



Milwaukee County Commission on Aging Select Committee on Senior Centers

Critical Questions for the Select Committee on Senior Centers

- 1) Will senior centers *as currently constructed* attract participation from new generations of older adults?

The results of our assessment study, our exploration of best practices in other communities and other research suggest that, while the existing centers, as currently constructed, are well loved by current participants, significant improvements encompassing the design, programming, and functionality of buildings currently in use must be made to meet the Attributes we envision for Future Senior Centers. These improvements would significantly enhance the experience of current participants and be a catalyst for attracting new generations to the senior centers.

- 2) Should Milwaukee County continue to own and operate *all five* existing Milwaukee County Senior Centers for the next decade: Clinton Rose, Kelly, McGovern Park, Washington Park, and Wilson Park? Which of the five senior centers, if any, must be maintained?

No, Milwaukee County need not continue to own and operate all five existing Milwaukee County senior centers for the next decade.

Based upon public feedback and the Envisioning report, Milwaukee County should commit to maintaining programming at five senior center locations, open to the public aged 50+ and coordinated by Milwaukee County.

If the design of non-Milwaukee County owned facilities meets the conditions laid out in the attributes, it is not critical that Milwaukee County own these facilities, as long as it maintains a vested interest in the programming that occurs in those spaces consistent with its vision.

The Committee evaluated each Milwaukee County owned senior center against the attributes contained in the Commission on Aging's senior center vision statement. Based upon our assessment Milwaukee County owns three strategically located senior centers (Clinton Rose, Wilson, and Washington) that, with some thoughtful renovations and additions, can be upgraded to support the

intent of the Attributes contained in our Vision Statement. We recommend that the County maintain, renovate, and operate these facilities as senior centers.

The two smaller facilities (Kelly and McGovern) were not designed to be used as senior centers and meet few of the attributes contained in the Commission's vision. In congruence with prior structural studies, these two facilities would not be easily renovated. New expanded facilities, built to meet the intent of the attributes from ground up, could better serve existing participants, while at the same time expanding their reach and accessibility.

In the short term, we recommend maintaining the useful life and programming at the smaller facilities until such time as new centers would be fully operational.

- 3.) Should Milwaukee County consider the construction of new senior centers to supplement or replace existing centers? If so, how many senior centers are needed/desired? Would these facilities need to be owned by Milwaukee County? Where would these centers be located?

The Attribute "Think Big and Think Small Simultaneously" suggests that there should be additional centers (beyond the five Milwaukee County operated senior centers), which could be smaller but more focused to serve other ethnicities/special interests. In particular, there is interest in locating senior centers in areas with high concentrations of older adults who do not currently have a dedicated senior center or where County assets are few. Such additional facilities would not need to be owned by Milwaukee County.

There is also an argument to consider "regionalization" with the existing suburban senior centers, the MKE REC Centers, UCC and other existing facilities can serve as assets within a wider and coordinated network of senior centers, all benefiting from a review of the Attributes, with specialization, local accessibility, and enhanced access to other Older Americans Act funded programs.

- 4.) Should Milwaukee County consider expanding the use of the existing Senior Centers to *multi-generational community centers* in the hope of expanding the benefits of such facilities to the broader community, achieving more efficient use of space, and engendering broader public support and usage?

Here we need to be very intentional and specific what we mean by multi-generational community centers. These centers are NOT intended to be day care centers, after school centers, nor youth recreation centers. *Multi-generational* refers to the many generations of older adults, aged 50+ who already are invited to participate in our senior center activities and who have different interests.

However, wellness studies do point to measurable benefits from the interaction between older adults and youth and there are many unexplored *intergenerational* programming possibilities for senior center participants and young people to share knowledge and skills in a thoughtful, controlled environment.

Moreover, current usage patterns suggest that there are many hours that the centers are idle of human activity and thus pose an increased safety risk and decreased potential to recruit new generations of users to their core programming. Thought must be given to attracting other adult users to the facilities in off-hours, perhaps with a revenue generating component.

- 5.) Senior Centers in municipalities of Milwaukee County other than the City of Milwaukee and Cudahy are operated by those municipalities, e.g. West Allis. What role should the cities of Milwaukee and Cudahy, or Milwaukee Public Schools have in operating the Milwaukee County Senior Centers?

The committee has heard from senior center program leaders in South Milwaukee, West Allis, Shorewood, and Milwaukee Recreation. All share similar passion and, in many cases, similar programming for older adults. Moreover, Milwaukee County already supports programming at several senior centers that are more culturally focused, such as the United Community Center, Milwaukee Christian Center, Greater Galilee, and Indian Council for the Elderly senior centers.

Many participants currently utilize or visit more than one senior center, based upon their offerings. An enhanced opportunity exists to further a discussion with all senior centers about “regionalizing” programming across the entirety of

Milwaukee County and encouraging cross fertilization and sharing of programming between centers.

6.) Should the Commission on Aging *support programming in all senior centers* across the county utilizing Older Americans Act funding, including in the Milwaukee County owned senior centers, rather than reliance upon steadily declining Milwaukee County levy funds?

As stated earlier, it is the sense of the Committee that Milwaukee County should commit to long term funding of public senior center programming aligned with the Attributes in at least five sites supervised by Milwaukee County.

Currently the maintenance, operations, and programming in the Milwaukee County owned senior centers, with the exception of congregate/take out dining (which is funded through the Older Americans Act), is funded entirely by County tax levy. Approximately \$1.2 million in total County tax levy is dedicated to senior center maintenance and programming each year. Some programming in *non-Milwaukee County owned* senior centers is already funded through Title IIIB the Older Americans Act.

Given the uncertainty of the availability of the County tax levy in future years (the County has an approximately \$37 million structural deficit) and the fact that senior center programming is discretionary (as opposed to the jail, for example), the Committee recommends shifting some additional Older Americans Act Title IIIB funding over time to the Milwaukee County senior centers while aggressively pursuing other grants, partnerships, and funding sources, including some element of sliding fees for certain activities or for certain users of the facilities.

For all senior centers, the Committee recommends using the Attributes as a guide for programming as well as infrastructure improvements. The Programming and Promotion subcommittee prioritized a list of programming related improvements from the *Envisioning* report for the Milwaukee County owned senior centers and is working to implement these improvements.

Both the *Envisioning* report and the Attributes suggest that there are many ways to enhance the programming and attractiveness of the Milwaukee County senior centers to new generations of older adults within the current structures,

particularly by pursuing and expanding external partnerships and cooperation within the broader Aging Network.

At this time, the Committee recommends leveraging ARPA, Affordable Housing, and Infrastructure funding opportunities for construction and building renovation purposes and pursuing multiple new partnerships with foundations, community partners, and private businesses that would enhance the offerings at the centers.

The Committee recommends that some OAA ARPA funding be utilized in the short term to conduct feasibility and design studies and to retain a Senior Center project manager to coordinate and pursue these efforts.