

Testimony from All Elders United for Justice
on
Consumer Equity for Broadband,
and
Support for establishing an Entity for Aging in 2025

Chairperson Klevorn, Members of the Legislative Task Force on Aging.

First, I would like to thank all the members of the Task Force for your invaluable service to the senior citizens of Minnesota and their families through your work these past 15 months.

My name is Jonathan Rose, executive director for All Elders United for Justice, an organization of collaborative organizations and individuals from diverse state-wide regions and communities.

We would like to present two issues today.

The first issue is a reminder on the importance of connectivity for seniors, connectivity on resources, family, and community to receive vital services and to address Loneliness and Isolation. The surgeon general and other health professionals find that Loneliness and Isolation can lead to poor physical health, including higher rates of cardiovascular disease and dementia, faster cognitive and mental decline, and increased risk of mortality.

One of our proposals for 2025 and beyond is to address connectivity through Broadband. We are currently expanding the Broadband infrastructure throughout the state, which is a good thing, but the funding from federal and state dollars do not address accessible and affordable connectivity for all. It is like building a highway, but people do not have the vehicles and other means to travel on it.

All Elders is recommending that Consumer Equity be addressed in 2025. Our definition of Consumer Equity would include:

- Affirmatively categorizing Broadband as a necessary utility
- Affirm the investment of consumer tax dollars in the development of the Broadband infrastructure
- Regulating the Broadband industry like other necessary utilities so that everyone has reasonable access and affordability to the system
- Provide training and tools for seniors to use the internet highway for things like telemedicine, information on medical resources, and connection to friends, family, and community.

We would like to recommend that actionable items be implemented in 2025, which brings us to our second point of testimony today, and that is the issue of establishing an entity on aging, in 2025.

There has been a significant amount of discussion on the topic of creating a cabinet level agency for Aging, and what it should look like. Around this discussion, concern was expressed for the difficulty in establishing a new agency and differentiating its role and authority from the existing agencies that currently serve elders.

It was also expressed by members of this Task Force and testifiers that initiatives to create a more just and equitable Minnesota for seniors should adopt a “Life Cycle approach”, which, among other things, requires individuals to begin retirement planning much earlier in life. An example of early financial planning might include those families that begin preparing for their children’s college education with the Minnesota 529 College Savings Plan. Some individuals prepare for retirement with long-term, low risk investments in government securities, which they begin as much as thirty years before their anticipated retirements.

We agree with this approach to managing the aging cycle.

However, some reflection will suggest that an agency devoted solely to address issues for people after that age , unless it is well-defined, may be inherently incompatible with a Life Cycle approach to create a just and dignified aging process. Any entity that is created to address senior issues must address the process of Aging which starts well before retirement age.

- The life cycle services that seniors require are already staffed across the Minnesota mission agencies, from healthcare to housing, from education to food, from technology to transportation. While this expertise already exists in missions agencies, they are not fully leveraged for the needs of seniors. It would be far more efficient to mandate that these experts ensure that senior needs are addressed in all existing and proposed programs into the future.
- Creating a new executive agency would require the new agency to compete with existing, well-established agencies for funding and staffing, rather than simply highlighting and holding these existing programs accountable for delivering services to seniors as a part of their life cycle planning and programming.
- Establishing a cabinet-level executive with both the mandate and authority to hold existing program managers accountable for delivering services to seniors is the most efficient manner in which to ensure that seniors are highlighted in their regular program planning. More importantly, with this approach, the needs of seniors can be addressed immediately, without the need to stand up and staff a new agency, which oftentimes takes many years to be fully functioning.

Yet the visualized outcomes of both ideas, a dedicated agency and Life Cycle approach, must be realized. An agency, entity, or process is created not as an end in itself, but as the means to desired outcomes. We need to have something done in 2025.

Therefore, All Elders would like to offer for consideration, the model of a cabinet level policy executive: an interagency policy leader on aging. This could be a temporary or permanent position, but it is one that could be established and active in 2025.

This executive would serve as the “Policy Czar on Aging”, would have sufficient authority to oversee, coordinate, evaluate, and report existing and future mandated services provided by agencies that would affect the quality of life for all seniors living in Minnesota. Establishing this executive position, which should be a member of the Governor’s cabinet and report directly to the Governor, will be far less cumbersome and take much less time than creating a new agency and avoid diminishing the roles of existing agencies.

A Czar position provides multiple benefits: It can be established in much less time; it provides coordination and accountability between agencies; it is highly focused on the single issue of aging while enabling adjacent activities related to aging, and it does not stand in the way, but rather enables the “Life Cycle Approach” (which some call Life Course, or Life Span) to the physical and social processes of all residents in the State of Minnesota, from birth through end-of-life.

Once again, thank you so very much to the Legislative Task Force on Aging for your work. The All Elders Organization hopes that you will consider the Czar option among your list of recommendations.

Thank you.

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