

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 2017 - By Victor E. Heinrich

Advocating for Seniors

Chapel Hill—The North Carolina Senior Tar Heel Legislature (NCSTHL) held its first meeting of 2017 on March 14 and 15. The focus, as it is every odd numbered year, was advocating for older adults with elected officials at the NC General Assembly. The priorities that were selected previously are the primary method of conveying to the North Carolina General Assembly and other advocacy groups that the NCSTHL, representing all 100-counties in North Carolina, is unified as a single voice on aging issues.

Ninety-six delegates and alternates attended. Eighteen new delegates and alternates were sworn in to begin service with the organization, representing their counties, by serving as advocates for older adults.

In an ongoing effort to keep all members of the NCSTHL informed and educated on aging issues, the Division of Aging, and Adult Services (DAAS) provided several knowledgeable speakers.

Mary Edwards, staff from the Division of Aging and Adult Services, stated currently 15% of the State's population is 65 and over and by 2025, 20% of the State's population will be 65 and over. She also mentioned that the Governor's budget included additional funding to support low-income elderly citizens by investing in the Home and Community Care Block Grant, which funds in-home services, transportation, and meals. Ms. Edwards also discussed recent legislation introduced at the General Assembly regarding the establishment of a Subcommittee on Aging of the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services.

Dawn Oakley Gartman, Project C.A.R.E (Caregivers Alternatives to Running on Empty) State Director, with DAAS, advised that three \$500 vouchers are available statewide annually to eligible caregivers in crisis.. Additional information is located at <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/assistance/adult-services/project-care>

Mary Bethel is Chair of the Coalition on Aging which represents more than 50 member organizations. She listed a critical need for seniors as home care agency staff. Home care agencies are challenged in recruiting as the pay is minimal. H.B. 238 would provide for a minimum wage increase to \$15 over five years. However, there is no guarantee that the bill will pass.

Bethel also informed us that North Carolina's population has surpassed 10 million and the state ranks ninth nationally, both in total population and in the number of people 65 and over. By 2025, one-fifth of our population will be over 65 and total 2.5 million.

Charmaine Fuller Cooper, AARP Associate State Director for Advocacy, advised that the newly proposed federal government's health care act would: "impose an unfair and unacceptable age tax". It would allow insurance companies to charge people between the ages of 50 and 64 (those too young for Medicare) five times what they can charge younger consumers. Insurers are currently allowed to charge older consumers three times as much.

Vance Braxton, Director/Deputy Commissioner, NC Senior Health Insurance Information Program (SHIIP) commented that SHIIP served 105,078 people in 2016. "About 70% of the people we talk to save money by changing their health care plans based on their needs and prescription drugs." "You need to know if the plan you have or are looking at covers your particular drugs" he said. "The time to find out that your drug is not covered is not when you go to the pharmacy and you're told that your medications cost \$80 because they're not covered by your plan." The total federal budget for SHIIP across the United States is \$52 million. "Across North Carolina we saved consumers more than that" Braxton said."

Braxton added: "A new Medicare regulation requires that you and your representative be notified orally and in writing whether you are an inpatient or under observation when you are in the hospital. This must be done between 24 and 36 hours of your arrival. The regulation is MOON (Medicare Outpatient Observation Notice) instructions. If the individual is in observation status, Medicare will not pay and the patient could incur out of pocket expenses, often times, hundreds and even thousands of dollars.

Braxton informed us that to promote personal privacy, beginning in 2018, new Medicare cards will be issued without Social Security numbers listed. For more information or to contact a SHIIP representative, call 1-855-408-1212.

The NCSTHL priorities for 2016-2017 are:

1. Re-establish the Study Commission on Aging. The NCSTHL requests the North Carolina General Assembly re-establish the North Carolina Study Commission on Aging.
2. Increase Home and Community Care Block Grant Funding. The NCSTHL requests the General Assembly increase the Home and Community Care Block Grant funding by \$7 million dollars in recurring funds.
3. Increase Funding for Senior Centers. NCSTHL recommends that the General Assembly increase funding for the Senior Centers to continue to meet the vital needs of North Carolina's growing population of older adults.

4. Sustain and Expand Project C.A.R.E. NCSTHL recommends that the General Assembly increase recurring funding for Project C.A.R.E. in 2017-2018 by 10% annually and thereafter to meet the expected growth statewide.
5. Strengthen and Fund North Carolina's Adult Protective Services Program (APS). NCSTHL recommends that the General Assembly recognize and value its vulnerable and older citizens by making available \$5 million in recurring funds in the State budget to meet the growing need for APS in North Carolina.

Members of the NCSTHL spent the morning on March 15 at the State Legislative Office complex to advocate for and educate legislators about the organization's priorities.

Our Speaker, Dr. Althea Taylor-Jones reported that "our priorities and information were well received. I had the opportunity to meet personally with Rep. Pat Hurley, Co-Chair of the House Aging Committee." This is a newly constituted committee in the House of Representatives. It meets at 11a.m. on the second and fourth Wednesdays, in Room 423 of the Legislative Office Building.

The NCSTHL promotes citizen involvement and advocacy concerning aging issues before the N.C. General Assembly and assesses the legislative needs of older adults by convening a forum modeled after the General Assembly.

For more information contact Mary Lou Blakeney, Guilford County Delegate purplelady44@gmail.com, 336-471-3178 or Dr. Terry Oliver, Guilford County Delegate Alternate, t_oliver5@bellsouth.net, 336-674-1222. You may also contact the local Area Agency on Aging at [336-904-0300, www.PTRC.ORG]. Please visit the North Carolina Senior Tar Heel Legislature website at www.ncsthl.org.

The next NCSTHL meeting is scheduled for June 13-14, 2017 in Chapel Hill.