

January 12, 2021

The Honorable Assemblymember Valerie Vainieri Huttle
Chair, Assembly Aging and Senior Services Committee
New Jersey State Capitol
Trenton, NJ

RE: Assembly Bill 2304 – Support

Dear Chairwoman Valerie Vainieri Huttle,

The Arthritis Foundation urges your support of Assembly Bill 2304 when it comes before the Aging and Senior Services Committee. This bill directs the Commissioner of Human Services to establish the Arthritis Quality of Life Initiative in the Department of Human Services. The purpose of the Initiative shall be to: (1) increase public awareness about arthritis, its symptoms, and available treatment options; (2) publicize options for arthritis prevention; (3) highlight the value of early diagnosis and treatment; and (4) encourage and facilitate the delivery of programs and services that are aimed at preventing arthritis-related complications and improving the quality of life of people with arthritis.

In establishing the Initiative, the Commissioner will develop a list of health care providers who offer specialized services for persons with arthritis and publicize it on the department's website. The initiative will also identify and publicize on the department's website, programs and services that are designed to prevent arthritis, reduce complications associated with arthritis, and improve the quality of life of those living with the disease.

Further, the proposed initiative would direct the NJ Department of Human Services to implement a public information and outreach campaign, a professional education program and phone-based referral and support network to help arthritis patients. The initiative would also engage in, or promote and facilitate, the use of outcome-based research designed to improve arthritis care and treatment, and appropriately publicize the findings of such research.

In addition, this initiative will establish, authorize and facilitate the re-establishment and ongoing maintenance, of two regionally based arthritis centers, one in the northern and one in the southern parts of the State.

Last, this bill would establish The Advisory Council on Arthritis within the Department. The purpose of the Council shall be to advise the Commissioner on the development and ongoing implementation and operations of the Arthritis Quality of Life Initiative in the state. This Council will include members from several divisions of the department and 14 public members who have expertise in or experience with arthritis.

The Arthritis Foundation believes that establishment of A-2304 will improve the quality of life for people affected by arthritis. This bill can help people affected by arthritis through 1) Increased

awareness about appropriate arthritis self-management activities; 2) Extending the reach of programs proven to improve the quality of life for people with arthritis; and 3) Decreased overall burden of arthritis as well as its associated disability and activity limitations.

In 2018, the Arthritis Foundation began cataloging real-world, real-time reporting from arthritis patients, collecting details about pain intensity, sleep, mental health concerns and experience of care. In the inaugural year of this ongoing, cross-sectional analysis, [A Mandate for Action](#), we received 18,000 patient assessments, making the program the largest collection of data in our 70-year history and one of the largest in the world. Data from the assessments found that 100% of patients reported pain – the kind of pain that causes constant fatigue, significantly disrupts sleep and cannot be ignored. Two-thirds of respondents said they found it difficult to participate in family activities and felt depressed and/or fearful and anxious. Many reported their needs are unmet by health care professionals, especially among lower income patients and minorities. While results came from across the country, and no group or community is immune, the challenges vary widely from one area to another. But what is clear as a whole-- arthritis patients are living a life of less, instead of pushing to reclaim the life they deserve. Enacting A-2034 will help develop programs and awareness which could assist more in New Jersey to live with less pain.

This bill appropriately signals that New Jersey wants to be a leader in the fight to combat arthritis. By any measure, arthritis is an urgent public health priority. Arthritis is an umbrella term to describe more than 100+ types of diseases related to the bones and joints. The most common form of arthritis is osteoarthritis. Other forms include gout, rheumatoid arthritis, and lupus. Symptoms of arthritis are pain, aching, stiffness, and swelling in or around the joints. Rheumatoid arthritis and lupus can affect multiple organs and cause widespread symptoms. Conservative estimates suggest arthritis affects 1 in 4 Americans (54 million). It is a leading cause of work disability. The disease results in over \$300 billion in direct and indirect expenses each year. It is time for state investment to match the disease burden. Adequately funding programs that can ease, or even prevent, the physical suffering that comes with arthritis is a crucial need for millions of Americans. This investment could also help reduce much higher spending that occurs in other parts of the state budget.

Sixty percent of US adults with arthritis are of working age (18 to 64 years). Arthritis can limit the type of work they are able to do or keep them from working at all. In fact, 8 million working-age adults report that their ability to work is limited because of their arthritis. For example, they may have a hard time climbing stairs or walking from a parking deck to their workplace. Enacting A-2304 will send a message to arthritis patients throughout New Jersey that your state is ready to combat the nation's leading cause of disability. Accordingly, this investment will lead to results in the form of more patients leading lives that allow them to participate in the workforce, which will benefit these individuals, New Jersey businesses, and the state.

On behalf of the more than 1.5 million people living in New Jersey with doctor-diagnosed arthritis, the Arthritis Foundation strongly urges your support of A-2304.

Sincerely,



Steven Schultz
Director, State Legislative Affairs
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