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Testimony submitted by Carol Zernial

Melissa Carter
Secretary

Chairman Nelson and members of the Human Services Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Carol Zernial, director of the Area Agency on Aging of Bexar County and Vice President of the Texas Association of Area Agencies on Aging. I also serve as project director of the Texas Fall Prevention Coalition—a model program that reduces the risk of falls among frail elderly Texans. I am submitting written and oral comments on the state's current and current health prevention and wellness programs and chronic care management efforts, and options for expanding and optimizing the state's current investment in wellness programs.

It's my pleasure to share success stories from the Texas Falls Prevention Coalition—a highly rewarding venture for the State's 27 participating area agencies on aging into evidence-based health prevention and wellness programs. Since October 2007 our coalition has certified 58 master trainers and more than 55 trained coaches to implement "A Matter of Balance." Collectively, these trainers and coaches have conducted 96 class series, reaching more than 1,100 participants.

Designed by Boston University, "A Matter of Balance" has a solid foundation in research and draws on principles of adult learning to change participants' behavior and to sustain changes long after classes have been completed. Specifically, it changes both attitudes—to reduce participants' fear of falling—and behaviors, to improve participants' balance. As Older Texans have said after taking the class, "This class helped me see as an older person we can improve our environment and that we can do exercise that make us more agile. This is a very helpful & enjoyable class that every senior citizen needs to take!"

Falls are a major public health issue. One-third of all older Texans age 65 and over will fall each year, impacting more than a million of our State's residents. Of those who fall, 70% require emergency medical care and 40% require nursing home care. Falls can be lethal, and are the leading cause of accidental death among adults age 65 and over.

Grim statistics? Yes. But there's good news.

The Texas Fall Prevention Coalition has demonstrated effectiveness in reducing the incidence of falls among older Texans for several reasons:

- It has used a proven model, and has benefited from oversight by Texas A&M's School of Rural Public Health to ensure program fidelity.
- It has the strong backing of the area agencies on aging, who are highly visible and recognized providers of health and social services for all Texans—both well and frail—and without regard to income.
- It engages in a number of partnerships with agencies that are known and respected to older adults, to expand the program's reach. For example, housing authorities, senior centers, county extension offices and others have sent staff through training and hosted classes.

Further, the Coalition has made a significant impact on participants participating in the "A Matter of Balance" Program. After participating in the class, on average, attendees reported:

- Significant improvement in the number of healthy days in their lives
- Significant improvement in their confidence in being able to prevent and protect themselves from falls
- Significant improvement in their health status and it's impact on their activities of daily life

The Coalition has demonstrated cost-effectiveness for several reasons:

- It relies on volunteer coaches who receive little or no compensation for their services.
- It has generated matching funding from organizations that have an investment in wellness. Specifically, Humana recently made a sizeable donation to the coalition so that it might expand its reach.

The State's area agencies on aging have a strong commitment to A Matter of Balance and other evidence-based programs. We prefer to provide services that preserve wellness rather than compensate for loss of function. We'd much rather have a full house at the senior center for an exercise class rather than at a nursing home for physical therapy sessions. And, to a great extent, we can make the difference between a participant living at home and living in an institutional setting.

I am testifying today to let you know that we stand ready as willing and able partners to expand and optimize the state's current investment in wellness programs. We wish to continue our fall-prevention efforts and look forward to the State's continued support.

The Coalition has been fortunate to receive seed money from the Texas Department of Aging and Disability Services, in the amount of \$200,000 in FY08 and another \$200,000. The money has been well spent. A Matter of Balance series of six classes costs only \$85 per person, versus an average medical cost of \$17,000 for any senior who

falls and sustains an injury. Of course, the intangible cost—seen in the erosion of quality of life after an injury—is even higher.

Also, we look forward to expand our reach with other evidence-based programs. Several of the State's area agencies on aging are conducting evidence-based programs that help older persons manage chronic diseases, increase their activity levels, manage their diabetes, and self-manage depression.

We know that it's never too late to adopt healthy habits, and that lifestyle habits can change for the better, no matter one's age or level of wellness. We know, because we've seen the results. I'll close with a testimonial from A Matter of Balance participant who wrote, "[Since taking the class,] I've been watching how I really do things in the house and outside. This class really gave me food for thought on how to help myself as I do use a cane under doctor's orders all the time....Thank you all for making me aware of my surroundings and also physically helping me with the exercises that have helped me a lot. God bless the instructors! They are awesome."

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