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Crime-Safety-Security Issues Committee Presents Proposal for the NC Senior Tar Heel Legislature

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This article is the fifth of six features describing the current focus of the NC Senior Tar Heel Legislature (NCSTHL) leading up to the 2023 legislative session of the NC General Assembly. We are highlighting the six issues committees as they determine which proposals are most important and timely for legislative consideration. The Crime-Safety-Security Issues Committee is featured for this article.

The NCSTHL's Crime-Safety Issues Committee, chaired by Rosalyn Pettyford (Durham County), focuses on physical, emotional, and financial threats faced by older adults. The topics include fraud and scam schemes; elder abuse; residents' rights; supporting Adult Protective Services; housing subsidies; ADA home improvements; and enhancing disaster preparedness; among others.

The Crime-Safety-Security Issues Committee received five proposals to review as possible resolutions. They included providing electronic notification devices for older adults living alone; enacting a Victim's Rights Assistance Bill to compensate victims for injuries and damages; supporting efforts to reform NC's Guardianship Law; updating NC's judicial system to be more efficient for all NC's citizens; and one of the longest-standing requests for the NC General Assembly, investing in the state's Adult Protective Services (APS) program. After two weeks' deliberation, the Committee chose the proposal to allocate recurring state funds to address current and future APS staff shortages as its primary recommendation that the NCSTHL body will consider when it votes to determine its top legislative priorities at the October General Session.

In NC, county departments of social services are mandated by statute 108A to investigate reports of the abuse, neglect, and exploitation of older, disabled, and vulnerable adults. Most people have heard of Child Protective Services, but many do not realize their county department of social services (DSS) is also responsible for Adult Protective Services, when older adults are subject to mistreatment. Mistreatment includes physical, sexual, psychological abuse, neglect, self-neglect, and financial exploitation.

With the growth in the older adult population, county departments of social services APS units are simply overwhelmed by increased demand. In SFY 2005-2006, across the state, APS received 14,001 reports, compared to 32,075 reports received in SFY 2020-21, reflecting an increase of 129% in 17 years. Compare this growth in the number of abuse reports to the growth rate of the older adult population: In 2005 there were 1.46 million adults age 60+, increasing to 2.46 million in 2021, for an increase of 68%. The increase in the number of APS reports is almost double the rate of increase in the age 60+ population, indicating a tragic rise in the percentage of older adults who are experiencing mistreatment. Added to that, the NYS Elder Abuse Prevalence Study reports that for every one case that is reported, 24 cases go unreported.

In North Carolina, the federal Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) funds 21% of the programs, the counties fund the remaining 79%, and the state provides no funding. Unfortunately, the SSBG is a shared bucket of funding

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across several other county DSS departments, which results in disparities across counties as to availability of APS resources. Often, the limited SSBG funds earmarked for APS are depleted by mid-year. Counties report on average they need two additional full-time APS staff to address programmatic needs.

APS incidents are reported from across the spectrum of income and education. The state has more people 60 and older than under 18 years. The projected growth among the age groups 65-74 (25%), 75-84 (88%) and 85+ (116%) indicates that as the baby boomers continue to age, by 2040 there will be a significantly increased proportion of older adults in the state, creating challenges for long-term services and supports. (NC State Profile 2020 <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/media/14887/open>)

The NCSTHL is committed to bring attention to critical challenges faced by the state's older adults. The need to increase additional APS staff, in keeping with the growth of not only the population but the growth of abuse reports, will be one of 16 proposals the NCSTHL will vote upon in October.

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 Agency 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 ncsthlpr@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 on aging.

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