

October 9, 2024

To: Minnesota Legislative Task Force on Aging

From: Supporters of the *Department of Community Aging*

In its collective, bipartisan wisdom, the 93rd Minnesota Legislature created a platform where every aspect of policy, programs, and services for older adults in the state would be analyzed and scrutinized for effectiveness and appropriateness in meeting current aging-related concerns and challenges. The Legislative Task Force on Aging is the statutory body designed and authorized to complete this work.

As the task force wraps up its review and prepares to submit recommendations to the legislature, it is important to highlight the task force's duty, as spelled out in the enabling statute, "from this review, determine the governmental entity to plan, lead, and implement these recommended policies and funding for aging Minnesotans across the state."

It is right that legislators should call for a "governmental entity" to plan, lead and implement the recommendations emanating from the task force's extensive review. The importance of creating a firm foundation for the success of this work can't be understated. Throughout the task force's review phase, it has been made clear that aging-related policy, services, and programs in Minnesota are varied, complex, multi-faceted, multi-sector, and multidisciplinary.

For this reason, it is imperative that the "governmental entity" be a new statutory, fully authorized, fully staffed and fully funded state department. As a part of the executive branch of state government, all aging related policies, services, and programs will be closely aligned with state authority and serve, fairly and equitably all Minnesota citizens. This new department will have the rights and powers to perform and enforce the duties prescribed to it by law.

The new department will be represented by a commissioner on the governor's cabinet, where all state-supported policies are debated, state funds are appropriated, and the will of older Minnesotans is front and center. Older Minnesotans will finally have a "seat at the table" where their wants and needs will be considered as vested in the common good and not as special interest.

The Department of Community Aging, as the "state unit on aging," would conduct a multi-sector planning process for aging and be responsible for the implementation of the resulting Statewide Plan, providing regular reports to the MN Legislature and Governor. The multi-sector planning process by this cabinet agency must be robust, data driven and require full public participation to gain an understanding of the current realities of aging across Minnesota.

We envision a cabinet level Department of Community Aging with the following components and activities.

Sustainable Resources for Aging in Community

- Collaborates with Area Agencies on Aging as the lead community organization in the *Aging Network* and partners in the planning and implementation of the Statewide Plan to ensure that older adults receive the most current and relevant information and support,
- Continues agency oversight and coordinates funding with counties and local communities for community-based services and supports,
- Collaborates with the private sector to secure grant opportunities for healthy aging in community,
- Promotes community engagement in developing local education endeavors for family and friends' caregiving and support,
- Continues to build a robust and current Senior LinkAge Line,
- Ensures public communication to promote general knowledge of protective services for older adults,
- With appropriate agencies, establishes policies against age discrimination of older workers in public and private sectors, and promotes employer education on hiring of older workers.

Long-Term Services and Supports

- Ensure widespread release of public reports, conducted by the Office of Ombudsman for Long-Term Care, on quality of care and quality of life evaluations of residents in long-term care facilities,
- Continues oversight of regulations and responsibilities regarding aging services, certified and licensed, funded by local, state, and federal governments and third-party reimbursements through a Memorandum of Understanding,
- Coordinates oversight of publicly financed services and supports,
- With economic development and appropriate state agencies, forecast necessity for future long-term services and supports based on community need, acknowledging caregiving role of family and friends.

Economic and Community Development

- Develop data-driven Statewide Plan on Aging encompassing a comprehensive framework of policies and programs to improve and support the health, wellbeing, and quality of life of Minnesota's older adults in rural, urban, suburban areas,
- Conduct initial and ongoing planning processes with full public participation, coordination across public and private sectors and state agencies,
- Design and report on measurable outcomes for all aspects of the Statewide Plan,
- Direct analysis of delivery systems for chronic, acute health care, palliative and end-of-life care,
- Direct gaps analysis of family caregiving policies,

- Support measurable outcomes in relation to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in plans for aging in community across Minnesota,
- Ensure ongoing discussions with the Tribal Nations and the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council in planning for aging,
- With the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), establish the directive to support training, recruiting, and hiring of older adults within state government and among employers statewide,
- With DEED, create education and training policies to support long-term care workforce development.

Again, we refer to the enabling statute. The governmental entity will be accountable for leading a statewide planning process and implement the resulting statewide plan. Given the testimony we heard this past year, we are confident that Minnesotans who participate in the planning process will raise concerns and areas of interest brought to the attention of Task Force members this past year, including but not limited to:

- Safe, affordable housing and modifications for older adults,
- Communities that support older people who want to live in their homes in their communities where they remain connected and engaged for as long as possible,
- Reliable and accessible transportation,
- Workforce development and programs to support aging workers' financial security,
- Education, financial and community support for family and friends providing care,
- Income security from fraud and abuse,
- Digital inclusion and literacy.

Through the planning process, Minnesotans will share specific information and data to draw attention to the impact of ageism in our culture. We will be in the forefront in changing this culture through our statewide plan and an accountable cabinet level agency. The following quotes from supporters stress the impact of our ageist culture, why it must change, and how it relates to the necessity for a Department of Community Aging:

"...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."

"As the demographics of Minnesota changed, developing a positive and affirmative culture on aging failed to develop...it was assumed that the elderly can 'take care of themselves.' One of the many reasons why Minnesota must establish a cabinet level agency on aging is to change our culture and engender relevance of our aging population."

A supporter of "community gerontology" challenges us to change our approach and use a more robust model for planning health care and community services. This model:

*“...differentiates aging in community versus aging in place, moving us from aging in isolation in homes and apartments to a broader place-based community with personal meaning
...identifying how our ‘life space’ impacts our ability to establish one-on-one relationships,
interact across neighborhoods, and participate as full partners in our communities.”*

It is time to invest in aging. We propose that the Legislative Task Force on Aging support a new culture for us all as we age. Join us as we advocate for full public participation in designing new systems and statewide policies rather than projects.

Again, it is imperative that the new governmental entity be a fully authorized, fully funded and fully staffed Department of Community Aging. As a part of the executive branch of state government, all aging related policies, services, and programs will be closely aligned with state authority and serve, fairly and equitably all Minnesota citizens.

Thank you.

Presenters:

Stephanie Klinzing

Mary Jo Schifsky

Kathleen Kelso

Additional Contributors and Supporters of this proposal:

Ann Bussey

Kate Grathwol

Leif Grina

Kris Sundberg

Jim Varpness

Gregg Wright