

COLUMNS | Opinion ⓘ

Grumet: What happens when seniors set the agenda for the Texas Legislature?



Bridget Grumet

Austin American-Statesman

Published 7:48 p.m. CT May 10, 2022

Rhonda Rogers says, half joking, that you shouldn't get her started on the Personal Needs Allowance. But really, you should.

Texas nursing home residents get just \$60 a month to spend on personal items if their care is covered by Medicaid, which is the case for nearly two out of three nursing home residents. That's a grand total of \$60 to pay for such things as magazines, a cellphone bill, haircuts, toiletries, maybe some knitting needles and yarn.

"What if they want a Coke from the vending machine once in a while? What if they want to buy their grandchild a birthday card?" Rogers asked, noting the \$60 allowance, which hasn't budged since 2006, goes quickly.

This issue affects the daily quality of life for roughly 58,000 older adults in Texas, but chances are you weren't aware of it. It's not like nursing home residents have a special interest group championing their needs.

But they now have some friends in the Texas Silver-Haired Legislature, a nonpartisan group of volunteers aged 60-plus who study and push for policies to help older Texans.

At its biennial gathering last week, the group decided that updating the Personal Needs Allowance is the No. 1 priority it will press state lawmakers to address next year. If the allowance had kept up with inflation, it would be closer to \$85 a month now.

Grumet: We can bring sanity, empathy back to our political discourse. Here's how.

"We think it needs to be increased so they can at least have a few things in their latter days that they might enjoy," said Rogers, a full-time volunteer from the Northeast Texas town of

Paris in her 60s, a retired U.S. Air Force administrative officer, and now Speaker of the Texas Silver-Haired Legislature.

“As someone gets older in a nursing home, it doesn’t mean they quit caring.”

The same could be said of the roughly 60 older adults involved in this year’s session of the Texas Silver-Haired Legislature. They’re largely retired, but they’re not done working: They’ve been studying the state pension system, examining policies at long-term care facilities and even looking at the cost of fishing licenses, all in the service of telling our state government what older Texans need.

They’re a reminder of how state government *should* work when it’s driven by the priorities of regular people, not politicians — quaint as that seems.

“It’s really not about us as individuals,” Rogers told me. “It’s about helping older folks that need it the most.”

I caught up with several members of the group this week, eager to see what kinds of issues topped their agenda. Other priorities included providing a cost-of-living adjustment to retired teachers (whose pension payments haven’t changed since 2004); ensuring that grandparents who are raising their grandkids receive the social service supports they deserve; and increasing the readability of the vote-by-mail paperwork (we’re talking pages of instructions in tiny font).

The Texas Legislature approved creation of this senior advisory group in the mid-1980s. Members of the Texas Silver-Haired Legislature, who meet in the years between state legislative sessions, follow up with individual lawmakers to seek sponsors and support for the group’s priorities.

Grumet: Wrong people might get aid for the poor, but this time we won't know

Scott Christensen, a delegate from the Brazos Valley, has pressed lawmakers over the past two regular sessions to shore up the pension systems for teachers and other state employees. He’s quick to note other groups have worked on those issues, too, but said it has been rewarding to see his advocacy make a difference. The 2019 law strengthening the teacher pension system mirrored many of the Texas Silver-Haired Legislature’s recommendations, he said.

“Our legislators have a lot of stuff to think about,” said Christensen, 72, who previously worked in banking operations and management consulting. “It’s pretty hard for anybody to

be an expert on every issue. Our primary push was providing the information, talking about what the challenges were and what the potential issues would be if the repair didn't start."

Other advocacy groups have seen the effectiveness of the Texas Silver-Haired Legislature on issues from combating elder financial exploitation to addressing the needs of long-term care facilities.

"While our agendas are not entirely identical, we often work together and share the goal of promoting the needs of older Texans," said AARP Texas Director Tina Tran. "As we know at AARP, volunteers who lobby at the Capitol make for persuasive storytellers and activists on the issues that matter most to older Texans and their families."

For so many of us, democracy starts and ends at the ballot box. But there are valuable places in between to get involved, to push for governance that reflects your values.

With more than 5 million residents over age 60, Texas' *older* population is larger than the *entire state* population in two dozen other states. Some are still in the workforce; some are still raising kids.

"We are diverse, and we are evolving," Rogers said. And groups like the Texas Silver-Haired Legislature help ensure those voices are heard.

Grumet is the Statesman's Metro columnist. Her column, ATX in Context, contains her opinions. Share yours via email at bgrumet@statesman.com or via Twitter at [@bgrumet](https://twitter.com/bgrumet). Find her previous work at statesman.com/news/columns.