

August 14, 2024
Legislative Task Force on Aging
Comments in support of a statewide strategic plan and a department for community aging

Members of the Legislative Task Force on Aging have met this past year to: "...determine the governmental entity to plan, lead, and implement recommended policies and funding for aging Minnesotans across the state."

I think it is important to share the origin of this endeavor. It was initiated by the appointed volunteer members of the Minnesota Board on Aging at their December 3, 2021 meeting in accordance with the MBA state statute. The first duty of the Board on Aging is "...to advise the governor and heads of state departments and agencies regarding policy, programs and services affecting aging."

The original statute enacted in 1961 instructs the MBA to accomplish, essentially, the very same policy goals that this Task Force has been studying:

1. to provide a mechanism for coordinating plans and activities of state departments and citizens' groups as they pertain to aging;
2. to create public awareness of the special needs and potentialities of older persons;
3. to gather and disseminate information about research and action programs, and to encourage state departments and other agencies to conduct needed research in the field of aging;
4. to stimulate, guide and provide technical assistance in the organization of local councils on aging;
5. to provide continuous review of ongoing services, programs and proposed legislation affecting the elderly in Minnesota.

<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/256.975#:~:text=The%20Board%20on%20Aging%20s hall,medical%20treatment%20for%20the%20elderly.>

Due to the current structural arrangement of MBA within DHS, it is not possible for volunteer members serving short terms of 4 to 8 years on the Board to fulfill these duties. Volunteer MBA members do not have the expertise to initiate and maintain this level of oversight. And, as members of MBA change over time, so does the understanding of their duties and priorities.

Given what we know about aging in Minnesota today, and convinced that this fragmented set of statutory duties is actually detrimental to building a future infrastructure for aging, the appointed MBA members in 2021 considered it our duty to raise this concern. We voted unanimously to:

...propose to the Governor and the MN Legislature that a task force be established to examine the necessity for a Department on Aging within the Executive branch to promote and support healthy aging.

We then chose to pursue our concern through the legislative process to establish a public record during the 2022 legislative session. By 2023, the MBA moved on and this endeavor was led by Elder Voice Advocates with support from numerous individuals and organizations.

In another example of past influence on our present endeavor, Kathleen Lawler set our challenge before us in an article entitled, *Go Big or Go Home*, published in the Public Policy & Aging Report of the Journal of the Gerontological Society of America. She stated nearly a decade ago that we must address system wide change to "...successfully advocate for the creation of communities that accommodate people of all ages and abilities" and "...integrate older adults into the economic development strategy of cities, counties, and states."

Lawler recommends strategies that will determine "...what gets built where, who is served, what businesses are attracted, and sometimes what philanthropic dollars are invested." We agree and we know that this will require an open, statewide dialogue.

Today, we must challenge the notion that our current focus on aging services and the publicly funded delivery system is sufficient. We must pursue strategies that take us beyond short term initiatives and projects and will lead us to investments by the public **and** private sectors for aging in our communities.

If we fail to address the levers that govern development, infrastructure, and system investments, longevity will not be addressed as our communities continue to age. Our challenge is this: When will we address significant policy issues that fundamentally alter the core elements of community life? Who will be included and who is left out? Will this be an open process or left to inadequate systems and service providers alone? What we learn through an open planning process will inform the basis for how we live together in MN.

We require a new cabinet level agency to lead this endeavor. The Minnesota Department for Community Aging would prove our state commitment to endorse healthy communities and care as we age – following the example set by the Pennsylvania strategic plan and vision for the future to hold the state accountable for transparent dialogue and communications with citizens.

It appears that Pennsylvania has set the bar and leads by example. They have a stated vision for older citizens. They are fortunate to have an established Department on Aging that was established in 1978 and a Governor who issued an executive order for this statewide plan, as advised by that Department. And they are fortunate that this same department realized that their aging state required a rapid response to the challenges ahead for the people of their state.

There are several guideposts for us to follow as the Task Force members chart the way forward for us all. In addition to Pennsylvania, Maryland and Colorado, several additional states are working on actual multi-sector statewide plans.

The American Association of Professional Planners published *Guidelines for Aging in Community* 10 years ago. These Guidelines continue to encourage cities and citizens to recognize their aging demographic as did the City of St. Paul six years ago, when they approved the City's 2040 Comprehensive Plan to include *aging in community* with input from the St. Paul Advisory Committee on Aging.

In May, the Administration for Community Living released a comprehensive Report to Congress entitled - *Aging in the United States: A Strategic Framework for a National Plan on Aging*. The Report encourages states to think “upstream” – endorsing:

...thoughtful, intentional planning and action – at and across every level of government; across industry, philanthropy, and academia; and in partnership with older adults...

This Report is timely. It acknowledges the serious deliberations being considered by members of the Legislative Task Force on Aging, encouraging us all to move forward on a path that goes beyond being friendly. A path that proves that our state recognizes the value of longevity.

The bottom-line questions for us all:

- What do we want to achieve to make it possible for older adults to age with dignity and an infrastructure to support aging in the communities of our choosing?
- In MN, what governmental entity must be established with the authority and accountability to lead us in creating a strategic plan of action, to chart our progress and prove that Minnesota will affirm aging throughout our state?

This past year we’ve heard descriptions about aging in Minnesota by presenters who have offered various recommendations and suggestions most of which were focused on deficits and challenges ahead. A collection of these recommendations will result in a flurry of legislative proposals that would serve as band-aids but not form a coherent actual plan of action.

What we have heard this past year is also further confirmation that without an open, state-led planning process that includes us all, and a resulting multi-sector plan for which a cabinet level department is accountable – we will not make measurable progress in MN. We require a Department for Community Aging.