

The Daily Item

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OPINION

SENIORS NEED NEW COMMON-SENSE LAWS

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Many people think of the senior years as the golden years. A relaxing retirement spent golfing, traveling the world and working on hobbies. But for too many seniors, both in Lynn and across Massachusetts, these are the years of financial struggle. In Massachusetts, six out of 10 senior citizens living alone do not have the resources that they need to meet their basic needs. That's a higher percentage than in any state, except for Mississippi.

Part of this is due to the high cost of living here, including rising rents and property taxes, and cold weather that pushes up heating costs. But part of the problem is that Massachusetts lawmakers have so far failed to act on common-sense legislation that would make health care and food more affordable for seniors, and bring in federal dollars to do so.

But seniors, led by the Massachusetts Senior Action Council, are ramping up our fight for economic justice. And we are already having some success.

This year — after five years of our advocacy — Gov. Charlie Baker included a measure in his budget that would help 40,000 seniors afford their medicine and doctors' visits. He proposed expanding the eligibility to a federal program called the Medicare Savings program. It's a good first step. We need all of our lawmakers to make sure this provision stays in the final budget that gets voted on this summer.

But the Baker budget doesn't fix the whole problem. We have filed a bill that, over three years, would let a total of 70,000 Massachusetts seniors access the Medicare Savings Program, significantly reducing their health care bills. It's crucial that lawmakers pass this bill, because 1 out of 5 of our seniors spends more than 20 percent of their monthly income on healthcare.

Lawmakers seem to “get it.” Nearly 100 legislators have signed onto our bill as co-sponsors, and we feel confident that they will vote in favor of this bill. The challenge is just getting a vote on the floor of the House and Senate. After all, only about 10 percent of bills actually get voted on. So we need lawmakers to see this as a priority — and to push their leaders to take action on this bill — this year.

At Mass. Senior Action, we are also taking on food insecurity. When the Shaw’s closed in Lynn, it made shopping for food much more difficult for local seniors. City Councilor Dianna Chakoutis tried to send us a life line, for which we are truly grateful — but even weekly buses to reach the grocery store and the pharmacy are not adequate for us to get the healthy foods and medicine we need.

But seniors also face food access issues because they can’t afford their groceries. That’s why we are supporting a bill to cut the red tape and make sure that all seniors who are eligible for SNAP benefits (commonly called food stamps), actually get them. Right now there are separate, complicated application processes for Massachusetts residents to apply for MassHealth — our state version of Medicaid — and for SNAP benefits. This doesn’t make sense since the same people are typically eligible for both.

This bill would create a simple box to check on the MassHealth form to apply for SNAP benefits at the same time. The best part is that making the SNAP program accessible to more seniors won’t cost the state a dime, because it’s all federal dollars.

In Lynn, we are fortunate to have a Beacon Hill delegation that understands the importance of these issues.

State Sen. Brendan Crighton has been a terrific ally to seniors. Please call him to thank him for his leadership on advocating for the Medicare Savings Program expansion (House Bill 1199/Senate Bill 699). He is also a cosponsor of the SNAP benefit legislation (House Bill 1173/S.B. 678).

Our state representatives have also shown their support. Reps. Daniel Cahill and Peter Capano have signed on to both of these bills as cosponsors. Additionally, Rep. Lori Ehrlich has signed on as a cosponsor for the SNAP bill.

Readers, please call them to let them know how important this is, and to keep pushing for the bill to reach the House floor.

Massachusetts is known for being a progressive state. But right now, the state is leaving seniors behind, even as our economy prospers. Massachusetts can do better, and needs to do so this year.

Kathleen Paul is a Lynn resident and president of the North Shore Chapter of the Massachusetts Senior Action Council.