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Service Access Issues Committee Presents Five Resolutions for the NC Senior Tar Heel Legislature

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This article is the third of six features describing the current focus of the NC Senior Tar Heel Legislature leading up to the 2023 legislative session of the NC General Assembly.

The six issues committees and five standing committees of the unicameral NC Senior Tar Heel Legislature (NCSTHL) operate similarly to the NC General Assembly, which has 18 senate committees and 42 house committees. The NCSTHL's Resolutions Standing Committee received a record number of 67 legislative proposals during July 2022 from its member body of 84 delegates and 51 alternates. Fourteen of the 67 proposals were assigned to the Service Access Issues Committee, chaired by Gayla Woody (Gastonia), which was tasked to narrow the proposals from 14 to the top three to five for the upcoming legislative cycle's slate of resolutions.

The NCSTHL's Service Access Issues Committee is authorized to assess obstacles that stand in the way of older adults who need to access supportive services. The issues may include provision for transportation to medical appointments, groceries, prescriptions, and other life necessities; access to services such as in-home aide, nutrition programs, housing, education, exercise, and socialization outlets; and any gap that blocks the ability of older adults to live independently.

After two weeks of deliberation, the Service Access Issues Committee has chosen five resolutions to put before the NCSTHL body for vote.

Tied for 1st rank is a resolution to restore \$50 million for state transportation funding for the Rural Operating Assistance Program (ROAP) grant. When it comes to quality of life for older adults, transportation is the fundamental common denominator for accessing all other goods and supportive services. Seniors without transportation face crises of hunger, lack of medical care, and social isolation in both urban and rural areas of the state.

Also ranked 1st is a resolution to establish a wage floor of \$15 an hour for all direct care workers in all settings of care. Anyone who is trying to care for an aging adult can confirm the difficulty they face in hiring in-home care workers or seeking placement in long-term care, which is currently limiting admissions due to staffing shortages. Direct care workers are the aides who perform the essential tasks that preserve dignity and ensure health and safety, such as toileting, changing, bathing, grooming, dressing, and feeding. Low wages and lack of medical insurance benefits have resulted in an exodus from this field, leaving family caregivers with few options for critical support.

The third ranking resolution is to allocate to the NC Housing Trust Fund at least \$3 million dollars over the current amount in recurring annual funding. Approximately 1.2 million North Carolinians cannot find affordable

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housing, yet the NC Housing Trust Fund was decreased to \$7.6 million in FY 2021. NC ranks 28th nationally in highest housing income needed to afford a two-bedroom apartment in fair market rental.

The fourth resolution is to increase state in-home care funding by \$2 million to allow more senior residents to remain at home rather than having to be admitted to long-term care facilities.

The fifth resolution is to increase funding to \$300,000 for the Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, and to expand eligibility beyond congregate nutrition participants, increasing the maximum allocation per person. North Carolina has the 10th highest rate of food insecurity in the nation. The NCDHHS identified 622 census tracts across NC as having low access to healthy food. It is proven that a diet rich in vegetables and fruits can lower blood pressure, reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke, and prevent some types of cancer, all of which lower the costs of healthcare.

Any individual or family engaged in caring for an aging loved one can attest to the difficulties they face in all of these service access arenas. In many cases, the first hurdle is convincing the care receiver to accept help, but then the pathways to finding the assistance that is needed are blocked by lack of funding, inadequate systems, and unrealistic policies established by decision-makers. Medicare provides assistance for medical expenses but makes no provision whatsoever for long-term care expenses, whether in-home care or placement in facilities. The NCSTHL has repeatedly requested legislation to preserve and protect older adults, and will continue in its mission to bring priority issues to the attention of the NC General Assembly. For now, the Service Access Issues Committee has completed its work. In October, the NCSTHL will decide which of these five resolutions will be chosen as legislative recommendations for the NC General Assembly's consideration in 2023.

About the NCSTHL: The North Carolina Senior Tar Heel Legislature was created as a nonpartisan, unicameral body by the North Carolina General Assembly with the passage of Senate Bill 479 in July of 1993. Its purpose is to identify the most pressing issues facing older adults across the state and propose new legislation that will improve their quality of life to the NC General Assembly. The NCSTHL is comprised of delegates and alternates representing each of North Carolina's 100 counties, supported by the area agencies on aging serving the state's sixteen service areas.

For more information about NCSTHL, visit www.ncseniortarheellegislature.org.

To contact your local NCSTHL member, send an email request to media contact Allison Brown at katbrown1029@gmail.com, stating the originating county. Or visit the North Carolina Association of Area Agencies on Aging (NC4A) to locate the correct region and county, at <https://www.nc4a.org/membership>, and request NCSTHL member contact information from the local Area Agency on Aging.

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