

Presentation to the Task Force on Aging

August 14, 2024

Submitted by Leif Grina, President Minneapolis Regional Retirees Council, a constituent body of the Minneapolis Regional Labor Federation, AFL-CIO.

The Minneapolis Regional Retirees Council urges this task force recognize the complexity of the challenges Minnesota faces as our population ages and rises to meet these challenges through creation of cabinet level department. A department capable of developing a strategy to change the existing culture about aging, plan to meet the challenges we face and capable of coordinating resources now scattered among a bewildering array of departments, and agencies.

There is one aspect of the change needed to meet the challenge I would like to focus on. The task force as adopted as a guide for its work the 'eight domains of livability'. Of these I would argue only two, health services and community supports, and transportation, have to do with the delivery of services. The rest are all about maintaining relationships and engagement in social and civic life. It seems though that much of what we have heard about at task force meeting from a variety of agencies and departments is recitation of services that a variety of agencies, departments and programs the state or other entities are providing.

We know however that those domains of healthy aging that relate to civic and social engagement are equally, if not more important, than service delivery, as indeed those who are engaged with others have better physical and mental health. (I have attached a few excerpts from the *Institute on Aging, National Institute of Health* that support the role of civic and social engagement in healthy aging)

The focus on service delivery is understandable given a common perspective that the elderly need health and transportation and housing services and that these lend themselves to measurable activities and outcomes- metrics as I have often heard this called. We are seen then as people who are recipients of services. This speaks volumes about the culture of aging in which we live.

So, I believe we must focus equally on changing the culture to recognize that as we age we thrive on engagement and relationships and in doing so make enormous contributions to our families, our communities and our civic life.

“Culture eats strategy every time” it has been said. If the plan and strategy is overly focused on services it runs the risk of being eaten by the culture. And we should name the culture within which we age and it is ageism.

We face an enormous challenge as our population ages. We have all heard the numbers and demographic implications. And I think it fair to argue that we are relying on a fractured and fragmented system focused almost exclusively on providing services to meet these challenges. But the changes our state is experiencing as our population continues to age may easily be overwhelmed as a service oriented culture will not suffice. What we are doing it looks to me, is a bit like hoping you can outrun the tornado bearing down on you.

‘If you want to effect a big change, act in a way that changes the culture.’ With apologies to the person I am paraphrasing I do think this presents an over arching challenge- can we change the existing culture to one which guides us to the future we want?

If so, we must understand the changing culture is hard work. It will not happen without focused leadership, an understanding of how cultures change, and a well thought out plan and strategy well resourced.

It is difficult if not impossible to imagine success if we continue to do things as we now do. We do indeed need a cabinet level Department of Community Aging. We ask that the task force be bold and accept risk as the task before you is one that will impact the future of our state and the lives of every Minnesotan as we all hope to remain healthy, secure and to age with dignity as we age.

Attachment:

The following are excerpts from the website of the *Institute on Aging, National Institute of Health*

Research also shows that being socially active can benefit older adults. A study of more than 3,000 older adults found that making new social contacts was associated with improved self-reported physical and psychological well-being. Being social may also help you reach your exercise goals. A 2019 study found that older adults who had regular contact with friends and family were more physically active than those who did not.

Older adults are at particular risk for stress and stress-related problems. **You can help manage stress** with meditation techniques, physical activity, and **by participating in activities you enjoy**

Social and leisure activities may be at lower risk for some health problems. For example, one study found that participation in a community choir program for older adults reduced loneliness and increased interest in life. (National Institute on Aging, National Institute of Health)