April 15, 2020

Commissioner Jodi Harpstead  
Commissioner Jan Malcolm  
Co-Chairs, Blue Ribbon Commission  
hhs.blue.ribbon.commission@state.mn.us

Dear Co-Chairs Harpstead and Malcolm,

Minnesota is on the cusp of unprecedented shifts in demographics to an older, more diverse state. This shift allows us opportunity to think creatively about our health and human services policies and programs. It is vital that we continue proactive, future-oriented thinking to ensure that our state remains economically productive.

The Blue Ribbon Commission’s charge to find $100 million in cuts in the near-term HHS budget is deeply concerning, particularly within the context of the demographic shift. We are in many ways not prepared.

**Supporting Low-Income, At-Risk Older Adults**

As reported by the Department of Human Services, Elderly Waiver rates need modernization, including filling a nearly $400 million gap in investment. Providers across the state are subsidizing the cost of care and many are transitioning to discontinue service or limit the number of Elderly Waiver clients. These forced economic choices decrease choice and access for individuals. Further cuts or adverse changes to eligibility are short-sighted and would limit access to and **increase costs of services in the future**. Investments in the home and community-based service infrastructure through Elderly Waiver are common-sense and helpful in keeping individuals out of the more costly Skilled Nursing Facility setting, which results in bending the cost curve.

**Living Well with Chronic Conditions**

Older adults are living longer, and for many that means managing chronic conditions that can threaten independence and quality of life. Significant spending in health care occurs at the end of life, a curve that can be mitigated with early intervention and supports. The Blue Ribbon Commission should pay particular attention to supporting older adults living with chronic conditions such as Alzheimer’s Disease and related dementias. All Minnesotans should have access to early screening, diagnosis and competent long-term services and supports including the best in evidence-based health promotion and chronic disease management strategies.

The Commission should support proven models such as palliative care and innovate new models of integrative services across community-based, acute and long-term care settings. This work must include considerations for friend and family caregivers who are key to ensuring high quality of life and cost containment strategies.
Eliminating Social, Economic, and Health Disparities
For many, Minnesota is a great place to age. The state is consistently ranked the healthiest and most senior-friendly in national polls. However, this is not true for all groups. Minnesota ranks as one of the highest in disparities between communities of color and the LGBT community and their peers. Healthy aging is both a public health and health disparities issue. Differences in education, income, and wealth, along with the impact of chronic stress and social exclusion associated with race and language barriers negatively impact the health of older adults. The lack of equity (social, health, environmental) impacts the health and well-being of all older Minnesotans and their families and creates health disparities. The Blue Ribbon Commission must continue to place focus on eliminating health, economic and social disparities if our state is to thrive for all older Minnesotans.

Own Your Future
It is well documented that a significant cohort of the Baby Boom Generation will not have enough retirement income to support their rising health and long-term care costs. We need to take immediate action to bolster the retirement outlook for future older adults. This immediate action should include adding a rider to Medicare Supplemental Insurance plans to include essential community supports and PCA services. It should also include building on the important work of the Own Your Future initiative to develop new private-market products to increase individual investments in health and long-term care. These personal investments will save money in the long-term.

Age-Friendly Minnesota
Purposeful involvement of older adults, their families, and the aging services workforce in systems design, programs and policies is critical. The Blue Ribbon Commission must inform and support the work of the Governor’s Council on an Age-Friendly Minnesota. This Council is charged with recommending to the Governor initiatives to ensure we continue to thrive into the future as we become older and more diverse. This work recognizes the diversity of communities across the state and further recognizes that these communities are uniquely positioned to be their own best problem-solvers and innovators. The recommendations you make will have far reaching implications across all communities in the state. Using a community-based framework to make decisions can help ensure strong communities now and in the future.

Thank you for your commitment to ensuring older Minnesotans have access to the needed supports to live well and age well. Please do not hesitate to contact me at adam@mnlcoa.org or (651) 271-3116 for further clarification or to answer any questions.

Respectfully submitted,

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