



Building communities where older adults

THRIVE

A research and discussion forum for leaders in Ramsey County

April 2004

Conference highlights



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“Building communities where older adults thrive: A research and discussion forum for leaders in Ramsey County” was convened April 29, 2004, by the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, Ramsey County Human Services, SouthEast Metro SAIL, and the Metropolitan Area Agency on Aging.

Find more information about the survey of older adults in Ramsey County at www.wilder.org/research and at www.co.ramsey.mn.us.

“You can know everything about all the programs and systems that are out there, but you are never prepared for the emotional cost of caregiving until you’re actually caught up in doing it.”

Audience member

Discussion highlights

“We need to start paying attention. It’s as simple as that,” said Ramsey County Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt as she launched the April 2004 forum for Building Communities Where Older Adults Thrive.

Reinhardt focused on two elements of the Wilder Foundation/Ramsey County survey of older adults:

- About half of the older adults in the survey volunteer their time, an average of 17 hours a week.
- Eight of ten report that learning is important in their lives.

Contrary to many stereotypes of the elderly, these results show an extremely high level of social involvement, Reinhardt said. “They want to remain active. They want to remain part of their community.”

“Seniors don’t want to be cared *for*,” Reinhardt added, quoting a member of her staff. “They want to be cared *about*.”

Approximately 80 people attended the event, which was convened by Ramsey County Community Human Services, the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, the Metropolitan Area Agency on Aging, and SouthEast Metro SAIL. Wilder Foundation President Tom Kingston said his organization is committed to helping Minnesota prepare for the coming wave of older adults, by engaging as many individuals and organizations as possible in dialogue and planning. Traditionally, he added, the state has been prepared for issues before they develop. One problem of special concern, he said, will be the wide disparity between those who have financial and other resources and those who do not.

Former Saint Paul mayor George Latimer, a visiting professor of Urban Studies at Macalester College, noted that Ramsey County, as the smallest and most highly developed of the state’s counties, will face unusual challenges because it doesn’t have a lot of vacant land that can be developed to broaden its tax base. The county must confront difficult challenges with limited financial resources, he added: It must be efficient, and can’t afford mistakes.

Latimer pointed out several positive survey results. The fact that 90 percent of elderly residents say they have someone in the neighborhood whom they can count on, Latimer said, “is a marvelous statement. How many urban counties can say that?”

But in some cases, Latimer warned, mostly positive results might mask significant challenges. For example, 78 percent of seniors own their homes, but 23 percent live beneath the poverty line. Also, 82 percent of seniors drive their own cars, but the county must improve transportation alternatives. The fact that 60 percent of the Hmong older adults who were surveyed don’t know where to turn for information about services they might need is also a matter of concern, Latimer said.

Creative initiatives such as cooperative housing, Latimer said, might address a variety of needs, providing stable homes at relatively low cost, near shops and public transportation. He also called for changes in public policies to enable volunteer agencies to divert people from nursing homes. Many of these problems can and should be addressed through Ramsey County's existing network of community service organizations, Latimer said.

Reactions to the research

A panel discussion followed the presentation of the 2003 survey results. The following are the five panelists and their opening comments:

Psychologist **Ann Meissner**, who joked that "my main claim to fame is that I'm old," has worked as a public health nurse, rehabilitation counselor, teacher, and therapist. She expressed particular concern about the impact of Alzheimer's.

Hal Freshley, who works for the Minnesota Board on Aging, said Ramsey County faces unique challenges because it is geographically so small and well-developed, with little open space for growth and a great deal of land that is owned by government or nonprofit organizations, which don't pay taxes. These factors make it more difficult for the county to raise money. Allocating limited funds - deciding who is most deserving - will be a big challenge.

A seemingly unrelated issue, such as zoning, can deeply affect the lives of older adults, because it affects the density of development, the availability of housing and its proximity to shops and public transportation. Transportation is another key issue, Freshley said, since most people in Ramsey County don't live near shopping centers. Yet, a large proportion of older adults get around by walking, so they need to be near grocery stores. Redesign and redevelopment will be additional challenges.

Overall, however, Freshley expressed optimism about the future, as there are many opportunities for older citizens to contribute to society. As an example, he cited the Vital Aging Network, sponsored by the University of Minnesota, which helps "promote self-determination, self-sufficiency, civic engagement, and a high quality of life for and with older adults through education, advocacy, and leadership development."

The culture is changing, Freshley added, in ways that can benefit both the elderly and society. Older adults have a tremendous amount of education, energy, and enthusiasm. They can be resources - if they feel they're needed.

Gaoly Yang, who is Hmong-American, works for the Metro Area Agency on Aging. She focused on survey results showing that older Hmong adults tend to rely on immediate family and other relatives for assistance. Yang expressed concern that this informal network will diminish as younger generations become more Americanized. So on the one hand, she was happy to see that Hmong elders are being helped, but it's important to prepare for the possibility that this informal support may diminish with time. This informal support network, Yang said, also puts stress on families, something she has personally experienced.

Dentist **Steve Shuman** is an associate professor at the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry, the head of the University's geriatric dental training program, and director of the Wilder Senior Dental Program. He has 15 years of teaching experience and two decades of experience providing dental care to the elderly.

The survey findings, Shuman agreed, were generally positive. Most respondents were financially secure, trusted their community, reported high levels of social interaction, and were generally healthy.

Shuman expressed concern about the 40 percent of respondents who reported being anxious or depressed in the preceding year, while only one-third of that group sought help. Are health care providers and others who work with older adults on the lookout for this as a potential problem?

Shuman also pointed out that one-fourth of the elderly are serving as caregivers. How well-trained are they to provide support? Twenty percent, for example, didn't know where to go to find community services if the need arose.

Another looming problem, Shuman pointed out, is a dearth of geriatric dentists. Minnesota must also confront a general shortage of dentists; one solution might be to encourage retired dentists to return to work, at least part-time, perhaps by providing state-sponsored malpractice insurance if they work with underserved populations.

In some cases, positive results also present challenges, Shuman said. Is the educational system, for example, prepared to meet the needs of the many respondents (80%) who said opportunities for learning and creativity are important to them? The University of Minnesota's Vital Aging Network is one resource, Shuman said. Older adults have talents to share; it is to our benefit, and theirs, if society can tap those talents.

Shuman also emphasized the need to improve transportation for older adults. "Not a day goes by," he said, "when I am in the clinic and I don't hear concerns about transportation and getting to where we are. I don't think we can over-emphasize those concerns." He told the story of an older adult who failed his driver's test on a Wednesday - and attempted suicide two days later.

The survey response rate was 75 percent, which is considered quite good for a random telephone survey of this type. However, it is difficult to say what differences would be found among the 25 percent who declined to participate. One possible explanation, Shuman said, is that some who were called were not mentally capable to participate. "We need to know more about them in order to address their needs well," he added.

It would also be helpful, Shuman said, to survey this same group of people five years from now. How will they change? Good information is absolutely essential to planning. "Without good information," Shuman said, "we are not going to make good decisions."

"Not a day goes by in the clinic when I don't hear concerns about transportation."

Steve Shuman
geriatric dentistry professor

The fifth panelist was Ramsey County Commissioner **Jan Wiessner**, who serves on the board of the Metro Area Agency on Aging and has “a long-term passion for the subject.” She has both legislative experience working on issues that affect the elderly and experience working directly with them, ever since she was a young woman.

Wiessner found the survey results to be encouraging. She saw opportunities for policymakers to re-evaluate how society treats older adults, and to view them as a resource. People used to talk of retiring at 50, she said, but now they’re living longer: “What are you going to do for the rest of your life? That’s a long time to be retired.”

Wiessner compared this new way of thinking about older adults to the way experts have begun to look at children’s assets. “We really have to have that mindset with the elderly as well,” she said. “What are their abilities, not their disabilities?”

Creative solutions will help, Wiessner said. Until recently, her mother lived with her brother and his children: multi-generational living might be a way to help care for older adults and to tap their individual strengths. Other suggestions were to encourage older women to share a home and to promote cooperative living.

Wiessner said the fact that half of survey respondents do volunteer work is nothing short of amazing. “Think about the demographic changes [that are coming] and what a tremendous resource we are going to have in communities,” she said. “We need to be thinking differently about this. . . . It’s not just a wave of elderly coming at us; it’s a tsunami. It’s my generation. We’re going to be flooding the population.”

Moderator question: The Wilder/Ramsey County survey presents a generally rosy picture of older adults, of people who are reasonably healthy, reasonably happy, and reasonably well connected to their families. Where do we have the greatest chance to lose ground? Where are we most in danger?

“I am very concerned about our infrastructure of services,” Wiessner said. Ramsey County cut over \$20 million from its budget from 2003 to 2004. And that’s not including \$8 million of new services vetoed by the legislature. We’ve done so much cutting of services, she said, that we can’t afford to cut more.

Shuman was most concerned about cuts to education, and their effect on health care delivery and training. It’s hard to reshape and remodel curricula to respond to new challenges when budgets are being cut.

Gaoly Yang's greatest concern is that many people of color are not using available resources, whether because of culture, language, or other factors. They don't know where to get information, and are relying heavily on relatives. At the same time, it has become increasingly common - even necessary - in the Hmong community for both members of a couple to hold jobs. If that trend continues, no one will be available to care for the elderly. Another concern is that 71 percent of Hmong older adults live with their children, half of whom don't own their homes: They often won't be able to make home modifications to accommodate the needs of older adults.

Yang also worried that additional cuts in government services will hurt elders who are at or below the poverty line. Their health care needs are being met only through government services, she pointed out; the survey might mask their needs because those needs are - at least for now - being met.

For Hal Freshley, the biggest challenge is spending scarce public money as wisely and strategically as possible. It's crucial, he said, to maintain a variety of options for older adults, such as home care, assisted living, and nursing homes. It's also worrisome Freshley said, that people of color are disproportionately represented among the poor. Ramsey County has a lot of immigrants; if we use a cookie-cutter approach to serve older adults, it may limit our ability to serve cultures with somewhat different needs.

The most important need to address, in Ann Meissner's opinion, is to make prevention more appealing. But it's often difficult to interest medical students and nurses in prevention, she added, because it can't be measured. In the emergency room, you can say you've treated 100 people. But how do you measure the 100 who are kept out of the ER?

Given the increasingly diverse population of Ramsey County, Meissner said, it's crucial for students to study other cultures in high school and college. Some cultures, for example, view navy blue as the color of death; someone dressed in navy blue is "death coming toward you." Her uniform years ago as a public health nurse, Meissner said, was navy blue.

Moderator question: Where would you most recommend action?

The first panelist to address this question was Ann Meissner: "If I ran the world," she said, "what I would do is devise a class - an interesting class - for people approaching retirement age about the components of a happy life." One key to a happy life, she added, is using your strengths to help others.

"What we do [to serve older adults]," Hal Freshley responded, "is almost completely irrelevant to most older people." The reason: Most get assistance not from government or social service agencies, but informal sources - hired help, for

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*Ann Meissner
psychologist*

example, who help with housework and often provide myriad other services. It's more natural for most people *not* to go through formal systems. There may be opportunities for the formal systems to blend with, and perhaps support the quality of, informal systems. Providing full-time, long-term care is extremely expensive, so this approach makes economic sense. Part of the challenge, however, will be to assure safety and quality when services are informal and individually arranged.

"Our system is too rigid," Gaoly Yang said. In Hmong families, younger generations generally care for older adults as long as possible, with older adults moving to nursing homes only when caregivers cannot do it anymore. Yang suggested listening carefully to Hmong older adults and caregivers to figure out why they don't use services. "As a system," she added, "we also need to allow for flexibility, in order for this informal support to continue." That may require policy changes. In some cases, the rules of the system make it harder for families to provide for their own. For example, if someone can get financial help to care for someone else's grandmother, and that person in return cares for the first person's grandmother, it's difficult for many people to see the sense in that, Yang said.

Steve Shuman called for an increase in advocacy by and on behalf of older adults. Fifteen years ago, he pointed out, activists started expressing concern about the lack of drug coverage for older adults, and Congress is only now addressing the problem. Advocacy can help make the system better.

"I think the biggest challenge is raising public consciousness," said Jan Wiessner. "This is an important public policy issue. We need somehow to create awareness of where we are heading." Foundations need to focus more on the needs of older adults, she argued. There also won't be enough young people to care for the Baby Boom generation as they age, she added, so we need to look for creative solutions.

Audience question: Most service providers exist in "thick-walled silos," but many individuals have complicated, multi-faceted needs. What can be done to reduce the thickness of these walls, and to make services more accessible?

There are organizations, such as intergenerational programs, that provide wonderful examples of how to break down those walls, Jan Wiessner said. We need to encourage them—to "water those seeds."

Hal Freshley advocated a shift towards making services consumer-directed. As an example, he cited the new waiver program that, at least theoretically, allows counties more flexibility in what services they will pay for - more of what consumers choose. There is an opportunity, he said, to customize services to address the unique needs of people from different cultures. He expressed hope that this program will result in positive change.

Audience question: Older adults sometimes have a myopic view of their needs, and deny them until there is a serious problem. They don't always realize how difficult the situation is for their caregivers. Are there plans for an adjunct study of caregivers?

This question touched upon a sensitive and important issue for panelists and conference participants alike. A second audience member described a federal program that supports family caregivers with help navigating the process of caring for an older adult. Respite care is another important service. Employers can help by providing flexibility. It's important to get information about such programs to organizations that work with families, such as churches, clinics, and schools. Education and training of caregivers can also help.

One participant expressed concern that the Wilder/Ramsey County survey presents too rosy a picture, when the reality is different. She hears often, she said, about older adults who can't get to doctors' appointments, or who can't pay for medications to treat chronic health problems. She was especially concerned because Wilder is a trusted source of research: She worried that the report might distract from a focus on public solutions, and government will continue to cut programs.

Others agreed with this concern. It's difficult to mobilize support for services to seniors, Steve Shuman said, when 97 percent of respondents say they're happy. In his experience, older adults are making tough choices about health care because they don't have enough money to meet all their needs. He also expressed concern about older adults who live at home but depend on informal care systems. Policymakers must work with them and identify their needs, he suggested.

Not everyone agreed. Advocates can frame the survey results to point out needs, Hal Freshley said, for example by focusing on low-income seniors. What planners need is good, unfiltered information.

Balancing paternalism and autonomy with regard to older adults is a major challenge, Freshley added. He recalled expressing concern to his mother about her continuing to live at home as she aged and experienced health problems. His mother bristled: "You will not tell me when I need help," she told him. "I will tell you when I need help."

"It was a huge difficulty for me," Freshley said. We need to strike a balance, at once helping and respecting the person, he added. People have a right to refuse assistance.

It's important to respect the autonomy of individuals, even when they refuse services, Steve Shuman said, and even though the cost will sometimes be higher in the long run. Providers must address this challenge.

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Ann Meissner predicted that the challenges will be different with baby boomers because women of the Baby Boom generation are more aggressive in demanding that their needs are met. “Women my age were raised not to complain, not to brag, not to stand out,” she said.

Participants returned to this question about caregivers later. The “burnout” level among caregivers is very high, one said - another argument for more research with caregivers, Steve Shuman pointed out.

Congress is unlikely to address such issues on the federal level, Hal Freshley suggested, until it’s forced to do so, or until a significant number of elected representatives need help with their own parents. In order to effect change, caregivers might have to become advocates.

Audience comments

Putting the survey data in perspective

One participant put the generally positive survey data in perspective by saying that it’s rare for any medical or social problem to affect a majority of people; a problem can be significant even if it affects only a relatively small percentage of people. If, for example, we have 10 percent unemployment, this person added, “We don’t say, because employment is 90 percent, let’s not have employment programs.” It’s also important to look at the total number of people affected, and not just percentages.

Transportation

The survey asked about transportation, but the results masked the real issue, one participant said: The problem in Ramsey County is a lack of transportation for the frail elderly, who have difficulty using Metro Mobility. Dakota and other nearby counties do a better job of helping seniors, the participant said.

Worker shortages and older adults

More workers will be needed to provide care for older adults, one participant pointed out. We need to begin thinking about who those caregivers and attendants will be, in order to avoid problems such as poor service and conflicts with licensing laws. Many elderly people find caregivers through informal networks, such as a neighbor.

Many of those informal caregivers are and probably will be unlicensed, Hal Freshley added. That presents tough public policy choices. The government has a responsibility to protect consumers from being exploited. But with a decentralized, consumer-driven system, it’s difficult to assure quality. In this case, legal liability may be a tool for assuring quality, since many people are sensitive to the threat of lawsuits. But fear of lawsuits and liability might promote inefficiency.

“The trend that will overshadow all the others.”

Minnesota State Demographer Tom Gillaspy began his luncheon address with a joke at his own expense. “They say demographers are a lot like accountants,” he told the audience. “Only not quite as exciting.”

And yet, as a demographer, Gillaspy had a very serious message for anyone hoping to build communities in which older adults thrive. The first wave of the Baby Boom generation will turn 65 in 2011. “The aging of the Baby Boom generation is so large, so overwhelming, that we are going to see a huge increase in the number of people aged 65 and older,” he said. By comparison, all other population trends—emigration, immigration, shifts of population to the suburbs—will be dwarfed.

What that trend means for Ramsey County is more difficult to say. Age 65 is an arbitrary distinction used for convenience by demographers, Gillaspy said, just as the county borders are arbitrary political boundaries. Both are, however, “largely irrelevant” to how people behave. The real challenge, Gillaspy said, is understanding the human ecology of the Twin Cities - how people really live their lives.

No accidental success

History can be a useful guide. “Minnesota is a remarkably successful state on virtually every socioeconomic characteristic,” Gillaspy said. “Minnesota stands as one of the most successful states.”

That was not always true. In the late 1950s, per capita income in Minnesota ranked in the bottom 25 percent of states. The federal government identified some Minnesota regions as areas of chronic poverty, similar to Appalachia.

“Minnesota over the last 40 years has made tremendous strides,” Gillaspy said. Why, he added, is clear: Our leaders made wise decisions decades ago. Or, as former Governor Elmer Anderson has said, the state “made wise investments” in people (education) as well as infrastructure 40 or 50 years ago.

“Whether or not we will be successful in the future - 30 years from now, 40 years from now, 50 years from now - depends on the wise and good investments we make today,” Gillaspy added.

Despite Minnesota’s overall success, Gillaspy warned the state also has “a dirty underside: Things are not as good here, in general, for people of color. There are groups of people that are not sharing in our success,” he said.

Putting the county into context

From the perspective of human ecology, Gillaspy said Ramsey County is best understood as part of a single large metropolitan area with a core city at its center - "Saint Paul-Minneapolis," he joked. "Two cities separated by a common river." Those core cities, though they have grown some in the past decade, are still smaller than they were in 1950. Similarly, the metropolitan area's inner ring suburbs - generally, inside the Interstate 494-694 ring - for the most part are not growing. Growth is occurring on the outskirts of the metropolitan area. But regional politics don't reflect that human ecology: The seven-county Metropolitan Council includes barely half of the 13 counties in the federal government's definition of the Twin Cities metropolitan area. And two of those counties are in Wisconsin, not Minnesota.

At the same time, Ramsey County faces some unique challenges. It is the most developed county in Minnesota, with little open land, and thus little room for new development. It's also the only metro-area county with no fast-growing outer ring suburbs inside its borders. So if the county is to grow - and to increase its tax base - it must become denser.

Older people are leaving Ramsey County, choosing primarily to live in the eastern suburbs. Others are going to the Sun Belt. Starting in 2011, however, the aging of the Baby Boom generation will more than compensate for that migration. Yet those who are leaving, Gillaspy suggested, might offer a uniquely valuable perspective on what Ramsey County can do to help older adults thrive. "Why are they going?" he asked. "Where are they going? Are there 'push' factors from Ramsey? Or are there 'pull' factors from other places? Good businesses - businesses that survive - are the ones who know why customers leave."

The foreseeable and unforeseeable

Although future growth in the Twin Cities metropolitan area will occur in the suburbs, Ramsey County is expected to grow a modest amount. Beginning around 2015, however, the labor force will begin to shrink. In other words, Gillaspy warned, we may experience labor shortages just as more older adults need workers to help with household chores and personal care. "The problem is," he added, "where are we going to find [that help] in an increasingly tight labor market?"

In addition, the degree that the population of the metro area is expected to grow will be the result of migration into the state, both from other states and from foreign countries. And the number of people who come to Minnesota will be greatly influenced by economies elsewhere - whether people feel compelled to leave. Thus the size of Minnesota's workforce depends on many factors the state cannot control.

"Yet another unknown is how many people 65 and older will continue to work. Predictions are that this will increase, but the trend is not yet evident."

Tom Gillaspy
Minnesota State Demographer

Yet another unknown is how many people 65 and older will continue to work. Predictions are that this will increase, but the trend is not yet evident, Gillaspy

said. “Whether or not they stay in the paid workforce, they still will be looking for things to do - either to go to school, to do recreational things, or to volunteer.”

In the past, baby boomers have prided themselves on being different from previous generations - they have, for example, been more mobile, and less involved in formal organizations like churches. “The question is, will these Boomers be different [as they age]?” Gillaspy asked. If so, their behavior will affect support mechanisms, needs, and services.

Ramsey County is also becoming more diverse ethnically and racially; the people who live here speak different languages, come from a variety of different cultures, and practice many different religions. “We are changing, and we are continuing to change,” Gillaspy said.

Other trends that will affect Ramsey County

- Traditionally, daughters have been the ones who care for elderly parents. But baby boomers as a rule have fewer children than prior generations; many have none. And their children are mobile - they don’t live near their parents. “What will that mean 25 years from now?” Gillaspy asked.
- Because of the way in which the metro area is growing, political representation (and thus political power) will increasingly shift to the outer suburbs - not the central cities and inner suburbs that comprise Ramsey County.
- Whether the county’s population grows or shrinks, individual residents change constantly - people come and go. What that means, Gillaspy said, is that the county must constantly get out the word about needs, issues, and services.
- There will be a huge increase over the next 30 years in the number of married couples and individuals living without children at home. As a result, developers expect there will be more enclaves of developments for seniors, with stores nearby. “It all sounds absolutely wonderful,” Gillaspy said. “But there’s only one thing missing - kids.”
- “Health is the 500-pound gorilla in the middle of the room,” Gillaspy said. Even now, before the senior boom, “health care costs are eating up budgets” of states, cities, counties, businesses, schools, and the federal government. And that’s before the flood.
- However, Gillaspy also foresees hopeful - but unpredictable - trends. We might, for example, eventually be able to treat or prevent Alzheimer’s disease, which is of course a disease of the elderly. When projecting 20 or 30 years out, significant medical advances must at least be considered a possibility.

Paying for retirement

Gillaspy also expressed concern about how well baby boomers have prepared for retirement. “Our prediction is, ‘Not well.’”

Gillaspy said people tend to fall into three categories:

- Roughly one-quarter of those over 50 are fanatics about saving, and have enough money to live comfortably after retirement.
- Approximately another 25 percent have saved nothing, know they've saved nothing, and have no intention to save. Their plan for retirement is in essence to keep working. "That's going to get real old around age 75 or 80, or when they are no longer physically able to work," Gillaspy said.
- The remaining half of those over 50 think they're prepared for retirement - but they're wrong. In reality, Gillaspy said, many have saved a small amount of money - something like \$40,000. The interest won't even be enough to pay their property tax.

"Basically there are a lot of people who simply are not prepared," Gillaspy said. Perhaps more worrisome, Gillaspy said many Americans are going into debt to buy consumer goods. Some are borrowing on home equity - their most valuable asset, which has enormous potential to support them in retirement.

The meaning of "community"

Despite his initial jest about demographers being even drier than accountants, Gillaspy closed with some philosophical and moving reflections on the nature of community. "There is one word," he said, "that becomes the operative word across the whole mess, and that's the word 'community.' What do I mean by community? It's two or more people who know that if something happens to one of us, it happens to all of us. So if something bad happens to you, it happens to me; if something bad happens to me, it happens to you ... that is community."

If there's a flood in Roseau County, Gillaspy added, and Minnesota is truly a community, people in the Twin Cities help out. And if people in the central cities need something, residents in high-growth suburbs help.

But, Gillaspy said, there are signs that our sense of community is eroding. When school bonds fail to pass, for example, some people say, "They're not my kids."

But they're everyone's kids, Gillaspy argued. "What happens if we fail to recognize the community of all the people who live in the Twin Cities, all the people who live in Minnesota?" he asked. "Is there such a thing as Minnesota? ..."

"We need to learn to seize opportunities. We need to learn to seize them across language barriers, cultural barriers, religious barriers. We need to share each other's religious ceremonies; we need to share each other's beliefs and loves, and things like that. We need to learn how to be a community of brothers and sisters."

"Think about the demographic changes [that are coming] and what a tremendous resource we are going to have in communities."

Jan Wiessner
Ramsey County Commissioner

What needs attention and action?

In the second half of the day, conference participants gathered in small groups to discuss four questions:

1. Of all the facts and ideas discussed so far today, what strikes you as most important to understand or to take action on?
2. Of those issues, choose the top two or three opportunities for action or issues deserving attention.
3. For each top opportunity, identify ways the people at your table can become involved and make a difference.
4. What is missing? What issues need more attention or additional information?"

Together, participants generated dozens of recommendations for enabling seniors to thrive in Ramsey County.

Improve existing systems and services

Many of the groups' recommendations centered on ways to improve existing systems and services:

- Coordinate existing services and systems so that they are being used more efficiently.
- Market existing resources and services, such as medical transportation, more consistently and effectively.
- Develop more flexible and better-integrated programs and services. "Breaking down silos" was a common metaphor.
- Match community resources and skills with people who need them.
- Evaluate and, when necessary, change rules and regulations, which sometimes prevent common-sense solutions. One example: If program money could be used to buy air conditioners, some hospital trips for respiratory problems might be avoided.
- Strengthen existing partnerships. One example cited was a local college that offered electricians' services to a nonprofit organization for maintaining the homes of seniors.
- Make programs and services consumer-driven: Give people what they want, not just what the system thinks they should have.

- Even as individuals advocated making services more flexible and consumer-driven, several anticipated new challenges. It is essential to make sure people aren't taken advantage of, and that they receive the services that have been paid for.
- Improve education and training of those who come in contact with older adults. One example was the need for better recognition of the warning signs of stroke.
- Instead of having individuals do isolated tasks to help older adults, train and support "universal workers" who provide an array of personal services.

Working with individuals and communities of color

Many recommendations focused on Ramsey County's growing population of people of color:

- Remove barriers to access for low-income older adults of color.
- Agencies should develop and strengthen relationships with key leaders and organizations that serve people of color.
- Develop and improve education and training about other cultures.
- Do door-to-door outreach to promote services to people of color.
- Schools and organizations should hire, recruit and train more persons of color to work with older adults.
- Develop more cooperative programs with institutions of higher education to train persons of color to work with older adults.
- Support existing organizations that have expertise in working with people from different cultures.
- Individuals and organizations need to learn more about non-dominant cultures.
- Build strong educational programs in high school so that young people can learn about different cultures.
- As baby boomers age, there will be a limited number of personal caregivers in the workforce; those who provide care will be from a variety of different cultures. "There will be a tremendous need for the care *receiver* to have a better understanding and knowledge of the culture of the person providing care," one person emphasized.

Older adults as workers, including caregivers

Another common theme was the value - both economic and non-economic -- that elderly people contribute to society in both paid and unpaid work:

- Re-evaluate and redefine the role of elderly workers in businesses, nonprofit organizations, and educational institutions.
- Rethink mandatory retirement ages, and what implications that would have for Social Security, Medicare, and other programs for older adults. Some people will want to continue working well into their 70s.
- Organizations that work with and serve older adults should themselves become models for how to constructively engage aging workers, providing opportunities for part-time work, mentoring, and consulting.
- Advocate for flexibility in workplaces (such as at-home and part-time work, job sharing, mentoring, and consulting work).
- Help older adults, organizations and businesses figure out how the skills and experience of older workers can be transferred to different settings and applications (such as new types of businesses, web-based applications).
- Redefine “retirement.” Help the elderly think about what they are able to do, want to do, and enjoy doing to help others.
- Look at seniors as resources, both for volunteer and paid work, and also as caregivers. “They have a lot to offer,” one person said. “They do deserve to be paid.”

Recruiting and training caregivers, including family members

The increasing population of older adults will translate to an increased need for trained caregivers:

- Find ways to make elder care and prevention more attractive career choices.
- Recruit people to work in geriatric health care, including dentistry.
- Provide education and training to those who are serving as informal caregivers for the elderly, teaching them about resources and options.
- Help caregivers deal with the emotional effects of caring for older adults, especially a family member. “There is an emotional burden that is not addressed, and all the information in the world doesn’t really help you get through that well,” one participant said.
- Strengthen informal systems of support for caregivers.

Help families navigate complex systems

Individuals and families need help navigating the nation's extraordinarily complex health care system and other bureaucracies encountered by the elderly:

- There is a need for individuals and organizations to serve essentially as guides, helping families and individuals through difficult transitions: training caregivers, for example; helping the elderly and families find services; serving as advocates; and mediating disputes.

Transportation

Other participants, drawing upon both the survey and their own experience working with older adults, emphasized the need to improve transportation in our automobile-dominated culture:

- Convene a task force to examine the issue of transportation for the elderly, looking, among other places, at how nearby counties handle transportation. Some surrounding counties, one group commented, do a better job than Ramsey County.
- It's difficult to find drivers to help older adults, whether paid or volunteer. Liability is an issue that must be addressed, perhaps through creative approaches. One suggestion: Enact a "Good Samaritan" rule for giving rides to older adults, similar to existing protection for those providing first aid.
- Train volunteer drivers through faith communities.

Build community

Several groups built upon a theme highlighted by Minnesota State Demographer Tom Gillaspay in his luncheon address - the necessity of building true communities:

- Foster community - the sense that we are responsible to and for each other. "We need to think how can we together make a difference," one person said.
- Nourish and build the capacity of communities to support informal systems of care, for example, through family, friends, and faith groups.

Communication

Others focused on the need and value of improved communication with and about older adults:

- Use personal stories to communicate important messages about the experiences of families and the elderly themselves, like when someone is suffering from a terminal illness. As an example, one group described a woman whose husband didn't qualify for services because they had too many assets: "She kind of had to lose everything and then qualify." In the long run, it probably cost taxpayers more than if she had been able to remain in a stable living situation.

- One group expressed concern that the picture painted by the Wilder/Ramsey County survey might be perceived as being rosier than is actually the case, in effect justifying a decrease in services. Communicating with decision makers is essential. “We don’t want to lose the infrastructure that we have because someone is misinterpreting information,” one participant commented.
- Develop new ways to reach and educate seniors. People don’t go to health fairs, one participant commented; they do like to attend shows that are funny. Humor might provide a vehicle for educating people about serious matters.
- Develop communication programs that take into account the reality of population turnover. New people, including immigrants, are constantly moving into Minnesota; others move within the state. “What we forget, I think, is that we need to keep marketing, or educating people, offering information to the public about the resources that are out there,” one participant said.
- Education and outreach should utilize a variety of different media.
- Develop a catchy slogan, similar to “Y2K,” to draw attention to the coming increase in the population of the elderly. One tongue-in-cheek suggestion: “No elder left behind.”

Do more research

Participants viewed the Wilder/Ramsey County survey as the starting point for additional research:

- Do additional research on the needs of those who are older than in the Wilder/Ramsey County survey, as well as the 10 percent of individuals who said their lives are not going well. “If you have 90 percent employment, that’s good,” one participant commented. “But for the 10 percent that aren’t working, that isn’t good.”
- Find out more about the 25 percent of individuals who were asked to participate in the Wilder/Ramsey County survey but declined.
- Do research on caregivers.
- Study the impact of informal services to older adults on quality of life and costs. What’s being used? What works? How can these informal systems be improved and strengthened? What is the economic impact?
- What does it mean when survey respondents say they don’t know how to access existing services? That can mean wide variety of things, from not being sure how to get help with taxes to life-threatening questions about hospital care. Use information in the survey as a springboard to explore specific areas of need.

- Examine the effectiveness of preventive programs and services.
- Design demonstration projects to show the cost-effectiveness and quality of allowing more flexibility in the use of funding and services.

Advocacy

Many of the recommendations made by conference participants would require policy-level changes in government, foundations, and organizations. The need for advocacy echoed throughout the group reports, often in tandem with a call for improved communication:

- Advocate for flexibility in workplaces (i.e., encourage at-home and part-time work, job sharing, mentoring, and work as consultants).
- Advocate for the return of the “universal worker,” and for reimbursement.
- Do a better job of advocating with policymakers, including funders, about the importance of supporting organizations that coordinate services. Improved coordination won’t happen on a volunteer basis.
- Encourage foundations to address the needs of the elderly.
- Those who work with and provide services for the elderly can and should play a key role in educating legislators and other policymakers.
- Give older adults a role in policy/program development. Get their input *before* legislation is passed.

Of all the facts and ideas that were discussed, what strikes you as most important to understand or take action on?

Concern for the 10% whose lives are not rosy

- Identification of “at risk” individuals
- Those without family or friends
- Special attention to elders of color

The imperative of the Senior Boom and limited resources

New care models

- Consumer-directed care: issue of autonomy vs. paternalism
- Integration of complementary flexible services

Caregiver burden

Mental health/depression

Vital aging: older adults as a resource

Prevention: the importance of being proactive

Transportation

Zoning and smart growth as it affects older adults

What are the top opportunities for action or attention?

Consumer-directed care (autonomy vs. choice)

Refocus dollars from nursing homes to communities

Focus on the 10 percent who are not doing as well

Caregiver burden - more education for caregivers

Community support for elders and caregivers

- Vital involvement of all ages - Baby boomers as a resource
- Adopt a two block radius in a neighborhood
- Replicate faith-based community outreach

Develop services and build capacity of providers to serve minority elders

- Provide training/education for professionals
- Learn more about best practices

Affordable housing

Task force to tackle transportation

- Specialized transport for frail seniors

Workforce issues

Improve access to information through constant community education/outreach

Migration to suburbs



Wilder Research Center

www.wilder.org/research

651-647-4600

Ramsey County

www.co.ramsey.mn.us