

Pennsylvania Alliance for Retired Americans

Retiree Advocate

A State Affiliate of the National Alliance for Retired Americans

Issue #1 in 2010 – HAPPY NEW YEAR!

President's Corner

Jean Friday, President of PARA

What a year it has been! I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to all PARA's members, affiliates, leadership and partners for helping to make 2009 a success for our organization. I could not be more proud of the progress we have made and all that we have accomplished together.

First, let me thank PARA's new officers. Ray Myers (CWA), Wayne Burton (APSCURF) and Mike Doyle (Community) each stepped up to take a vacant position this year: Executive Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer, respectively. I also want to thank our new Board Members who joined us in 2009 – Amanda Lapina (SEIU) and Carol Coultas (CWA). Along with our returning Board Members, PARA's leadership team is as strong as ever.

I also am thrilled that we welcomed so many new affiliates to PARA. Our organization continues to grow, and I fully expect that growth to continue in 2010.

I would like to thank Bill George and Rick Bloomingdale of the PA AFL-CIO for being such a wonderful partner, and for all the support they provide to PARA. Thank you as well to our state-sustaining unions and all our returning affiliates for your continued participation.

Most importantly, I would like to extend my thanks to all the PARA members who participated in our activities this year. We had so many members come to each of our Regional Legislative Conferences, participate in lobby events, call into teleconferences and write or call their representatives to advocate for seniors. I continue to be humbled by the dedication and determination of the activists among our membership who will never stop struggling for what is best for our state and our nation. It is my sincerest hope that PARA continues to be an organization worthy of your valuable time and tireless effort. Thank you again for all that you do, and please stay active in 2010!

PARA Supports the "Home Care Consumer Information Report Card"

Adam Swope, Alliance Field Organizer

Many seniors in Pennsylvania choose to receive their long-term care at home, rather than move into a nursing home. PARA believes that safeguarding this choice for all seniors is very important. Therefore, PARA is interested in any legislation that makes home care safer, more affordable or more accessible. In the case of HB 1961, establishing the **Pennsylvania Home Care Consumer Information Report Card**, safety and transparency are the goal.

Homecare agencies that take taxpayer funds and should use them to take good care of seniors, deal fairly with workers, and operate according to the law. Unfortunately, some agencies don't. Seniors are entitled to detailed, accurate, and meaningful information about how each agency conducts its business. It's time for agencies to put their cards on the table with the Home Care Consumer Information Report Card. New legislation in the PA House of Representatives would require agencies that take public dollars to be publicly accountable by creating a Report Card that allows seniors to make informed choices about their home care.

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PARA Year-in-review

Adam Swope, Alliance Field Organizer

2009 was a great year for PARA, thanks to the hard work of our Leadership, the commitment of our affiliates and members and the support of the national alliance and supporting organizations here in Pennsylvania. Together, we have completed a year to be proud of!

Most importantly, PARA continues to grow! PARA added almost 20 new affiliates this year around the state, as of this writing in early December. New affiliates were chartered in York, Norristown, Honesdale, Franklin, Johnstown, Cresson, Shamokin, Wernersville, Uniontown, Allentown, Clearfield, Scranton, Hazleton, Hamburg, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. President Friday, the Board Members and I continue to work on bringing new affiliates in, so I expect to be able to report another 20 next year!

PARA's influence on state legislative issues important to seniors took a leap forward this year. In addition to adopting a State Legislative Priorities document covering what we want to see worked on at the capitol, PARA put out numerous statements in support of pro-senior legislation such as the Expansion of PACENET, the reauthorization of the Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council and, most recently, the Pennsylvania Home Care Agency Report Card legislation discussed in this newsletter.

Of course, PARA's number one priority in 2009 was to advocate for seniors issues as they relate to the debate over Health Care Reform. While we have been supportive of the reform effort's overall goal to cover the uninsured, because the uninsured create waste within the health care system and hurt Medicare's solvency; we have focused our efforts on making sure that provisions to directly help seniors make it into the final bills.

To this end, PARA has held over 25 lobby visits with Senators or Members of Congress to discuss eliminating the Medicare Part D "doughnut hole", eliminating co-pays for preventative services, helping pre-Medicare retirees find coverage and helping low-income seniors qualify for lower premiums. We also expressed our support for cutbacks to the profits that insurance companies make from Medicare Advantage, because Medicare dollars should be spent on care for seniors, not insurance company profits! Finally, PARA lobbied hard against the taxation of health care benefits. Regardless of the outcome of the reform effort, PARA made sure that working class seniors had their voices heard.

PARA also endeavored to keep our membership informed on all the latest health care reform news through our regular e-mail, newsletter and website updates, as well as encouraged members to contact their representatives by phone or by signing one of our post cards. Our most successful outreach effort was another slate of well-attended Regional Legislative Conferences, held this year in Butler, Philadelphia, Reading and Pittsburgh. At least 250 PARA members represented their affiliates at an RLC this year, hearing from great speakers and elected officials, and taking informative handouts back to their chapters.

As we look ahead to 2010 and another important election cycle, PARA's future as a strong advocate for seniors issues in Pennsylvania looks brighter than ever.

This Report Card would tell seniors what services each agency offers and when they are available, as well as how the business is run and whether the owners run other businesses too. It would also allow seniors to find out if an agency has broken the law or has had complaints or issues about its quality of care. Finally, seniors can see what caregivers are paid, and whether they earn benefits. This legislation would level the playing field with nursing homes, which already report this information. PARA looks forward to working with HB 1961's author, State Rep. Marc Gergely, to help this great idea become the law of the Commonwealth.

Where is our COLA?

**Don Rung, AFSCME Sub-Chapter 8304 President,
Penn State Retired Faculty/Staff Club**

As most SERS and PSERS retirees know, there is no automatic Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) in our state pensions. Each COLA requires a legislative act by our Senators and Reps in Harrisburg. The first COLA was enacted in 1968, followed by 1974, 1979, 1984, 1989, 1994, 1998, and a two-tiered COLA in 2002-03. COLAs have generally tried to offset about half the cost of living during the period from the last COLA, plus some consideration for those older retirees whose salary at retirement may have been lower than more recent retirees.

As is evident from the above data, the previous legislative consensus on enacting a COLA about every five years has been lost. Many states' pension plans have automatic COLAs, while others regularly address the need for a COLA. But Pennsylvania has become a battleground for those who oppose public pension COLAs, or for that matter, any kind of reasonable public pensions at all. As a result, we are one of a very few states that have enacted no COLA for retired state workers for almost a decade.

For over 20 years an ad-hoc coalition of retiree groups, called the COLA COALITION, has been the focal point in efforts to enact a COLA. This coalition is composed of representatives from 11 major retiree groups, including PARA. Other groups represented include state retirees represented by both AFSCME and SEIU, retired professors at State Universities represented by APSCURF and retired public school teachers represented by PSEA and AFT. The current reincarnation of the COLA COALITION began meeting in Harrisburg in 2007 and our last meeting this December was our 24th. The COLA COALITION supports House Bill 1970, a COLA bill introduced by Representative Pete Daley, a Democrat representing the 49th District (parts of Fayette and Washington counties) and will continue efforts to pass the bill in 2010.

While this is an issue that only affects some PARA members, I would urge all retirees to call their representatives and express their support for this legislation. As all of our pensions are under pressure from a variety of sources, we must stick together as retirees to fight each battle at full strength. Erosion of public pensions will only embolden those who seek to weaken privately-held pensions as well. So please, call your legislator today! Contact Adam Swope at aswope@retiredamericans.org or 717-231-2866 if you need help finding your representative.

News from the National Alliance for Retired Americans

Barbara J. Easterling, President

As 2009 draws to a close, I want to say thanks for all you did this year to educate and mobilize your fellow Alliance members on state and national issues. No matter how long the day, or how tough the fight, you consistently rose to the challenge.

It was an honor and a privilege to become president of the Alliance for Retired Americans earlier this year. For me, the Alliance is a constant reminder of how when people are brought together around a common goal, they can accomplish great things.

We've sure had our hands full this year with health care. I know this has been difficult. Seniors have been hit with a whirlwind of lies and scare tactics from insurance companies and political opportunists. Too often the truth gets lost in all this sound and fury – seniors actually have much to gain from health care reform.

Because of your great work in 2009, we have a chance to pass a law that will help Americans of all ages better afford to see a doctor or get a prescription filled. As I write this, we are nearing the finish line. But in this marathon health care debate, the last mile may be the hardest. We cannot stop now.

In 2010 we will need to finish health care reform, keep a watchful eye out for those who want to "reform" Social Security, and get ready for next fall's elections. Older voters will make up over one-third of the turnout in many states, so it will be more important than ever to educate our fellow retirees on the issues and where the candidates stand.

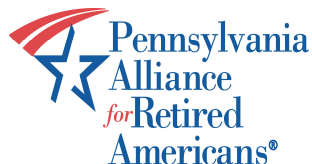
I hope you can join us in Las Vegas for the Alliance's National Convention. From April 5-8, we will hold workshops and training sessions to strengthen our organizing and advocacy skills. We will also hear from leading experts in public policy, health care, aging, and the media.

Again, thank you for all you do. I am continually amazed by Alliance members. You bring such experience, energy, and passion to your work. You are making a difference.

Best wishes for happy and healthy holidays.

WANT MORE NEWS FROM PARA?

E-mail Adam Swope at aswope@retiredamericans.org if you would like to receive "The Friday Alert" e-mail newsletter every week!



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