

## GOVERNMENT

## Kushner Talks About Senior Issues

By HERBERT P. WEISS, NHA

After a long day of shaking hands and campaign stumping, Linda Kushner, Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate, sits on her cream-colored living room couch, kicks off her shoes and reflects on meeting hundreds of seniors in her bid to become the state's first woman Democratic Senator.

The 55-year-old former teacher, lawyer and District 4 State Representative is challenging Senator John H. Chafee, an 18-year incumbent.

"Campaigning is a very enriching experience for me because so many older people have come up and shared their personal experiences and concerns with me," Kushner says. She adds that this personal contact, combined with being an older woman and caregiver to her late father, has made her more aware of the problems seniors face.

Understanding caregiver needs, Kushner successfully pushed the R.I. General Assembly to extend the Rhode Island's Medical Leave Act

that allowed employees to take unpaid leave to care for their parents or parents-in-law with catastrophic illnesses.

Kushner also introduced a bill enacted by the legislature in 1994 and vetoed by the Governor that would require 20 clock hours of continuing education annually for nursing home administrators to renew their licenses.

"Attending education programs regularly will keep administrators updated on operating their facilities amid a myriad of federal and state regulations and will keep them updated on newly emerging patient care and management trends," she says.

Many seniors who have followed the 1994 health care debates on Capitol Hill are also worried that

Congress will cut their Medicare benefits without addressing the high cost of

prescription drugs and long-term care, Kushner says. These are common concerns told to her by seniors across the state.

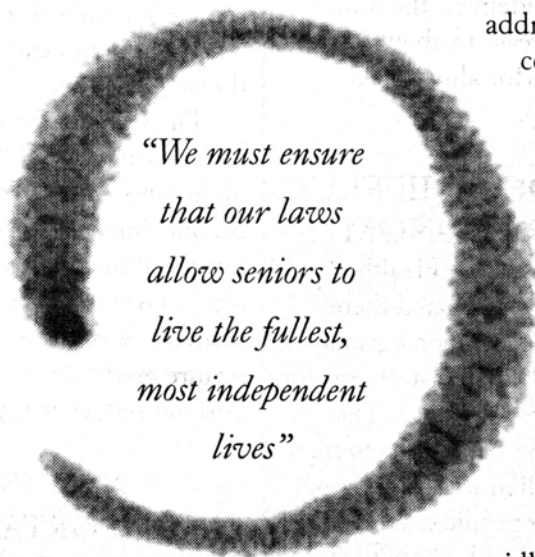
Congressional gridlock has stalled the health care reform movement this year. When the debates begin again in 1995, Kushner plans to call for comprehensive long-term care and prescription drug coverage. "Thousands of Rhode Island seniors age 60 and over, their spouses and middle-aged children will

be put in financial jeopardy if they are forced to pay for costly nursing home care out-of-pocket," Kushner says.

According to Kushner, another major senior concern is the inadequacy of their Social Security cost of living adjustments (COLA). Because their pensions are based on lower salaries they received years ago, the checks just don't cover the high cost of living today, she says.

Caring for family has traditionally been a role for women, Kushner says. "As a U.S. Senator, I will draw on my real-life experiences and that of older Rhode Islanders. We must ensure that our laws allow seniors to live the fullest, most independent lives," she says.

*Herbert P. Weiss is a Rhode Island-based freelance writer on health care and aging issues. He was a volunteer for the Linda Kushner For U.S. Senate Campaign in the spring of 1994.*



*"We must ensure that our laws allow seniors to live the fullest, most independent lives"*

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- Appoint a Senior Advocate so that the Governor's staff will never stop listening, caring, and acting on behalf of seniors in Rhode Island.

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# The Senior Times

## Carcieri searching for 'right person' to head Department of Elderly Affairs

By Herb Weiss  
Special to The Times

Throughout his life, Republican Gov. Don Carcieri has worn many hats. He has worked as a math teacher, banker, CEO of a Fortune 500 company, and a caregiver.

Life experience as a caregiver along with his wife Sue has given the 60-something Carcieri a greater sensitivity and understanding and knowledge of senior issues. His late mother-in-law resided in a nursing facility for more than four years. Ten years earlier he saw her become afflicted with early onset Alzheimer's disease, watching it slowly progress.

As Carcieri enters his second week on the job he spoke about his senior agenda.

While Carcieri has appointed permanent directors at most state agencies, he has moved slowly to appoint a replacement for former Director Barbara Rayner, who headed up the Department of Elderly Affairs. He disagrees with some who believe his slow response sends a message that DEA is a low priority for his administration and that the agency will lose its independent status.

"DEA needs a strong manager

and I think the issues of elderly care are big and are going to grow in the next decade. That's why I want to make sure that we pick someone good. I want to be very careful and try to find the right person," he says.

Seeking a new director was a result of his belief of the importance of DEA as an agency.

Carcieri says that his staff has received and screened more than 18 resumes.

Aging advocacy groups say former DEA directors, senior-level DEA staff, a private sector health insurance manager, and a social service administrator have been interviewed for the position.

Three candidates have already turned down his administration's job offers. "We couldn't convince them to take the job because they would have had to make a financial sacrifice," he said.

With the DEA now relocated to the Pastore complex in Cranston, Carcieri looks to senior centers to deliver services, programming and training to older Rhode Islanders in their neighborhoods. "I would like to see more of them because they are a great venue for providing services," he says.

Carcieri affirms his strong support for a cabinet level, independent DEA but has called for the

department's expansion by giving it oversight and implementation of senior services offered by other state agencies.

Expect the governor to establish a new task force in the coming months to (smooth out) the overlaps and eliminate the duplication of services provided by state agencies. He'll call on some member of his Health Task Force, created during his transition, and department heads to sit on the newly-created task force.

From this initiative will come an elderly affairs grouping that will provide one stop shopping for seniors needing services, he says.

Carcieri noted that he has basically inherited a budget put together by former Gov. Lincoln Almond.

However, "we are reshaping this budget. I am kicking out things and adding things."

One budget item that will change is the funding for the Meals on Wheels, a program that provides meals to home-bound seniors.

"When I initially looked at the budget this program was being cut back. We are going to go the other way," he says, noting that spending will probably increase.

Meanwhile, Carcieri would like to change the funding mecha-



Gov. Don Carcieri says senior issues won't take a back seat to other concerns in his administration. AP Photo

nism of Meals on Wheels from a legislative grant to a stand alone budget item. Because it's a valuable program, "It ought to be an institutionalized program that gets reviewed every year."

Will Carcieri provide more money to the state Department of Health to staff up to oversee the regulation of nursing homes, assisted living and home care? Probably not right away, he says, noting that other regulatory agencies like the Department of Business Regulation are understaffed.

"We've got tough financial problems this year. I may not be able to do as much as I want to this year."

Again, Carcieri called for the provision of affordable assisted living to seniors. However, he would not commit his administration to reallocate Medicaid resources to fund 180 Assisted Living units already approved by the federal government but not

funded in the current state budget.

Also, no details were available on Carcieri's plans to beef up Medicaid program to fund nursing homes or community-based services, his Senior Swat Team initiative, or a plan to reducing prescription drug costs. Stay tuned!

Meanwhile, the governor expressed his amazement waste built into the purchase pharmaceuticals in nursing homes.

He noted very few people realize how much medications wasted in a nursing home worth months worth of drugs bought at one time in order to get a free delivery. If not these perfectly good prescription drugs are thrown away.

"System-wide it will be a staggering amount of money that are throwing down the drain

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need a system to get pharmacies to allow facilities to order more frequently and in smaller quantities," Carcieri says. "Or maybe excess prescription drugs, kept under the watch of a registered nurse, could be returned to the pharmacy," he adds, expressing his hope that an answer

to this drug delivery problem can be found.

If Carcieri has his way, he would like to see older Rhode Islanders stay in their homes, receiving whatever services that it would take to keep the person independent. When a person can't be kept at home, why not create a facility for this person to reside where different levels of care are provided, from independent housing, assisted living, and nursing facility

care.

As my 30 minute interview wound down, Carcieri made it clear that in order to provide programs and services to seniors, he must get the state economy moving.

Unless his administration can expand the economic base of the state, there won't be resources to provide the services to seniors. "You can't build a future unless you have your financial house in order."

Senior advocates and older Rhode Islanders wait for Carcieri's upcoming proposed state budget that will be released next month. With its release we will really see how his initiatives are taking shape.

*Herb Weiss is a Pawtucket-based writer covering aging and health care issues for The Times. His articles also appear in state and national publications. He can be reached at hweissri@aol.com.*

# The Senior Times