

From Governor Whitman's 2000 State of the State address:

...Let me turn to E Number Three -- the elderly.

Think about this for a moment: when baby Patti Ann is ready to retire, the year may be 2070. You and I probably won't be around. But our work on senior issues will give Patti Ann's older relatives more security in the near future.

As Patti Ann grows, she will find that her grandmother, Pat, is a very special person. While Pat has not yet reached her senior years, she has the proud distinction of becoming a grandmother for the third time. She is with us today, along with her daughter-in-law and new mom, Elaine. Congratulations, Pat and Elaine Van Meter.

I'm proud of our efforts on the third E. Working together with legislators like Assemblywomen Carol Murphy and Rose Heck, and the late Senator Wynona Lipman, we've helped New Jersey's senior citizens lead independent, productive lives. We expanded senior services and protected PAAD. We froze property taxes for qualified seniors and improved on the homestead rebate program.

Just as important, we have given families more options for long-term care, whether it's assisted living or alternate family care. Our seniors are no longer being automatically shuttled from hospitals into nursing homes.

The \$60 million initiative we started last year is helping more seniors stay in their homes and communities. Today, we're supporting caregivers and screening seniors to ensure that a nursing home plan is right for them.

We must do even more. The New Jersey Advisory Council on Elder Care, which I created in 1998, looked closely at the needs of the elderly and their caregivers. Its report echoed many of the concerns I hear when I talk with people around the state.

The message is clear: seniors want to maintain their independence as long as possible. As Patti Ann's grandmother and fellow baby boomers age, this desire will only increase.

So this year, to further help older citizens remain independent, we will dedicate another \$5 million to six important initiatives.

First, we will expand home-delivered meals to the elderly. Meals on Wheels helps countless New Jersey seniors get the daily nutrition they need. This year, we will expand Meals on Wheels to entirely eliminate the waiting list for this vital program.

But we can't stop there. We need more community assistance for frail elderly on low incomes. Congregate housing services can help. They include housekeeping, personal assistance, case management, and meals in a group setting. This year, we will expand these services to 15 new senior housing sites across the state.

Of course, some seniors who stay at home can suffer from neglect or abuse. This is particularly true for those who can't care for themselves. Let's keep our seniors safe, and give their caregivers the help they need. This year, we will enable local adult protective agencies to serve hundreds more at-risk seniors.

We will also address a concern that I know is on your minds: ensuring that all home health aides are the kind of people we want caring for our most vulnerable citizens. Assemblywomen Charlotte Vandervalk and Loretta Weinberg have led the way on this issue. With thanks for their efforts, I will propose in my budget that we combine state and federal funds to pay the cost of all background checks -- not just for new aides but for every single person in the system.

Helping seniors remain independent also means providing a hassle-free way to get information and services. Our toll-free New Jersey EASE hotline connects them to all the services our state offers.

To strengthen the program, I propose we award grants to help all New Jersey EASE counties improve the quality of the care management they provide.

There's another step we can take: ensuring that younger citizens like Patti Ann's mom and grandmother can buy some peace of mind by planning now for their senior years. Buying long-term care insurance today will enable them to choose from among the widest range of options tomorrow -- from home care to assisted living to a nursing home.

That's why we will begin a program this year that will offer this insurance to State employees and their families on a voluntary basis. I hope private employers will follow our example by offering it to their employees as well.