



## Submission to the Department of Social Protection for Budget 2025



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland



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The Irish Senior Citizens Parliament is a representative organisation of Older People in Ireland. The Parliament is a non-partisan political organisation working to promote the views of older people in policy development and decision-making. The Parliament is run by older volunteers who are elected annually at the Annual Parliament Meeting by delegates from affiliated organisations. The ISCP currently has 116 affiliated organisations and individuals including retired sections within ESB, RTE, HSE, SIPTU, CIE, FSU, ICTU, FORSA, Guinness and many others. This membership base means the ISCP has a genuine mandate to be the Voice of Older People in Ireland.

In addition to public consultation with both members and non-members, we conducted a pre-budget survey to capture an in-depth view of the realities of older people in Ireland. The results of this survey were used to inform this submission and organise our key asks of Government for 2025. The survey was completed by 554 older persons and members currently living in Ireland.

Most older persons have no capacity to raise their incomes, often experiencing declining income and loss of spending power impacted by sharp cost-of-living increases. Social Justice Ireland (SJI) noted that retired persons in Ireland have experienced the greatest volatility in their risk of poverty rates. While the rate has thankfully declined in recent years, it still leaves 1 in 10 older adults at risk of poverty.<sup>1</sup> This could be your parent(s), aunt, uncle, grandparent, neighbour or friend. This is someone you know.

After a lifetime of contributing to society, it is only fair for the government to protect those who have no other way of coping with soaring living costs. The Roadmap for Social Inclusion defines social inclusion as ‘having access to sufficient income, resources and services to enable [people] to play an active part in their communities and participate in activities that are considered the norm for people in society generally’.<sup>2</sup> This is a clear recognition that avoiding poverty and enhancing social inclusion requires adequate income.

We are proud members of the Alliance of Age Sector NGOs, a collective which includes ALONE, Alzheimer’s Association of Ireland, Irish Hospice Foundation, Age and Opportunity, Active Retirement Ireland and Third Age. We have long been advocating for the Establishment of an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People similar to that which is in place in both Northern Ireland and Wales. This would help to ensure that Ireland’s various policy commitments relevant to older people are meaningfully monitored and that older people are treated with respect and on an equal basis with the rest of the population.<sup>3</sup> We also continue to support and work with Brid Smith TD, to progress the Industrial Relations Bill 2021 to give voice to retired workers concerning their pension.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Social Justice Ireland (SJI) *Social Justice Matters 2024*; Page 5. Available at: <https://www.socialjustice.ie/system/files/file-uploads/2024-04/SER%202024%20Annex%203%20Income%20FINAL%20with%20cover.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 – 2025. Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/46557/bf7011904ede4562b925f98b15c4f1b5.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Alliance of Age Sector NGOS (2023) *Telling it Like it is; Combatting Ageism*. Available at [http://www.thirdageireland.ie/assets/site/files/default/AASNGOs\\_Telling\\_It\\_Like\\_It\\_Is\\_Combatting\\_Ageism.PDF](http://www.thirdageireland.ie/assets/site/files/default/AASNGOs_Telling_It_Like_It_Is_Combatting_Ageism.PDF)

<sup>4</sup> *Industrial Relations (Provisions in Respect of Pension Entitlements of Retired Workers) Bill 2021* Available at: <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/2021/15/>

## 1. An Adequate and Sustainable Pension:

With 88.4% of our members reporting that they feel they will be less financially secure in 12 months' time, it is imperative that we express the need for a viable, long-term solution to income inadequacy among retired persons.<sup>5</sup> The Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023 conducted by the Central Statistics Office (CSO), identified the 'risk of poverty' threshold as 60% of the national median income, which amounts to €16,558.<sup>6</sup> A retired person in receipt of the maximum rate pension earns approximately €14,419 annually. This is a shortfall of €2,139 which means the Government expect older persons to maintain a standard of living that is well below the poverty line upon retirement. A heart-breaking juxtaposition alongside the same survey revealing that the richest 20% have 3.8 times the income of the poorest 20%.

*Spotlight on Income in Older Age—The State of Ageing in Ireland 2023* published by Age Action, found that 3 in 10 people aged 66+ rely on social protection for over 90% of their income and a further 4 in 10 people aged 66+ rely on it for more than half of their income.<sup>7</sup> Approximately 745,325 persons received a pension payment in the first quarter of this year, a 4% increase compared to 2023.<sup>8</sup> With this number set to rise with our rapidly ageing population, now more than ever, we need to solidify a more sustainable and egalitarian pension system.

As mentioned in our submission last year, Government's Roadmap for Social Inclusion promised to set a formal benchmark target of 34% of average earnings for contributory State Pension payments.<sup>9</sup> The Government also committed to working towards a 34% benchmark for the State pension in the Roadmap for Pensions Reform 2018-2023.<sup>10</sup> An annual, automatic benchmarking system of pension rates would facilitate future planning. Thus, providing peace of mind for older workers while depoliticising the budget process.

Failing to meet this commitment, we additionally support Social Justice Ireland's previous call to introduce a residency-based universal pension. A Universal Pension would replace the State Pension (Contributory), State Pension (Non-Contributory), the Death Benefit and the Widow's, Widower's or Surviving Civil Partner's (Contributory) Pension for all those above the State Pension Age.<sup>11</sup> It would also be paid to those who had reached the State Pension

<sup>5</sup> Irish Senior Citizens Parliament (ISCP) 2025 Pre-Budget Survey Results

<sup>6</sup> Central Statistics Office: *Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023*. Available at:

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/>

<sup>7</sup> Age Action, *Spotlight on Income in Older Age—The State of Ageing in Ireland 2023* Available at:

[https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/published\\_age\\_action\\_spotlight\\_on\\_income\\_in\\_older\\_age.pdf](https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/published_age_action_spotlight_on_income_in_older_age.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Department of Social protection, *Quarterly Statistical Report Q1 2024*

Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/291283/?page=null>

<sup>9</sup> Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025,

Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/46557/bf7011904ede4562b925f98b15c4f1b5.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Roadmap for Pensions Reform 2018-2023,

Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/10968/9740541c18cc4eaf92554ff158800c6f.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Social Justice Ireland, *A Universal State Social Welfare Pension: Recognising the Contribution of all our Senior Citizens*

Available at: [www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/legacy/attach/publication/5197/universalstatesocialwelfarepension.pdf](http://www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/legacy/attach/publication/5197/universalstatesocialwelfarepension.pdf)

Age who are currently only receiving an income through their spouse or partner's State Pension as Qualified Adults. This would also be extended to include public servants recruited on or after 6th April 1995 as their occupational pensions would be integrated with the state pension system. Ensuring that no older person would be left behind along with a more even distribution of wealth, the yearly battle of kicking around the pension rate as a 'political football' would finally be put to an end.

The State Pension is the "bread and butter" for the majority of older persons in Ireland. The pension system either requires restructuring or the pension rate must substantially increase in order to prevent further poverty and deprivation among older persons.

**For this reason, we ask the Department of Social Protection to:**

- ❖ Honour Government's commitment to set a formal benchmark target of 34% of average earnings for contributory State Pension payments
- ❖ Consider the re-structuring of the system of tax reliefs on private pension contributions and a modest increase in the rate of Employer PRSI in order to fund and implement a Universal Pension
- ❖ Until the implementation of the benchmarking system, increase the rate of the State Pension by at least €25 in order to match the rise in cost of living and to restore its purchasing power
- ❖ Simplify the process of applying for the state pension as many of our members have reported lengthy communications with the department as well as multiple discrepancies and confusion over entitlements

## **2. The Living Alone Allowance:**

SILC 2023 indicated a welcome decline in the percentage of older persons who are at risk of poverty. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for older persons living alone. In fact, People aged 65+ living alone had the lowest household income in 2022 while the number of those living in enforced deprivation rose from 17.2% in 2022 to 20% in 2023.<sup>12</sup> This means that 20% of older people living alone were forced to go without goods or services that are considered the norm for other people in society. 38.6% of ISCP members reported having to give up going out for a meal, 33.7% have had to give up the possibility of a weekend break and 29.85% have stopped attending social events since the rise in the cost of living.<sup>13</sup> Not to mention hearing numerous stories of people going without heating and staying in bed for the entire day just to keep warm. Enforcing deprivation also enforces isolation.

The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) demonstrate that retired persons living alone were found to be at the greatest risk of having inadequate income in their retirement, across

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<sup>12</sup> CSO, Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/poverty/>

<sup>13</sup> Irish Senior Citizens Parliament (ISCP) 2025 Pre-Budget Survey Results

all benchmarks.<sup>14</sup> A high percentage of ISCP members have again, specifically stated the need for a more substantial increase in the Living Alone Allowance with one member stating that “You can’t heat half a radiator or turn on half a lightbulb”. Increasing the allowance would significantly address concerns about income adequacy for older adults living alone in retirement. **For this reason, we ask the Department of Social Protection to:**

- ❖ Increase the rate of the Living Alone Allowance by at least €25 in order to match the rise in cost of living and to restore its purchasing power
- ❖ Simplify the process of applying for the Living Alone Allowance to enable accessibility for older people, while also considering people who do not have access to online facilities

### 3. Eligibility Criteria and Means-Testing

**Eligibility Criteria** appears to be the largest barrier in accessing financial supports and non-cash benefits. Yet, pre-1995 retired civil servants are still not entitled to receive any cost-of-living state supports. Cost of living supports should be paid to all pensioners regardless of which category they fall under. There is no justification for any group of pensioners being refused access to these cost-of-living state support payments.

It has been noted by our members that since Budget 2024 and the €12 increase in pension payments, many pensioners ever so slightly surpassed the income threshold in order to qualify for non-cash benefits. 27% of our members disclosed that the process of **means-testing social welfare payments had the most negative impact on their financial security**.<sup>15</sup> Even though their weekly income slightly increased in Budget 2024, the loss of such things as the fuel allowance severely impacted their financial standing. Simply put, if we gain in one area, we significantly lose out in another.

We have also received reports of pensioners losing their medical card for the same reason. We understand this does not fall under your department but this does draw attention to the need for cross-departmental communication and correlation between changing income levels and income thresholds.

The ISCP see the many roadblocks faced by older adults in accessing essential payments such as the Fuel allowance, the Household Benefits Package and other Cost-of-Living supports. **For this reason, we ask the Department of Social Protection to:**

- ❖ Increase income thresholds and cut-off points in line with social welfare increases to prevent further people from being stripped of their entitlements
- ❖ Widen the eligibility criteria to include those who have not been eligible to avail of any cost-of-living or social welfare supports including pre-1995 retired civil servants

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<sup>14</sup> TILDA, Income Adequacy and Quality of Life in Older Age. Available at: [https://tilda.tcd.ie/publications/reports/pdf/Report\\_IncomeAdequacy.pdf](https://tilda.tcd.ie/publications/reports/pdf/Report_IncomeAdequacy.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Irish Senior Citizens Parliament (ISCP) 2025 Pre-Budget Survey Results

- ❖ Improve cross-departmental communication when considering changes to social welfare payments to ensure that any increase will not prevent someone from availing of other much needed cost-of-living supports
- ❖ Consider centralising any means-testing and application processes so people don't have to submit information multiple times. This can be extremely stressful and confusing for some older persons in particular

#### 4. Energy and Cost-of-Living Supports:

Annual household utility bills are currently averaging at approximately €2000 per year.<sup>16</sup> There have also been further increases in areas such as the hospitality sector (up 4.8% CPI), transport (up 4.1% CPI) and in recreation and culture (up 5.2%).<sup>17</sup> These are all areas in which ISCP members have had to pull back from due to the high VAT, the rising cost of fuel and increased insurance premiums. 44.1% of our members admitted struggling to pay their utility bills while 40% reported that the high cost-of-living impacted their health expenses e.g. could not afford the GP or their medication.<sup>18</sup>

Budget 2024 delivered a frontloading of one-off payments to help with energy costs and household expenses. These were proven to be effective in reducing the consistent poverty rate and at risk of poverty rate. For people aged 65 and over, the at risk of poverty rate was 20.1% in 2022 and decreased by almost 12 percentage points to 8.3% in 2023.<sup>19</sup> However, SILC 2023 also concluded that once cost-of-living supports are excluded, the 65 and over age group were the closest to the poverty line than any other age group.

In addition, the same survey calculates the income of an older person living alone; if the pensioner receives maximum rate pension, living alone allowance, fuel allowance and the household benefits package, this pensioners income is still €1000 below the income poverty threshold. This further proves how essential these cost-of-living measures are from preventing older persons from living in poverty.

There are still a large number of older persons living in housing with a low Building Energy Rating (BER). It is estimated that 45% of older persons aged 60 and over lived in properties with a BER of E, F or G, rising to 57% for people aged 75 or older.<sup>20</sup> Fuel poverty is also more common amongst those living in rented accommodation (9%) and local authority housing (15%).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Commission for Regulation of Utilities, *Estimated Annual Bill Update April 2024*

Available at: <https://www.cru.ie/publications/27803/>

<sup>17</sup> CSO (2024) 'Consumer Price Index April'. Available at <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpi/consumerpriceindexapril2024/>

<sup>18</sup> Irish Senior Citizens Parliament (ISCP) 2025 Pre-Budget Survey Results

<sup>19</sup> CSO (2024) *Impact of Cost-of-Living Measures*. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/impactofcostoflivingmeasuresonpoverty/>

<sup>20</sup> John Curtis et al., (2014) 'Estimating Building Energy Ratings for the Residential Building Stock: Location and Occupancy' ESRI Working Paper. Available at: <https://www.esri.ie/system/files?file=media/file-uploads/2016-12/WP489.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> ESRI (2021), Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity, Shannen Enright; *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland*

The **Fuel Allowance** has been a more consistent way for households to budget for their energy needs as opposed to once-off lump sum payments. However, members of ours were either ineligible for the fuel allowance or were refused the lump-sum payments. Reasons for not qualifying for the fuel allowance include being in receipt of the Contributory State Pension, Widows/Widowers Pensions, Jobseekers' payments (for less than 12 months)<sup>22</sup> and those on full and half-rate Carer's Allowance.<sup>23</sup> For those who did avail of the allowance and the €400 lump sum last November, the total value falls €300 short of the purchasing power of the Fuel Allowance and has more than likely contributed to the increasing levels of energy poverty.<sup>24</sup>

The **Household Benefits Package** was a welcomed support towards the cost of living for people over 70 and to some people under 70 in certain circumstances. However, we are aware of multiple pensioners aged between 60 and 69 who did not qualify for this package due to similar reasons stated earlier.

The ISCP see the many roadblocks faced by older adults in accessing essential payments such as the Fuel allowance, the Household Benefits Package and other Cost-of-Living supports. We also envisage a particular struggle for those living alone and any older person who would no longer qualify for any of these additional supports: **For this reason, we ask the Department of Social Protection to:**

- ❖ Increase the rates for Fuel Allowance and Household Benefits Package by at least €15 per week
- ❖ Widen the eligibility criteria to include those who have been mentioned above including pre-1995 retired civil servants
- ❖ Re-instate the duration of the Fuel Allowance to 32 weeks from its current level of 28 weeks<sup>25</sup>
- ❖ Extend the reduced VAT rate for Gas and Electricity beyond 31<sup>st</sup> October 2024
- ❖ Provide other qualifying options for this scheme for low/middle income households and those who are just outside of the income threshold
- ❖ Overall, we support Age Action's previous proposal to replace the Electricity/Gas Allowance and Fuel Allowance for older persons with the new Energy Guarantee for Older Persons - a universal payment to every household where someone is

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e7fcaa-operational-guidelines-fuel-allowance-scheme/>

<sup>23</sup> Report on the inclusion of All half-rate Carer's Allowance recipients under the Fuel Allowance Scheme 2022. Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/237835/4f2cea0d-f9cc-4355-b6eb-2171ad9a1c78.docx>

<sup>24</sup> Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2022) *MESL Budget 2023 Impact Briefing*. Available at: [https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/budget\\_2023\\_-\\_mesl\\_impact\\_briefing\\_-\\_revised.pdf](https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/budget_2023_-_mesl_impact_briefing_-_revised.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> In 2012, the duration of the fuel season was reduced from 32 weeks to 26 weeks. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2018-07-24/2575/>

aged 70 or older and to those aged 60+ who have low incomes and/or whose home has a low Building Energy Rating (BER)<sup>26</sup>

- ❖ As above, we support the recommendations of the civil society Joint Statement on Energy Poverty and Energy Pollution to support those on low and fixed incomes with energy poverty<sup>27</sup>

## 5. Free Travel Scheme:

ISCP members have always expressed the necessity of non-cash supports like the Free Travel Pass and the Medical Card in helping them meet their basic needs. Particularly, members from rural areas, have to make use of public transport where possible due to rising costs associated with running a car. Our survey revealed that 7% of members avail of public transport daily, 27.7% on a weekly basis and 27.4% on a monthly basis.<sup>28</sup>

We have once again received multiple queries and complaints in relation to **pre-booking seats online** for adults with a free travel pass. Bus companies have been charging older adults from between €2 and €10 to guarantee their “free” seat for their particular journey. This incurs an extra cost for those solely reliant on public transport. This booking system also excludes a large portion of older adults (18.2%) who have never used the Internet or have no Internet access to book a seat online ahead of their journey.<sup>29</sup>

Another worrying component is the mistreatment of free travel pass holders by some bus companies and drivers. Free travel pass holders are often told to wait until everyone else has boarded before they can enter the bus. One ISCP member who questioned the driver on why older or less abled people were told to stand and wait, the driver refused to let the ISCP member board the bus; an extremely upsetting experience for our member. The implementation and application of the Free Travel Scheme requires supervision to ensure that Free Travel Pass holders are not discriminated against or singled out.

While we understand the need to pre-book a seat for a service that is in high demand, **we ask the Department of Social Protection to:**

- ❖ Impose legislation on private bus companies prohibiting any booking fee for those entitled to the Free Travel Scheme
- ❖ Cover the €2 online booking fee charged by Bus Eireann for all free travel pass holders as this is a public transport service<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Age Action (2022), An Energy Guarantee for Older Persons: Policy Brief. Available at:

[https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/age\\_action\\_energy\\_guarantee\\_for\\_older\\_persons.pdf](https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/age_action_energy_guarantee_for_older_persons.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> [https://www.foe.ie/assets/files/pdf/joint\\_statement\\_on\\_energy\\_poverty\\_and\\_energy\\_pollution.pdf](https://www.foe.ie/assets/files/pdf/joint_statement_on_energy_poverty_and_energy_pollution.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> Irish Senior Citizens Parliament (ISCP) 2025 Pre-Budget Survey Results

<sup>29</sup> Mohan, G., & Lyons, S. (2022). High-speed broadband availability, Internet activity among older people, quality of life and loneliness. *New Media & Society*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221095218>

<sup>30</sup> Press Release from Bus Eireann. Available at:

<https://www.expressway.ie/service-news/reserve-your-seat-with-your-free-travel-pass>



- ❖ Oversee and assess the implementation of the Free Travel Scheme on both public and private transport services, to ensure correct application and to prevent discrimination and ageism

## 6. Telephone Support Allowance:

This allowance currently stands at only €2.50 per week.<sup>31</sup> Older persons are now more confined to their homes as another result of the high cost-of-living. Therefore, telephone support allowance is more crucial now than ever. When asked about services that are essential to living a full life, many ISCP members quoted social activities as being most important to them. If they cannot afford to socialise in person, at the very least, we should be able to afford them a free phone call. As we still await a government promise within the National Positive Ageing Strategy (2013) to tackle loneliness and promote social participation, a simple phone call can act as a lifeline for many older people. Ireland adopted the 2022 Rome Ministerial Declaration on Ageing which urges that the empowerment and participation of older persons are essential for active ageing.<sup>32</sup> Appropriate, sustainable social support should be provided. **We ask the Department of Social Protection to:**

- ❖ Increase the Telephone Support Allowance by at least €10 to enable older persons to remain socially included and prevent isolation and loneliness

## Summary

A summary of ISCP's recommendations in the Submission to the Department of Social protection is as follows:

- **An Adequate and Sustainable Pension:** Implement the Government's commitment in the Roadmap for Pensions Reform 2018- 2023 for a State Pension set at 34% of average weekly earnings with annual review to ensure its continued adequacy. Until its implementation, increase the pension rate by a minimum of €25. Failing the above, plan to implement an egalitarian Universal Pension System.
- Increase the **Living Alone Allowance:** An increase of at least €25 for persons living alone while simplifying the process of applying for the Living Alone Allowance to enable accessibility for older people
- **Eligibility Criteria and Means-Testing:** Increase income thresholds and cut-off points in line with social welfare increases to prevent further people from being stripped of their entitlements. Widen the eligibility criteria to include the large numbers of older

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/4d2773-telephone-support-allowance/>

<sup>32</sup> Alliance of Age Sector NGOs (2024) *Taking Stock; Is Government keeping its commitments to older people?* Available at: <https://ageandopportunity.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Taking-Stock-Full-Report.pdf>

persons who do not qualify for the state pension and additional cost-of-living supports

- **Energy and Cost-of-Living Supports:** Increase the rates for Fuel Allowance and Household Benefits Package by a minimum of €15 per week. Widen the eligibility criteria for such benefits and allowances. Re-instate the duration of the Fuel Allowance to 32 weeks from its current level of 28 weeks. Provide other qualifying options for this scheme for low/middle income households and those who are just outside of the income limit
- **Free Travel Scheme and pre-booking seats:** Impose legislation on private bus companies prohibiting any booking fee for those entitled to the free travel scheme. Otherwise, the state should cover the costs of pre-booking seats for Free Travel cardholders when using public transport. Oversee the application of the scheme to prevent discrimination and ageism
- **Telephone Support Allowance:** Increase the Telephone Support Allowance by at least €10 per week to enable older persons to remain socially included and to prevent isolation and loneliness
- **Simplify Access to Entitlements:** Facilitate access to information and application procedures while also considering people who do not have access to online facilities

Budget 2025 will be the last opportunity for this Government, and this Oireachtas, to set a course in securing a dignified, worthwhile retirement for our older population which would inspire and incentivise future generations to come. Unless we change the manner in which we treat older people, we may create the future that we fear for our older selves.

*“Caring for our seniors is perhaps the greatest responsibility we have. Those who walked before us have given so much and made possible the life we all enjoy.”* – John Hoenen