

elder voice

ADVOCATES

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Presentation to the Legislative Task Force on Aging

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The MBA recommendation begins with a vision and considerations that partially summarize suggestions we've heard this past year and actions that have been attempted by numerous people in past decades. MBA reasons correctly that the current structural arrangement of MBA within DHS is no longer working. In fact, that was the motivation for an examination *by* MBA members *of* the MBA structural arrangement within DHS in 2021. The result of that examination: the recommendation for a Legislative Task Force on Aging unanimously approved by MBA members in December 2021.

Initially, the MBA recommendation appears to build a case for a cabinet level governmental entity, however, they stop far short of "...creative solutions..." they commit to in the introduction. Instead, MBA proposes a continuation of the status quo with minor changes that simply rearrange functions, secures jobs and attempts to assure the future for the Age Friendly Council. The newly named "Aging Entity" would not have the breadth or depth of authority required of a department. In fact, a recommendation by MBA for a new entity outside DHS would be too bold and would not be allowed.

MBA recommends an "Aging Entity" that appears to combine MBA and the Age Friendly Council and would be designated as the "state unit on aging" with one dedicated FTE position, and a redesigned and renamed MBA as a "citizen's advisory council." Essentially, this is a different arrangement of the entire present structure. MBA suggests changing titles while still embedded within the DHS service culture. It appears that MBA, as we know it, would be repealed but it is not clear what happens to all sections of the MBA statute which also require a thorough analysis.

The MBA recommendation would maintain and re-name the weakest structural arrangement. That is the Governor appointed time limited volunteers to serve on a "citizens advisory council." The volunteers would provide "oversight" of federal funds, a function for which volunteers are not sufficiently prepared and often not interested. Basically, this proposal replicates the current weak structural arrangement of MBA within DHS. The newly named volunteer group would continue to "rubber stamp" decisions made by staff who must have the expertise and responsibility for managing millions of dollars in federal funds.

The MBA suggests that the primary role of the "Aging Entity" would be to "...advocate for...older adults..." but this advocacy is limited. The advocacy reach would be targeted: 1) to fulfill the goals of a federally required "state plan" that is restricted in scope and the capacity of area agencies on aging, and 2) to support the "Age Friendly Multi-Sector Blueprint on Aging"

that does not now exist. The Blueprint on Aging will not be a statewide plan generated and endorsed by participants throughout the state. Rather, it would be the result of a limited public input process with participants who are engaged in age friendly projects and themes and conducted by staff and supporters of the Age Friendly Council from within DHS in St. Paul.

Years ago, MBA and DHS promoted “reframe aging” – a soft campaign to improve public perception of aging and how older people contribute to our society. To reframe aging we must broaden our acceptance of aging in community. Last month, Leif Grina asserted:

We are seen...as people who are recipients of services. This speaks volumes about the culture of aging in which we live...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.

It is difficult to imagine this newly structured “Aging Entity” advocating to reframe aging when it endorses a limited scope for full participation in planning with, by and for older adults. This MBA recommendation will not meet their commitment to “...identify and implement creative solutions that will pave the way toward all Minnesotans thriving as we age.” It is not possible to do this from within the Department of Human Services, steeped in a service culture and a weak track record in planning for aging.

The proponents of a department for community aging will describe our proposal next month. Today, we will describe expectations of such a department.

We envision a cabinet level agency that must break with tradition and establish itself as *the* robust leader in aging policy. Today, Minnesota state agencies are known primarily as regulatory in function. It may be difficult to imagine a cabinet level agency that is community-oriented, actively engaged in planning and leads by example. But that is the agency we need now.

Minnesotans require an agency with a charter to lead the state in combating ageism, beginning with the recognition that aging is a public health issue. We imagine an agency charter that balances our aging services culture with one that addresses the impact that zip codes, lack of housing, inaccessible health care and social conditions all have on healthy aging throughout Minnesota communities. We require a cabinet level agency that will recognize that communities are the nexus for aging well.

We require an agency with planners who collaborate with demographers, aging experts and community leaders to evaluate and plan improvements in delivery systems for home care and long-term care based on community need. We know that the increase in population and longevity will necessitate more community-based services and supports, quality improvements in assisted living and in skilled care facilities throughout our state. We want an agency that will be vigilant in assuring conditions and systems that result in appropriate and accessible, high-quality care.

Our expectation for a future cabinet level agency is that it will become our commitment and investment in our own communities. We've heard the alarm raised by the state demographer: we should have started planning years ago. Going forward, we must realize the financial and lost opportunity costs for individuals, families and whole communities if we fail to plan and invest in an infrastructure for aging. We must quantify the cost to our state if we fail to invest in our aging population – and for ourselves.

We envision an agency that will encourage and reward innovation; an agency that will lead a statewide multi-sector planning process and be accountable for the implementation of the resulting statewide plan. This agency is not possible if we are not bold; if we, instead, choose to maintain the status quo. We all want state leadership that will work for and with us to prepare for aging in communities throughout Minnesota.