Moving Towards an Age-Friendly Minnesota

For the last few decades those working in aging painted a picture of our rapidly changing Minnesota. They targeted 2020 as a key year – the first year we will have more adults over age 65 than children in school. Twenty years ago this seemed so far way, but we are now just months from this demographic reality. The question is...are we ready?

Minnesota consistently ranks high in our supports for older Minnesotans and their family caregivers. This is due in large part to the network of non-profit and informal supports across the state.

That’s not to say we don’t experience significant challenges.

While Minnesota is a great place to age for many, it is not true for everyone. Significant health, economic and social disparities exist in communities of color, LGBTQ communities, Native American communities, and rural communities. These disparities result in lower life expectancies, increased rates of institutionalization, decreased access to a full range of long term services and supports, and poverty. The communities often lack a voice in designing systems and policies created for them. To combat this, the Minnesota Leadership Council formed the Minnesota Diverse Elders Coalition which is working to build a coalition of minority serving organizations to increase their capacity for advocacy on behalf of their elders.

The second challenge is investments in services and supports for older adults and their families has not kept pace with growing demand:

- The last study by the Minnesota Council on Foundations showed that only 0.8% of foundation support is targeted at older adults.
- A report by the Department of Human Services outlined the significant obstacles in the Elderly Waiver Program, a program designed for low income older adults to receive less expensive supports in their homes rather than institutional settings.
- A recent MinnPost article noting the Hennepin County budgeting process depicts the growing trend in cutting funding for older adult services.

To combat this, the Minnesota Leadership Council on Aging convenes the Finish Strong Network. This Network is a coalition of dedicated funders of aging services who explore how they can inform their peers about our changing communities.

Finally, older adults and their families continue to experience serious and persistent ageism. This ageism is pervasive and impacts all aspects of Minnesota life. Ageism is a significant
challenge in job seeking, receiving health care services, mobility in communities, aging in place, visibility...the list is endless. Many organizations are working directly to combat this ageism. AARP launched a philosophy of “disrupt aging”; the Minnesota Board on Aging focuses efforts on a MN2030 vision; and the Long Term Care Imperative (Care Providers of Minnesota and LeadingAge Minnesota) asks all Minnesotans to “face aging.” Each of these initiatives helps in shifting the narrative of aging from one of decline, burden and dependence to opportunity, asset focus, and multigenerational benefit.

There is more that must be done. Communities across Minnesota including Alexandria, Maple Grove, Minneapolis, Northfield and Hennepin County committed to working to become more age friendly by designating as official AARP/World Health Organization Age Friendly Communities. That designation is now available to states. Eight states beat Minnesota by making their commitment to older adults and their families. Minnesota must be next.

An Age-Friendly designation would solidify the commitment to our State’s prosperous future. The first requirement in this designation is for Governor Walz to proclaim the intent of the State to commit to “Age-Friendly Minnesota,” requiring state agencies to commit to actively plan for the demographic shift and creating a collaborative public – private partnership to oversee the work. Older Minnesotans and their family members are important to – and the largest segment of – Minnesota’s communities.

Together we can continue to make Minnesota a great place to live, work, play and age. But without a few necessary steps to support communities, older adults and families across the state and to address the challenges noted above, it will be quite difficult. We are in the midst of a very predictable demographic shift, many years in the making. Let’s be ready.

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