

Senate Energy Policy and Public Utilities Committee
February 5, 2009

Testimony from Sharon Gire, Director, Office of Services to the Aging

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

The Office of Services to the Aging, as the state unit on aging for Michigan, is mandated by the Older Americans Act to advocate on behalf of all persons age 60 and better. This mandate allows our office and the 16 Area Agencies on Aging to implement programs that protect older Michigianians, regardless of assets, income or other factors.

In that role, the Office is pleased to support Governor Granholm and the Michigan Public Services Commission's actions to protect vulnerable populations. The actions proposed by the Governor and implemented by the MPSC are especially critical to the safety of Michigan's older residents.

Everyone felt shock and pain following the tragic death of Marvin Schur in Bay City last month. Mr. Schur was not a client of aging services, however, he fit the description of someone who might have been helped by the Gatekeeper program:

The Gatekeeper program is designed to assist vulnerable older adults who need help, but may be unable to get it for themselves. This includes older adults who live alone, have little contact with others, have difficulty in functioning and are easily unnoticed or overlooked by others.

The Gatekeeper program was developed in 1978 in Spokane, Washington at a mental health agency. The program earned national recognition, awards and has been replicated at state and local levels throughout the country.

The program uses "community gatekeepers" such as

- o utility workers,
- o customer services staff, and
- o postal carriers

to identify isolated, at-risk older adults and refer them to local aging services.

The program is simple:

- o basic training, usually about an hour long, is provided to employees who have regular contact with customers.
- o The training provides some guidance for signs of someone who needs attention, information or assistance.
- o When the employee identifies an older customer in need of assistance, they refer the person.
- o The situation may be internally reviewed. If additional assistance is needed, a referral to the local Area Agency on Aging is made.
- o The aging agency then makes contact with the person, determines their needs and provides case management and referral as needed.

In 1987, OSA implemented the Gatekeeper program. Other utilities have participated, but over the past 21 years, Consumers Energy joined with OSA in recognizing their employees on a monthly and annual basis for referring an older customer in need to the aging network. Consumers Energy employees have assisted various older adults, who, for a variety of reasons, are faced with difficulties.

Examples include a call from a woman who wanted the utility to know that her payment was in the mail, but that her daughter was abusive, taking her food and money. After being referred to the aging network, "meals on wheels" was set up, transportation to a doctor's office arranged and home health care visits were provided.

Utility workers have found faulty ovens, furnaces that spew flames, frozen pipes, and other hazards. Meter readers have encountered widows and widowers, bereft with grief and unable to cope, despite having the financial resources. In some cases, the problems are physical, cognitive or emotional. In other cases, it's due to a lack of funds, a "rugged individual" approach to life or not having anyone to ask for help. The Gatekeeper program provides a connection to needed services, by people who are there when help is needed.

Over the past 21 years, OSA and the Commission on Services to the Aging has been pleased to honor Consumers Energy employees who not only identify someone needing help, but take the next step and connect them to a source of assistance.

Since Mr. Schur's death, Mr. Drew Orvosh, Director of Region VII Area Agency on Aging has contacted the Bay City Municipal Utility. A meeting is scheduled for next week to discuss implementation of the Gatekeeper program. Region VII's Consumers Energy customers are already protected by the program.

OSA has asked all Area Agencies on Aging to review their programs and policies to prevent another tragedy. We have supported the expansion of the Gatekeeper program to areas and utilities that are not currently participating.

We applaud the Governor's actions to protect Michigan's vulnerable residents and we support the MPSC in their implementation of protections. We also look forward to helping to expand the Gatekeeper program throughout Michigan's utilities.

Thank you for your time.