

Joint Hearing on Proposed Agency Consolidation in Philadelphia
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Testimony of:
Reneé C. Cunningham, MSS
Associate Director, Center in the Park
Member of Board of Directors, PA Association of Senior Centers (PASC)
rcunningham@centerinthepark.org

Good Afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today. I do so on behalf of the Board of Directors, Executive Director, staff and members of Center in the Park, a nationally-accredited senior center in Northwest Philadelphia. I am Reneé Cunningham, Center in the Park's Associate Director and board member of the Pennsylvania Association of Senior Centers (PASC). I bear regrets from our Executive Director, Lynn Fields Harris, who is in Harrisburg at a board meeting of the Pennsylvania Behavioral Health and Aging Coalition (PBHAC) on which she serves. Lynn is a former Chair of the State Council on Aging, current member of the PA Long Term Care Council, Chair of the National Institute of Senior Centers and board member of the National Council on Aging, working tirelessly at every level to ensure that senior centers have a voice.

In the legacy of our Center's founders and early supporters, like Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panther Movement, we take our role as advocates very seriously – evidenced by our active engagement on behalf of our older adult participants. Our Center's very mission is to “promote positive aging, foster community connections and listen to the voices of our members.”

Thank you to the members of the Senate for the opportunity to give voice to the concerns Philadelphia's older adults have regarding the consumption of the PA Department of Aging by a much larger department. In particular, we remain grateful to Senator Haywood, in whose district Center in the Park is located. We greatly appreciate Senator Haywood's long history with our Center and his unfailing commitment to understanding his constituents, as he regularly engages with our members.

We acknowledge the need to re-envision how services are delivered for the aging population in the City and across the Commonwealth; the sheer number of Pennsylvanians turning 60 every day necessitates that. We assert, however, that more stakeholder involvement in that process is required. Once again, as advocates we find ourselves reacting to a proposal that is already drawn and that we can't help but feel is a foregone conclusion. The voices of the older adults who will be effected have not been sought or included, nor those of the advocates and stakeholders who have repeatedly asked for, and effectively denied, a place at the table.

First, we believe strongly that losing a cabinet-level advocate for Pennsylvania's aging adults means a deliberate attenuation of their voices. This would be a mistake, especially at a time of unprecedented growth in the aging population and compounded by uncertainty and change in how aging services are delivered especially in home and community-based settings.

Second, the proposed move threatens the sacrosanctity of the Lottery funds. The Pennsylvania Lottery is the only lottery of its kind whose proceeds are solely designated for programs for older adults. It could easily get diluted and used for other purposes, despite denials of that potential – we have seen it happen in the past. We fought against it then, along with PASC, and we fight against that likely, dare I say imminent, progression now.

We have seen no support or explanation of how certain programs, like the Long-term Care Ombudsman Program, which Center in the Park provides for residents of long-term care in NW and NE Philadelphia, will maintain its advocacy role, free of conflict; and, are perplexed about how the advocacy, licensing and regulatory roles can be merged into one department. It's difficult enough to gain the confidence of long-term care residents because of the fear of reprisal within the facility, having all departments rolled into one will surely erode that confidence even further.

As part of the continuum of aging services and supports, senior centers stand at the focal point and for many are the first entry into the aging network, older adults and caregivers rely on the area agencies on aging and senior centers to

guide them and help them navigate. Senior Centers are trusted in their communities as resources and as the places where older adults can continue to be engaged, avoiding isolation and also learn to manage and prepare for challenges that are sometimes associated with aging.

In Philadelphia, and specifically in NW Philadelphia, Center in the Park is an anchor in the community, and has been for nearly 50 years. As other centers are closing, we continue to find ways to augment the funding we receive from Philadelphia Corporation for Aging (which is approximately 60% of our budget) to maintain our strong presence in the community.

The need for senior centers like Center in the Park continues to grow; as does the need to evolve as the influx of Baby Boomers into the aging demographic demands a multi-generational approach to senior center programming. The aging population needs more State-level attention and funding, not less. This consolidation is supposed to be a big money-saver for the General Fund, but PDA is both federally-funded and Lottery-funded; it receives \$0.00 dollars from the General Fund. Absorbing PDA into a larger department saves the Fund no money. The Lottery is at risk here, as are the agencies it funds, and the people they serve.

According to the last Census, 20% of Philadelphia's older adults have incomes less than 100% of poverty level and a little less than half have incomes less than 200% of poverty level. Nationally, from 2001 to 2010, there has been an 80% increase in the number of older adults in the United States who are facing hunger (Meals on Wheels Research Foundation). In Pennsylvania, 46%, nearly half of older adults are economically vulnerable, and 15.3% are facing hunger. I could spend the day here enumerating for you the challenges that face older Pennsylvanians and listing the programs and services currently in place that seek to assist them in facing these challenges, albeit with inadequate resources and a growing complexity when it comes to accessing them.

Faced with such challenges, we believe it is imperative that older adults have **a single, clear, and consistent point of entry** for accessing programs and services, including community-based wellness programs, such as those offered at CIP and many senior centers; daily meals; help at home when they are temporarily or situationally homebound; transportation and other lottery-funded programs.

Because older adults traditionally have under-utilized programs such as SNAP, for example, and programs that they view as “welfare” . . . it is beyond insensitive and flat-out dangerous to think that older adults would have to “**apply**” for services at the county human services offices. That’s taking a giant leap backwards in service delivery. Is that how the State plans to save money—by literally **RE-stigmatizing** aging services and making them **MORE** difficult to access? Research shows that older adults will access services, encouraged by their peers, in trusted community- based senior centers. Changing that will be a disaster.

As aging services providers who advocate for older adult participants, we also need a direct path to a department head who sits at the cabinet table with the Governor to guarantee that the needs, wants and concerns of older adults can and will be prioritized and shared across the government agencies. Taking away our cabinet-level advocate sends a very ominous message to not only our older adults, but to the service providers.

May, as you know, is Older Americans Month and this year’s theme, **Age Out Loud!** recognizes that the voices of older adults are essential and vital in shaping the future and it beckons us to listen . . . I encourage you in your deliberations to listen to the voices of the Commonwealth’s older adults and maintain a separate Department of Aging in Pennsylvania.

When the department was created, it was older adults who saw the need and worked in councils across the state to come together to demand the legislation and support its passage. The need is even more pressing now than it was then. Older Pennsylvanians need a strong, independent voice and visible presence in Harrisburg; and, they have come to rely upon the PDA to serve this critical role in the Commonwealth.

I began this testimony referencing Maggie Kuhn, who founded the national Gray Panthers after being forced to retire at age 65. She protested in the streets and in the halls of Congress. One of her most famous quotes is, “Speak your mind even if your voice shakes.” But the rest of that quote is: “When you least expect it,

someone may actually listen to what you have to say. Well-aimed slingshots can topple giants.”

Thank you for listening.