred. We all deserve more.

You ended your comments with something to the effect of Bergen County is a great place to live and raise a family. What about adding "and to grow old"? Better yet, Bergen County is a great place for people of all ages. My colleagues and I look forward to working with you and your staff, and the Board of Commissioners to effect age-friendly initiatives in Bergen County government. Warm regards, Janet Sharma.

(Applause).

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Thank you, Janet. The next speaker is Sherrill Curtis.

>> I was always raised don't have your back to everybody. Especially those you want their attention. A lot of wonderful things being said this morning. And especially what Brian Fitzgibbons had to share since my life has changed so much. My background quickly is one throughout my Human Resource career and business practice I was always one to want to get employers and other people on the other side of the interview desk, those in particular who were disadvantaged in one way or another with regard to employment, particularly persons with disabilities, people who were veterans, people who might be battered women, anybody who might have some kind of an issue going on that prevented them from getting employment easily. And being able to successfully retain that employment. I served on many different advisory boards for different organizations here as well as nationally and attended and spoken at national conferences on these subjects. But again, life changing as it has in recent years, I have very much experienced firsthand some of the nuances that have become glaringly apparent as being overlooked, as folks from services on aging in New Jersey have pointed out as well.

It seems that we're experiencing a disconnect between what we have in terms of legislation that says you shall do this, and things that are not done and not compliant. I hold my own municipality of East Rutherford in contention with this because being part of Access for All for some time, trying to ensure that just simple building access for people with disabilities and those who are seniors wanting to attend any of the meetings that we would have would be available. And they are still not because the buildings are not compliant where they choose to hold their meetings. They do not have the

services which are provided today by this lovely team, and do not encourage themselves to have those services available. Yet many seniors can't have a voice in the community because they can't attend and hear what's happening at planning meetings and other sessions that do affect their ability to be able to stay and live in their homes on a longer-term basis.

Other disconnects I see are in our building code enforcement where we have the Americans with Disabilities Act and we have certain guidelines and criteria that are to be met with regard to accessible parking spaces, accessible routes. One state building that we have here with offices for the government unfortunately has parking spaces that do exist in a lot that cannot be accessed by just anybody who comes in. So therefore, anybody with a disability can't get into the lot to park there and then there is no accessible route to get into the building.

This also affects the employees with a disability to get into the building, because there is no accessible route for them to come in from the employee parking lot to enter the building. Simple things of those disconnects if someone is looking at the logic of does this fit, can someone logistically move from point a to point b with dignity and with respect unassisted is important to many people in our communities.

When we look at what's needed in terms of seniors, in particular what has come to light for me is what happens with the disconnect for persons with Alzheimer's. I have cared for my nana and been by her side when she passed. Cared for an uncle, was with him when he passed. Two different reasons why they had Alzheimer's. I now care for my mother at a distance and another treasured loved one who was abandoned by her daughter. I see what

happens between those who have means and those who do not and what the gaps are that need to be addressed.

We have services in place that will provide assistance with daily life activities. However, those social services are not available to have someone come in and make certain the food in your refrigerator has not perished weeks ago, that you are not going to eat that rotted food. We have services that will assist with bathing. They will assist with getting dressed. They will assist with bringing a meal. Meals on Wheels are wonderful. The food pantries are wonderful. But when persons having Alzheimer's have the plaques continuously covering portions of their brain which are eliminating the ability of that person to be able to have the opportunity to remember the process as simple as what do I do with this -- my heart sank recently when my mom who had been trying to keep as independent as long as possible because that's what she wants didn't know what to do with the food in the freezer and how to prepare it for dinner for herself. We can't have Meals on Wheels for her because they drop off the pieces -- wonderful food, it's great, it's there. But she doesn't know what to do with it unless I can walk her through that every day. There isn't someone to come in unless we pay to have someone come in every day which she can't afford on a Social Security check of \$1,200 a month. It doesn't cover her rent. She is on the SNAP program. SNAP is wonderful for many things to get food but interestingly it won't allow you to purchase a fresh roasted chicken so you can have a fresh hot meal. We are relegated to having only frozen meals to put in the microwave but again she lost the process of what to do with that. They forget to eat. The person I'm caring for at a distance in another state, we have the same issues there as well. I needed to



move and transition her to assisted living which she could afford. She had planned for that. A lot of people have not thought about that. It's not something we teach kids in school and teach about life lessons and experiences they need to be prepared for and planning just as they would for college and other things that are necessary, when you want to buy a home. You do need to plan for aging in place. You do need to plan for who is going to be part of the support system because not everybody has family members to count on or family members who are able or interested in being able to assist those family members.

And when somebody does forget to eat because they think they may have or the body doesn't get the signal any longer they need to eat and they go down from 135 pounds to 108, they don't take their medications because they forget that they have to. And if you see somebody like this in your community, and you try to help, sometimes the help is not necessarily welcome. And a woman who lives in the house I grew up as a child, because she doesn't see there's a problem but all the neighbors around do and we've been trying to help her with these issues. So, there are a lot of people that get ignored because there isn't someone paying attention.

If we could take a look at what's happening in the gaps just as we are now and we are talking about today, I have great hopes for transportation. Thank you very much, Mr. Azzolino, and the tenacity of your father, to fill in the gaps to get them to their appointments, to keep them engaged. My mother now sits and watches television all day long. The same shows. Heartland over and over again, Out of Africa. This is a woman who traveled around 72 countries as an international tour director and was the first licensed woman to

become a horse trainer -- as a horse thoroughbred racing trainer in the United States. This is what she does now. It's not my picture of my mother.

Thank you all for listening to this today. I know there's more to be shared by everyone else. I just urge folks here on the panel to please look at who -- with whom they can collaborate, with which agencies and how can we stop being siloed in providing what we need to provide for every person in our community who needs everything from housing, food, help with other than what they say in Medicare are daily life activities. Because it's not just about getting dressed or taking a shower; it's being able to eat that food and know what to do with it. Thank you so much for listening. Have a wonderful day.

(Applause).

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Thank you. Next speaker is Share, Inc. Gwenn and Kathleen.

>> Good morning. Hello, everyone. I hope you can hear me. We are Share, Inc. We are independent living for active seniors. Affordable housing in Ridgewood, New Jersey. Bergen County, NJ. Special thanks to Rob Esposito for the Division of Community Development. We couldn't survive without that department and his team. Thank you for transportation, thank you for the Housing Navigator. Very helpful.

We are a boarding house in Ridgewood. We have two Victorian homes that could house up to 14 individuals. We are nonprofit, private. Housing costs under \$1,800 a month. That includes a private room, a common living room area, common dining room area, porch outside, all your food. We have a

cook making lunch and dinner Monday through Friday. We have guest chefs who bring meals to the houses on weekends. We provide the grocery items, the milk, orange juice, lots of fruit and vegetables for the residents. And there's companionship. Companionship in the house, which is such a great idea. Housing together, shared housing.

During the pandemic we had no COVID. We were strict about that. But our residents had each other. In that healthy environment. Age-Friendly is a big help to us. Thank you, Age-Friendly. They do a lot for us and for our seniors. We appreciate it.

What I see often is as you described, sometimes individuals are no longer independent. So, what happens when they're no longer deemed independent in our house? They need to go to a higher level of care. Breaks my heart because there are not many places affordable where they can go for a higher level of care. That's a gap, definitely, a need. I see that. I receive many, many phone calls, individuals interested in our facility. And they can't afford it. So, we're all inclusive, private room, less than 18 hundred dollars a month. They can't afford it. So, we see that need as well. I see that need often. In fact, I have a list of individuals who are calling us, and they don't qualify for our facilities. It breaks my heart. Financially.

So, if you do not know us or are not familiar with us, please check us out. [ShareRidgewood.org](http://ShareRidgewood.org). It's a fantastic idea. Beautiful houses. We definitely fill this theme of the month, companionship and communication for seniors. We're a model. We're a model for that. Maybe there could be more housing units like us. We do have some rooms available. Maybe those who can afford us, maybe there's some assistance for them to come into our home if we

have rooms available.

>> I think the main thing I wanted to stress is that we do see a need for more affordable housing for frail and elderly neighbors. That is the theme. It was the theme last year. It was the laughable shortage of housing vouchers. It was for the number of seniors that are looking for housing, and the number of vouchers and the lottery tickets. How lucky those 20,000 people are to find subsidized housing.

We also -- I feel like there's a gap in housing for folks who are poor to moderately poor. But imagine being compromised in any mental or physical capacity (senior citizens, or people with disabilities) and facing an impossible waiting list for Section 8 housing. And those lottery tickets. So, you could be waiting 8 years for that subsidized housing when you're a senior citizen. So, you might not really have that many years left. And then you're looking at poverty and homelessness in your last decade of life. And we actually have people who are transitioning out of Share looking for assisted living facilities with limited number of Medicaid beds, if our residents were smart enough to have signed up for Medicaid while they were living independently. And there are no Medicaid beds. So where do they go? I really don't know where they go. I'm interested in the 22 percent of homeless shelters residents are senior citizens. That number is supposed to go up 30 percent in the next five years.

And if you ask the homeless shelters how they feel about having seniors or people with disabilities in the shelters to be candid they're saying it doesn't work. Because they can't have wheelchairs, or walkers, clogging the aisles. They can't have seniors with medications and kits next to their beds because they'll be stolen. They can't provide trips to the medical visits. And there's a

real gap -- that word gap again -- not to denigrate everything everyone here is doing because we can only do so much. But I think there's a real need for the gap in homelessness and housing for seniors. Thanks for listening.

(Applause).

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Thank you. Our next speaker is James Jung from the Asian Women's Christian Association, Program Director.

>> Good morning, everyone. I'm James Jung from AWCA. I know Bergen County support 10 senior centers. Asian Women's Christian Association which is the first Asian women nonprofit organization in New Jersey. It's a 501c nonprofit social service agency located in Teaneck. We serve through our Asian American women's leadership we established in 1980, 44 years.

I was told that Bergen County is a second richest County in the United States. I'm not sure if this is true but I heard Westchester County, New York is the richest County in the United States and Bergen County is the second richest. I'm so proud that I live in Bergen County. I'm a Program Director. I work with Bergen County Senior Services. I'm so proud to work with Bergen County.

As a Program Director's job I serve congregate hot meals for seniors. We are running a senior program, Korean senior program, Japanese senior program, Chinese senior program. Let me tell you one brief story. One day a Japanese old husband brought his wife but he lives in Japan. His wife got a problem with dementia, very early stage. He didn't know what to do. He brought her. He visited the United States. He wanted to take care of his

ex-wife. He wanted just -- she regularly attend our Japanese senior program.

Transportation was a problem. And also whole day she was sitting alone in her apartment. The husband was supposed to go back to Japan. They have one son in California but no connection or communication for many years. We accepted her and our Japanese senior program coordinator and our members gave her a ride to come and she became very happy, talkative and enjoyed our program. She wanted to join and then regularly just come to our program. And she had also worship services together and she heard gospel. I'm an ordained Minister also. During the worship she changed and her attitude became very positive.

One day just showed up in the Korean senior program. Japanese senior program she's supposed to come, but she showed up at the Korean senior program. They couldn't communicate very well because the Korean senior program members speak Korean. One day also she wanted to come but she wanted to use public transportation. She fell off. And some of the passersby asked her to help. And she just said I want to go to AWCA. That good Samaritan gave a ride to her and she appeared. Husband is not around anymore. One day she couldn't come. She was very depressed and we brought her and talked and we realized she had Medicaid. That was an amazing story. After that we provided her home care agency and she became very sick and went to Holy Name Hospital. And then she had a chance to connect her son in California. And she's now in good hands in a nursing home. That is one story.

So many times over email I get emails, my parents are only Chinese speaking. Do you know anywhere we can send our mom? She really wants

to talk to somebody who can speak her mother tongue. I'm so proud. I'm just sharing this story. Let me just give a very short story. I don't know if it's funny or not.

(Laughter).

One old Asian husband, like 60th birthday, he has been a very good husband and father. Sacrifice a lot. A genie appeared to him. You have been a very good father and husband. Now, one wish I can answer to you. And he said, yes. I know, but I have one wish. If you ask me only one wish, this is a private wish but I'm not sure. Can I have a 20 years younger wife?

(Laughter).

Your wish guaranteed. Boom. He became 80.

(Laughter).

If somebody asks me, AWCA, what we can do for you, one wish. We want to say transportation. I know County has a wonderful program. But they are limited. They're afraid to call the dispatchers. English is limited. My address is here. I live in Palisades Park. I've been -- my wife is a Councilwoman. Palisades Park has a senior program, driver. But they wanted to come to AWCA. They do not have. But we have a share ride program. Also, I became a driver in the early morning. I get up and I run. But I ask Korean church pastors, you have the church van, pastor, can you provide ride services? We can pay you. But only two hours or three hours a day. And that is over \$600 a year, we have to keep a 1090 form. Nobody likes that part-time job so we have a problem. But I know access -- I just used to say to them, whenever you call the Bergen County program we can do the conference call. I can translate for you. Just call them. But we need to

teach them. It's our problem. Who speaks only their languages. They're enthusiastic to learn languages for their prevention of dementia, that's a good thing. But what is your wish, what can we do for you? Number one wish is easier access to transportation. They want to come to us and share, and have a good time. Thank you so much.

(Applause).

>> DOMINICK AZZOLINI: Lorraine, if I could address that issue momentarily. At Community Transportation Mary just asked me if we have translation and I'm going to defer -- Joe is my Deputy Director. Joe, raise your hand and introduce yourself.

>> We don't have Korean and Japanese. We have Spanish and English at this point, some Croatian, some Italian. What we could do, if you wanted to do the translation and set up something with us where you would call or somebody from the organization, we could maybe do that. That would be an easier way where you take the information from people and we'll set up with you. If you want to call me, I'll give you my card before I leave. We'll set something up where you can call for easy ride or regular rides and we can set it up with somebody from your organization that speaks English and Korean. We can do that.

>> Would that also include somebody who is deaf or hard of hearing to help them?

>> Yeah, we can do hard of hearing as well. We're trying to partner with more private organizations as we go along because the bottom line is we're limited with the resources we have. So, if we can get more and more on board



with private organizations. There's no reason somebody can't -- somebody with hard of hearing or not hearing -- set up somebody with those people and them calling our dispatchers. That makes it easier for us than our dispatchers trying to figure out how to communicate with somebody who can't hear or doesn't speak the language. We're going to try to do that. We have a meeting coming up with some municipalities. We'll try to work out where we can reach out to somebody like you with a bus, and even though they may not be Korean we might ask you to do a transportation. If people are willing to do that with towns, different towns sharing services we can do so much more than we're doing right now. Fortunately, we just got -- we asked for \$800,000 for the easy ride program for Uber and Lyft. We asked the county. Not only did they give us the \$300,000, they gave us \$145,000 more to do that.

Again, those resources need to be stretched. We need to start to have more private integration. We can do some of those transports ourselves rather than EZ Ride. The Director has a program that we use some of our reserved drivers because we have to keep a pool of reserved drivers in case something breaks down. We're using them. But again, if we can make a list of organizations that can do stuff like translation for us, shared trips, we're going to start trying to do that.

Again, we just moved out of the pandemic and we're trying to get certain things done. Unfortunately, we need more buses. Shortage of drivers right now. That's systemic to the whole state unfortunately. We can't get drivers. We actually have a meeting on that. Our drivers -- the problem is that money becomes a problem outside agencies, private agencies are paying 25 to 35 dollars for drivers. Unfortunately, we're not making that right here. And even

if we were, there are so many other reasons the driver shortage is becoming a problem. It's going to become a state issue at some point. We're going to have to sit down with the state and try to adjust that. Those are some things.

But the private -- with the hard of hearing, with languages, if we can get organizations that deal with that, and then call our dispatcher, it would make it so much easier for us to do those transportations. I went on a little more than I should have. I'm sorry.

>> Thank you, Joe.

ANIKA DAVIS: Lorraine, I want to piggyback just for informational purposes. Here at the County we do have a language bank here that is accessible. We do work together across different departments. We also have a member of my staff that does provide some sign interpretation. If there's ever that time -- sometimes if you want to make a call at that moment and you're trying to have that communication right away, if you have someone to translate for you, great. But if there's a moment where you can set up a meeting and we can work and use the translation bank or get an appointment to do the sign interpretation. There are ways we work together throughout the County and different departments and different divisions. I just want to make that aware there are other opportunities aware if that is needed for translation services.

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Thank you. My comments will be to follow up on what Anika is saying. Human Services has so many resources that we are -- we try to be one stop shopping. If someone calls and they're a senior but they're also disabled they don't have to hang up. They don't to have call someone else. We work jointly to take that person and serve them without

having to go all over the place. That's also with our Veterans Services and all our other services. Community Transportation, Joe, I have ideas on what we were saying about different languages and everything. I'm going to sit with you and Dominick and talk about that also.

If you never went to the Asian Christian Women's center, drop by. It is amazing. They have Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, and Chinese Americans. Once a year they also put on a program. It's wonderful to watch how everybody is – even though they're so uniquely different and their language is different, it's wonderful. Thank you.

Our next speaker and I hope I say this name correctly and please correct me when you come up here. Cajé Qesje.

>> Thank you very much. Don't worry about it. If you could give me some extra time, thank you. Thank you very much.

I live in Fort Lee and work as a caregiver and we go through a lot. A lot of speeches given here today I feel we have patients that have food in their homes that they don't know what to do with it. They have a shower and soap and they don't know what to do with it. One of the things that I'll raise as a caregiver, we can't stop talking with our nurses, our managers on how everyone – almost every one of the patients that we have smells bad. It's because they can't – at that age they forget what to do. And even when they're told to wash they can't. We need help. It should be a line like three numbers, like 222 that they call, a team of people coming to help us to get Mr. Xyz to have a shower. They can't understand it, refuse and don't know the consequences. A lot of food is expired in their homes. Shelves are stuffed with expired food. Their beloved children are either busy or even if they're

there they're busy watching TV instead of opening the shelves and checking for their mother and father.

We need inspections coming from the County and the state once a month to have mandatory inspections at home. What are the needs? Their mattresses are sometimes with holes in them while their children are taking expensive vacations somewhere and they send us pictures and I send them back pictures, this is your mom's mattress.

Inspections every month. And they should be mandatory, detailed inspections on what's going on with these people. Zoom. This should also be Zoom so a lot of senior citizens that have a voice and want to talk, they should speak from their own homes and their own comfort zone.

Also, food pantries, they should be in every town. No excuse. This is America in 2024 and the food should be fresh, organic, and tasty. As far as for the doors, sometimes I work in the most luxury apartments and places like five stars in Teaneck and the doors don't have automatic openings. Every door should be having a button where disabled, senior citizens, those who have problems should push a button and every door should open.

Other things I would say is Meals on Wheels is good but they have to improve the quality of their food. They have to have halal, Kosher. I know there is Kosher there but it has to be good. Other meat, and all the spices and everything should be on the side. Every unit must have a washer and dryer and also \$300 should be given from the County or state to the senior citizens for delivery and pick up of laundry services. There are blankets and stuff that cannot be put into small washers at home. That is another thing that needs to be addressed.

There are millions of things. Universal health care should be there. Funding. We need funding. Please take our concerns to the White House. And tell them we need funding for our senior citizens. We're all going there. The housing should not be a problem anymore and everybody should have a one floor housing for everyone. Thank you very much.

(Applause).

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Thank you. The next speaker is Dolores White. While she's walking down here, we do have the Division of Senior Services resource table out there. If anybody has any questions, my staff is out there. Thank you.

>> Good morning. My name is Dolores White. My concern is we as seniors have no physical places to live. We're building here in Hackensack numerous apartment buildings, high rises and everything. But they're building nothing for seniors. And what they're building, they're saying that they're allowed ten apartments or whatever in these buildings but they cost just as much as the people that can afford to live in them. And we can't. So why isn't it that we cannot have buildings built for seniors? In Hackensack we only have three. There's more than 4 or 5,000 seniors here in Hackensack. We need more housing for us. And that is my main concern. Thank you.

(Applause).

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Thank you. Our next speaker is Yusef Myers.

>> Thank you. Thank you. Basically, I'm here more like a protest. My wife and myself have been victims of abusing. An organization, their main

function is taking advantage of senior citizens. If there's -- through a movie you might see that sums up what I'm saying called *I Care A Lot*. It's Netflix movie. We pay our taxes and our mortgages, in a house we do not live in because Charles and his organization has taken over our home. Basically, I make this complaint but I've served over 30 years as a volunteer EMT to help seniors or to help people get back and forth to the hospital and stuff. I just want to -- I took this opportunity because another senior once called me for help and I told him I can't help you. And he was killed not far after that. I thought he was being a little erratic. He didn't know what I was talking about. Charles and his organization have an IT department and they target seniors and seniors only. My father's organization we work to help kids recently incarcerated and get jobs and stuff. We help them get jobs and training is what we've been doing the last few years. I'm still walking and talking and I want to go on the record to say I'm protesting Charles Kahut and his organization that takes advantage of seniors. When I confronted him once before he said they're a legal organization. When they get caught they pay fines and go on with their life. He said we admit to no guilt. We're a business organization. But the master mind, Charles, leader of the organization, he has a regular class he teaches people to take advantage of the seniors. He says they have no need. They're not going to be around very long. Anyway, thank you for your time. My wife was afraid to come here but I decided I would come anyway. I didn't know this organization met on a regular basis. Thank you for your time. I was very happy to hear about the young man. I told him -- we'll be glad to work with you any chance we can.

(Applause).

One thing I forgot. There's one other catch that maybe people don't know. When you're over 65, college is free.

(Laughter).

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Our next speaker is Karl Szabo. If there is anyone else who didn't sign up to speak or would like to speak, you can always just see someone at the back table. Or you can just – after Mr. Szabo speaks raise your hand. And we'll open it up to the public.

>> Thank you. Hello. Thank you. I would like to talk about something very important today that is being swept underneath the rug. I hear a lot about it in Bergen County. I'm from the Township of Washington.

It's about ageism. When an elderly – in the health care field, when an elderly person gets aged they're put in a category of ageism where hospitals and nursing homes do not do what they're supposed to do to keep them alive because of their age. This hit home to me after hearing all these stories very close to my heart, which is my mother.

Sorry. I took care of my mother – I knew – I don't want to get upset. I took care of my mother for 23 years. My mother was a 100-year-old senior that loved life. And she had a urinary tract infection, went into Pascack Valley Hospital in Westwood, New Jersey. And they accepted her there. She was put on IV for a urinary tract infection which is the common thing to do for a senior. Urinary tract infection for seniors is common. But another thing they did that is beyond is they put my mother on an anti-psychotic drug, Quetiapine and Seroquel without my knowledge. My mother turned into a zombie. Just to keep her docile to let her die. She was expendable by the hospital because

of her age and age alone. She didn't have a terminal illness. Or anything of that nature. Her vital signs on record at 100 years old, blood pressure 116-72, heart rate 62. Oxygen level in the lungs, 97 percent to 100 percent. That is better than most of the staff at Pascack Valley Hospital.

I fought for my mother for 23 years taking care of her, of course my whole life. But what happened to her is horrible. She turned into a zombie. When my mother was admitted on the fourth floor, the doctor, Dr. Sabi, her comment to me right away was your mother had a good life. Why treat her for urinary tract infection? Let her die. You know what that is? That's cost cutting and it's happening to a lot of elderly seniors in Bergen County. I want to put a stop to it. It's being swept underneath the rug.

While in the hospital – by the way, I did my research the last two years. The FDA, the AMA, the Mayo Clinic, and many other prominent organizations outlaw anti-psychotic drugs for the elderly because what happens to their body and mind. They turn into a zombie and they die. And that's exactly what happened to my mother. She turned into a zombie, something you watch on TV. She couldn't function. They wanted her to die because of her age and age alone. That's ageism.

And I want to also – after three weeks at the hospital my mother went into Care One up the street in Westwood, New Jersey to finish the IV of antibiotics. Eight hours a day I was there, no one came in. It was like a coffin in the room. It's ageism. They don't give a you-know-what for elderly people. You don't have to be a hundred. Hopefully we all live that long. But the aging population of Bergen County is up there now, and this has to be addressed with what's going on.



It's a shame what happened to my darling mother but I'm using her as a pedestal in honoring her for what happened. It's being swept under the rug. I'm calling out Pascack Medical Center, the doctor, Dr. Sabi (phonetic). I'm calling out the ex-CEO of the hospital who I met with. After I gave a two-hour presentation, they said the standard of care was met. That's met? I doubt it.

Care One Valley under the doctor leadership of Dr. Mohammed Said, put my mother -- under his leadership when my mother -- I got her out of there in two and-a-half weeks back to eval at the ER, she had dehydration, malnutrition, bed sores up on the wazoo, a rash from her knee to her neck, a fungal rash. She was tortured because she was 100. Left alone to die. And this is a shame.

I want to fight for what's right. I want to serve as a reminder of the strength of the human spirit, and the enduring power of the love shared between my mother and son. Through my efforts I want new laws and safeguards to be put in place, not swept underneath the rug like it's been, to protect the elderly from this hideous crimes, what happened to my mother should never happen again to another elderly person because of their age.

And I want to call out Kerry Ferris's office, the Executive Director of the Medical Examiner's Office who wouldn't take my calls. I want to call out the Department of Health after me sending in numerous reports who wouldn't take my calls saying the standard of care was met. We all know it's a bunch of you know what. And I want to protect the lives of the elderly in this community and in Bergen County. I want to work with this panel and anyone who wants to work with me to resolve this issue in the future.

One last thing, the dead cannot cry out for justice. It's up to the living to

do so for them. And that's what I want to do. I want to thank you very much for your time.

(Applause).

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Thank you, Mr. Szabo. Is there anyone else from the public that would like to speak because we have people who have sent in testimony. I'm sorry. You can come up. Then we will -- after this speaker we will read a couple of people have sent in testimony but could not come here today.

>> Thank you. Thank you, everybody. Hello. Thank you for convening this public hearing. I appreciate the opportunity to speak among you all. My name is EJ Vizzi, a Licensed Social Worker and dementia practitioner with the honor of working with older adults in Bergen County. I'm the Director of Senior Programs with the Brightside Family, a group of nonprofits and provider of affordable housing, affordable living and supportive services of older adults. We're proud members of Age-Friendly North Jersey and I also serve on the Bergen County Dementia Friendly Action Team. But I wanted to take this time to talk about the Medicaid application process and the challenges the unwinding period has created. I understand here in Bergen County, the Board of Social Services manages Medicaid cases, but there has to be some way the Bergen County Department of Human Services can help advocate for its seniors who are suffering due to long wait times. I understand processes, but we have to hold them accountable. Let me talk to three clients specifically navigating the complexities of Medicaid.

In my first case, despite her years of eligibility for traditional low-income

senior Medicaid, she faced health challenges following her spouse's passing and sought Managed Long Term Services and Support, MLTSS Medicaid, in October, which has a higher financial limit. MLTSS would provide her with the health care services not covered under ABD Medicaid. Although her income from Social Security survivor's benefit remained well below the MLTSS limit she was unexpectedly terminated from all Medicaid programs including her health insurance in January due to mistaken review process.

Despite advocacy efforts, she was only approved earlier this month in April and while her Medicaid coverage is retroactively effective from February first, as of today, April 30th, she's still not reassigned to a health insurance company. Great on paper the Board says she has continuity of coverage. But you can't turn back the clock with the health providers she couldn't meet when she didn't have coverage. The delay means she may be without insurance from January to May, possibly June, impacting her access to healthcare services during that time.

Another client already had Medicaid since before COVID and was due for redetermination, renewal. And there were no questions about her limits and we helped her gather the documents for what we thought was a run-of-the-mill renewal. She was surprisingly terminated from coverage with reasons citing over the limit. How? We raked over the documents and realized they must have only looked at the closing balance of one month's bank statement which closed the same day her Social Security was deposited. If they cared to look at the other months of banking that they received, they would immediately see after a deposit she paid rent, utility and various bills bringing the checking balance below \$500 where she would spend the next 25 days of the month

living off of that until the next Social Security deposit. The person reviewing the case should have seen that one number was not at all indicative of her usual state of finances and yet it turned into months and months of advocacy and review to -- took a long time to turn around.

I understand that we're in the 12-month Medicaid unwinding period. Generally, I empathize with the added responsibilities. But this was someone who qualified for the program, responded to the paperwork and needed that continued coverage. The Medicaid Unwinding period is not some excuse to point to, and it did not come as a surprise. I remember telling my social work staff about it in February 2023 when the state and County spoke about it during meetings. I expected maybe the one in ten exceptional cases would become two and three out of ten but genuinely I would say it's more 7 out of 8. It's a problem and needs to be addressed.

I have one last example, a clear-cut case. An older adult family applied in November 2023 for traditional low-income ABD Medicaid. She was easily below the financial limit. Her family went to the Board several times but was told of delays beyond the usual 90 days, closer to four or five months. Finally, April 8th they were sent an email from the Board requesting two more documents. No problem. They gathered and submitted it April 11th in person. April 15th they received a denial letter dated April 8th, the same day they requested those additional documents, with reasons citing not submitting requested information. Her family went in next day, April 16th, again a very responsive set of people, and requested clarification. Supervisor was unable to meet with them and they were told they'd have to wait another 90 days to have the case re-reviewed. It had already been 130 days by that point, and

yes, they were counting. The application process is already a daunting one, but to provide an environment intimidating and humiliating to older adults and their families is not okay. I spoke to them myself in many cases and they are often hurried and ready to rush you off the phone after a question. And I know the lingo they use so I can't even imagine how mortified a lay person would feel when in need of services and support. Maybe empathy training might help. Please, I ask for advocacy for our seniors in Bergen. I understand the separate factions that exist within County levels but I urge you to not perpetuate the status quo. This is not okay. My staff is not okay as their time is wasted as they attempt to follow up and advocate. More importantly seniors are not okay.

It's already difficult asking for help and we know that. But to add feelings of defeat, shame, and unheard is dishonorable. The Division of Senior Services and Department of Human Services already is doing some great things and some progressive things. And attempting for more. But can we please address this elephant in the room? Medicaid Unwinding is supposed to be a 12-month period ending in April but the I&A case managers and other case managers from CMOs are saying delays aren't going anywhere soon. Please. Thank you for this time hosting this public session.

(Applause).

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Thank you. I'm going to call up Ron Romano from the Division of Senior Services to just read a couple of testimonies that people have sent in. Since we have so many advocates in this room, anyone who would like to be part of our Advisory Council or our committees, we have

an application in the back on the table. This is to be either on our Advisory Council or one of the committees which is the Legislative committee, Education Committee, and we're going to bring back the Health Committee. So, if you have any interest or you'd like to know a little bit about the Advisory Council, there's a form in the back. Thank you.

>> Good morning. I have four testimonies to read. I'm not reading them in any particular order of importance.

This is from JoAnn Mitchell in Waldwick, New Jersey, who states -- seniors in the County need better and more regular transportation options for easy transportation within the County without having to drive themselves. Ride Connect is useful, however it is insufficient. From my Bergen County home it is easier for me to get to midtown New York City than it is to get to the Senior Center in Midland Park. There is no mass transit that covers this option nor is there a senior shuttle. Help in this area to solve the situation would be appreciated. And that's sent from JoAnn Mitchell.

This is from Jacqueline Kates, project advisor, Age-Friendly Teaneck. April 30th is the final day of the festival of Passover, a holy day for conservative and orthodox Jews who will not be able to participate in Tuesday's hearing. When scheduling future hearings or events, I hope the religious needs of all constituents will be considered. Thank you.

This letter is from Cathy Arden of Cliffside Park. She writes, "I am for the most part a healthy senior citizen. I am 72 years old and moved to Cliffside Park just a few years ago, shortly before April 1st. I live with my rescue dog Dideon, he is almost 13 years old. I guess that makes him a senior citizen as well. It was suggested to me that I submit testimony because of an

emergency situation I found myself in this month.

I began not feeling well April 10th. I felt queasy and had lower abdominal pain. I had no idea what was wrong with me, but I just continued my day although I was unable to eat. I had Dideon to take care of. He gets walks four times a day, and meals two times a day. By evening I felt awful. I had to walk my dog and that was very difficult. I went to bed but I never slept. The pain grew worse. I felt increasingly ill. And my thought was this, had I not had my dog and no one else to take care of him but me, I would have called an ambulance that night. That's how much trouble I knew I was in. But I did nothing because I couldn't leave my dog alone in the apartment with no one to take care of him, feed him, walk him, et cetera. I knew he barked like crazy when the EMTs arrived and that he probably wouldn't stop barking after I was taken away. It was an impossible situation and one that can never be repeated. Following day, I ended up having to take an Uber, I was too sick to drive to Princeton, New Jersey because I had extended family there to take care of Dideon, and I would go to the hospital emergency room in Princeton. I made it to the ER just in time. I was diagnosed with acute appendicitis, and I had emergency surgery. I was lucky, although my appendix was on the verge of perforating. Although they were able to remove it before that occurred. It is clear to me I need emergency backup not just for myself, but for my dog as well. I know for a fact I'm not the only senior citizen who lives alone and has sole responsibility for their beloved dog. Research has shown that senior citizens live longer with pets. We are encouraged to have them. But we need support when an emergency arises.

I ask my life – I'm sorry – her typo. I risk my life that Wednesday night

because of my love and sole responsibility for my dog, not to mention my concern for others in the building if he began to bark for hours on end. We need a system in place in which there is someone we can call to take care of our dog while we are hospitalized. I am hoping Bergen County will address this matter seriously as it affects so many senior citizens who live here. Thank you. Cathy Arden, Cliffside Park.

And last but not least, this comes from a Barbara Giarmo. I don't have her town here.

I am unable to attend tomorrow's public meeting but would like to recommend the following. That we should publish a catalog of services and contact information to seniors that includes all that is available. I know that many services are listed online but not all of us are computer literate. Some catalog can ask and answer questions such as where is the closest fresh produce market, nearest dentist, et cetera.

Two, many seniors need help in the how to, such as how to file a property tax rebate, how to reboot a computer, how to report phone or computer scams and how to recognize them. How to request transportation, free hopefully, to doctors' appointments. How to Zoom online. I'm sure there are so many more.

Number three, many have families to help them in many situations but there are those who don't have anyone. I know such individuals can identify what they need. Perhaps a poll either through mail or online, door to door canvas or in person at local grocery stores to assess the needs. I hope that submission of results of this public hearing will be available to those who do not attend. Thank you. Barbara Giarmo.



LORRAINE JOEWONO: Thank you, Ron. Our last two testimonies will be read by Kerri Sherer.

>> Good morning. This is on behalf of Marcia. Dear Lorraine, I work with seniors and caregivers of Bergen County through BFC. (Bergen Family Center I assume that means). I recently visited a country in South America and I was pleasantly surprised how well their seniors are treated. For instance, they have priority and are first online to check out at grocery stores, airports, doctors' appointments, etc. Nobody questions them nor do they show disapproval. I also learned if they own a home and have an income considered sustainable but not exuberant, they don't pay taxes. If they own two or more homes, they are required to pay for those.

How can we mobilize politicians to advocate for seniors who have worked their entire life to be recognized fairly? I will not be able to attend in person, however I kindly ask you to make these available if possible.

This is from Ian Magerkurth, the Director of Government Affairs for Welbe Health.

Good morning and thank you, Director Joewono and others at the Division of Senior Services for convening this hearing. My name is Ian Magerkurth, Director of Government Affairs for Welbe Health. We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of older adults in Bergen County.

Welbe Health is a program for all-inclusive care for the elderly (PACE) organization founded by mission driven doctors to serve the most vulnerable older adults with compassionate and quality care. We provide comprehensive,

whole-person care for frail older adults 55 and older living with chronic health conditions and other complex needs requiring nursing level services as an alternative to nursing home care so participants can age in place in their homes and communities. We are the first public benefit company in PACE, prioritizing corporate responsibility and formalizing our commitment to all stakeholders in the communities that we operate in and serve.

In 2023, the NJ Division of Aging Services awarded us with the opportunity to develop the PACE program to serve Bergen County which we anticipate opening in the next two to three years. Our shared mission-driven and community partnership-oriented approach will enable frail, vulnerable New Jerseyans throughout Bergen County to age in place safely in their community, significantly improving their quality of life. Most PACE participants are dual eligible for both Medicare and Medicaid and will pay nothing out-of-pocket.

Overall PACE provides an integrated system of managed care. When an individual signs up for PACE, we become the health insurer and provider of care. Each participant is assigned an interdisciplinary team of clinicians and other care professionals that manage and coordinate all medical, social, and behavioral care, both in home and at our PACE center which is supported by a network of contracted community specialists.

PACE participants and their caregivers are involved in discussions to develop and implement their individualized and coordinated care plan to work to address the ever-evolving health needs and goals of care with the support of their inter-disciplinary team.

Pace services include primary care, medications both prescription and over-the-counter, home care, meals and nutritional counseling, social work,

occupational and physical therapy, and round-trip door to door transportation from where they reside to our PACE center, any offsite specialists, and other services in the community. Furthermore, we provide restorative programming, home modifications, and other unique solutions to promote and maintain independence, function and mobility.

Finally, they can choose to remain in PACE through the final stages of their life as we integrate the practice and principles of palliative and end-of-life care into our care delivery without the need to enroll into a separate program such as hospice.

In addition to PACE's all-inclusive care and services, PACE programs have proven outcomes in reductions in hospitalizations, emergency room visits, and family caregiver burden and burn out. Over 96 percent of family members are satisfied with the support they receive through PACE, and over 97 percent of family caregivers would recommend PACE to someone in a similar situation.

Moreover, by addressing the behavioral health and well-being of our participants, PACE enrollees are less likely to suffer depression.

Welbe Health is excited to bring this proven and effective PACE model of care to Bergen County and looks forward to continued collaboration with the Division of Senior Services and other stakeholders through Bergen County as we continue the process to develop our program. In the meantime, should you need additional information please email me and his email address is listed if anyone is interested. We can provide that for you. Thank you for your time. Very truly yours, Ian Magerkurth.

(Applause).

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Thank you. Before we conclude is there anyone

else who would like to speak? First, I would like to thank our panelists for being here today. Thank you.

(Applause).

Thank you. And I do know them. After this hearing, I know we will all go back, we will look at your testimony. We will address the issues that we can address. And hopefully again when the testimony is all completed, we will post it on our website.

I do want to say one more thing since it's Older Americans Act Month kick off. We are collecting adult briefs and we will have bins in our lobby. With these adult briefs because there are so many people, seniors that need them to keep their independence and dignity. We also give them to our Meals on Wheels clients that are homebound and need them. And we share them with other organizations that need them. So, if you can spread the word that if anybody has adult briefs, or maybe someone you're caring for or someone whom you know doesn't need them anymore, passed away and don't know where to drop them off, please drop them off to us. Thank you.

And I thank you all for coming today and making this public hearing especially special to us because, again, we need to know what really your needs are. And we need to know how to address these issues. Which are so important to our seniors in Bergen County. Thank you, everyone.

(Applause).

>> Housing Authority of Bergen County, I know there were a lot of inquiries and questions about affordable housing. We're HUD subsidized, restricted of what jurisdictions we can go to. We have three waiting lists of

seniors opening in May so we ask you to please look at our website, and you can see how to apply. If you're 55 for Northvale and the other are 62 and other. There are income restrictions and limited to one to two people because they're all one- and two-bedroom apartments. Opening up in May - May 13 through 17 I believe.

LORRAINE JOEWONO: Can you also get that information to Senior Services and we'll get that out also.

KATHY PISCO: You got it. Thank you so much, everyone.