

# THE MKE HUBS

Reimagining Senior Centers  
for Milwaukee County  
in the 21st Century

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MARCH 7, 2022

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MILWAUKEE COUNTY COMMISSION ON AGING  
Select Committee on Senior Centers



By achieving racial equity, Milwaukee  
is the **healthiest county in Wisconsin.**

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## Executive Summary

### The MKE HUBS: Reimagining Senior Centers for Milwaukee County in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

For more than half a century, Milwaukee County has invested in multipurpose senior centers across the county. Today, through five senior centers owned by Milwaukee County as well as at multiple municipal and independent senior centers serving diverse populations, nearly ten thousand older residents dine, socialize, and participate in education, recreation, and fitness activities. A culmination of seven years of study, extensive public comment, and three prior reports, including *Envisioning the Future: Milwaukee Senior Centers 2020*, this report presents a new vision for senior centers and programming to support new generations of older adults for the next half century.

***“Each area agency on aging shall . . . provide . . . where appropriate, for the establishment, maintenance, and modernization of multipurpose senior centers. . . .”***

*- Older Americans Act, Sec. 306(a)(1) (2020)*

Across Milwaukee County and the nation, we are experiencing unprecedented growth in our older adult population. At the same time, we have created an age-segregated society where older and younger generations rarely socialize, collaborate, or create together. Social media and the virtual world have increasingly captured the time and attention of younger people, while membership and participation in social institutions of all stripes is in precipitous decline. To bridge this gap, we need to update and modernize our public policies, social practices, and time-honored programs for this rapidly increasing older population so that all residents will benefit from a renewed notion of community.

An enlightened model for the future of senior centers will need to be responsive to current participants, the expectations of future generations, and the lessons learned during an unprecedented national pandemic. It must also be responsive to the new vision for the Aging Network adopted by the Milwaukee County Commission on Aging:

*The Aging Network will improve the health and well-being for all older adult residents of Milwaukee County by acknowledging and overcoming structural racism, promoting health equity, improving communication and collaboration, and addressing all dimensions of wellness.*

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If we wish to create spaces where mature Milwaukee County residents can gather to live fully engaged lives, then the Commission on Aging ought to advocate for the development of a series of MKE HUBS – as effective centers of community engagement throughout the county. These MKE HUBS will serve as focal points for the Aging Network where advocacy, arts, conversation, craftsmanship, cuisine, exercise, education, information technology, recreation, services & supports, health & wellness, and most importantly – community -- is readily accessible. To do so, the Commission on Aging must embrace a future with new partners, welcoming spaces, exciting programming, and a willingness to conceive of new public places that better serve both existing participants and an entirely new multicultural base of residents.

The Committee challenges those passionate about the current spaces used as senior centers to think beyond them. What possibilities might emerge from combining housing development and commercial space with new MKE HUBS? Where might new centers foster community development and inclusion? How might the existing facilities be revived to take full advantage of modern technology and universal design? Perhaps more important than the physical structures, the Committee conceived of a series of experiences that would enrich the quality of life and participation for all those who come to enjoy them. We thought of these experiences as a list of attributes that can also be used as the basis for the design and programming of any new MKE HUB environments. While these attributes are included more fully below, they can be summed up in the Committee's own vision:

*Imagine innovative and vibrant environments programmed and designed to encourage a holistic approach to an engaged life.*

*Imagine spaces, activities, and experiences created to support the vital and active lifestyles of new and existing generations of mature Milwaukee County residents.*

***IMAGINE THE MKE HUBS!***

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## Final Recommendations

Following upon this premise, the Select Committee on Senior Centers recommends that the Commission on Aging implement a strategy to ensure that older adults in Milwaukee County enjoy a wide range of attractive programming that supports a healthy engaged life in the community through facilities that are accessible, available, enjoyable, and sustainable. This strategy will require the support and involvement of existing participants, vendors, and various levels of Milwaukee County leadership. Importantly, however, it will also necessitate the elevation of the important role the “MKE Hubs” can play in the revitalization of community and civic engagement with older adults throughout the County and an investment of new resources and additional funders, partners, and service providers who can bring our vision to reality.

### Accessibility

Perhaps most importantly, we must ensure that our vision for senior center programming is accessible to all communities in Milwaukee County - and that the facilities in which programming is offered are welcoming and easily navigable by all residents. This means we must consider the cultural and linguistic context in which senior centers operate, as well as full compliance with the guidance of the United States Access Board. Such considerations must also consider the grounds on which the centers are located, including the ability of all persons to easily get to and through their doors. Pedestrian, bike, vehicle, and transit access are critical to ensuring true accessibility to these facilities. Access will also require signage promoting and calling attention to the senior centers that can be viewed by public at large from the outside, as well as signage that facilitates easy navigation within the buildings.

### Availability

Today, many public buildings that serve as senior centers with their many assets remain closed outside of limited weekly hours. We must consider the expansion of building and programming availability, if we are to attract the next generation of participants. The distribution of senior center locations does not necessarily match the concentration of older adults in the county. Senior centers throughout the county are not well coordinated beyond the five county-owned centers, and some parts of the county are devoid of any senior center programming. Moreover, the recent experience of the pandemic has taught us that virtual programming can expand the reach and engagement of older adults who remain most isolated. Usage of the centers would also be promoted by ensuring residents feel safe when using the facilities and the grounds on which they are located, which will require upgraded security systems, lighting, and ergonomics.

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## Enjoyability

Senior centers must be fun, active spaces, appealing to a wide range of interests in the appropriate cultural context. It is critically important that both existing participants and potential future resident participants be consulted in the design of facilities and programming. Numerous studies have demonstrated the civic, health, and psychosocial benefits of bringing residents together in a shared public space across all social, political, and cultural strata. Such spaces build community cohesion, reduce social tension, encourage healthy behaviors that extend the lifespan, and move us closer to racial and health equity. In order to achieve these benefits, they must attract a wide audience of participants and thus offer programming and opportunities for growth beyond the current continuum that is attractive, challenging, engaging, and enjoyable.

## Sustainability

Without new sources of funding, resources, and partnerships, our ambitious agenda will fall far short of its transformative potential. Fortunately, the work of this Committee and its public engagement has demonstrated a high level of interest and support for senior centers among both policy-makers and the public at large. We already have senior centers that provide model services – existing facilities that can serve as a launchpad for network expansion – and a committed cadre of older adults supporting senior centers that meet their needs and interests. With this report the Commission can establish a context for public support using a "collective impact" model, describing the MKE HUBS project and identifying how different constituencies can play a role in advancing the model and benefitting from it.

We recommend that the Commission on Aging establish a standing committee on senior centers as part of the Commission on Aging and request that the Area Agency on Aging hire a coordinator to facilitate the strategic development of this plan, garner public support for the model by presenting it publicly to select groups and oversee expansion of collaborative programming in accordance with the attributes in existing senior centers. Modeled on Milwaukee County "Friends of the Parks", a separate non-profit fundraising entity could build support for our senior centers, with new branding and advertising utilized with the senior centers countywide. The senior centers themselves should serve as hubs to access all the other programs and benefits that the County has to offer and the Commission on Aging should continue to serve as the central coordination point regarding senior centers.

## History Worth Repeating

Milwaukee County is not unique in evaluating the purpose, function, and modernization of senior centers. Numerous public and private bodies have published such studies. Just this past year, the National Council on Aging established a “Modernizing Senior Centers Resource Center.” From Washington, D.C. to Portland, Oregon these studies echo the concerns that led to Milwaukee County’s senior center re-envisioning process and the formation of the Milwaukee County Commission on Aging’s Select Committee on Senior Centers.

## Current Senior Centers

Milwaukee County’s first senior center located at Washington Park opened in 1968 under the Department of Parks and Recreation, when the County’s Office on Aging operated independently, but prior to the formation of the Department on Aging. The purpose of this center was to provide nutritious meals, socialization, and physical fitness. Subsequently other centers were opened at Kelly in 1971, McGovern Park in 1976, Wilson Park in 1982, and finally Clinton & Bernice Rose in 1984. In addition to the growth of Milwaukee County’s own senior centers, many other municipal and non-profit senior centers grew out of “senior citizen” clubs that had been meeting formally or informally since the 1950s or 1960s.



\*Five Milwaukee County-owned senior centers

These centers grew and offered a wide variety of programming including dance, exercise, applied arts and crafts, social games and sport, gift shops and eventually computer labs. This model did well to meet the needs and interests of seniors for many years. Yet, with the notable exception of the more recent United Community Center senior center, as the population evolved these senior centers were not updated to meet accessibility requirements or the more complex interests of newer generations of older adults in the County.

By the mid 2000’s the County’s fiscal challenges, coupled with an array of aging institutions and infrastructure, forced a reevaluation of both program delivery and facility maintenance. This was true for both the City of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County. For example, the Granville Senior Center, operated by the County in a building leased from the City was closed in 2006 due to deteriorating infrastructure that neither

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government could afford to remediate. Senior dining and senior dining programs were moved to the Elks Lodge.

In 2017 the County undertook its first large scale evaluation of the infrastructure and programming at each of the five County-owned senior centers.<sup>1</sup> These five senior centers are between 45 and 63 years old and each face different capital needs, are not fully accessible, and have faced significant deferred maintenance. This comprehensive facility assessment found that:

*While these buildings are currently in acceptable condition, they are of an age where building systems need to be replaced. The current cost of repairs or system replacements needed in 2017 is approximately \$680,000. That same total through 2022 is \$9.5 million and through 2036 is \$23 million. . . . These numbers do not include any soft costs or contingencies. For planning purposes, an additional 50% increase could be considered on top of these values.*

The study also documented declining participation in the center's programs. While valuing their senior centers, participants expressed a desire for safe, clean, comfortable, accessible, modern, welcoming, and fun senior centers with more activities, hot topics, and improved technology. They wanted progressive programming, building upgrades, and maintenance that made the space inviting, with modern exercise equipment, fitness programs, and senior dining options.<sup>2</sup>

## Operational and Programming History

Since the mid-1970s, the County operated the senior centers it owned in partnership with Interfaith Milwaukee, a nonprofit senior social services organization which provided a wide range of social services for older adults, including: family caregiver support, senior dining, community outreach, senior centers, senior volunteer & employment services, neighborhood outreach, telephone reassurance, and long-term care case management. Through Older Americans Act (OAA) funding, the County also supports programming in several other senior centers<sup>3</sup>, as well as nutrition only programming at several others<sup>4</sup> In 2017 Interfaith merged with SET Ministries and formed a new entity called Unison.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://county.milwaukee.gov/files/county/departement-on-aging/PDF/Aging-2017FinalAssessmentReport1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://county.milwaukee.gov/files/county/departement-on-aging/PDF/PhaseISupplementalMaterialsforBinder.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Greater Life Community Center, Indian Council for the Elderly, LGBT Center of Milwaukee, Milwaukee Christian Center, and the United Community Center.

<sup>4</sup> Bayside-Fox Point, Dolan Community Center in Brown Deer, Franklin, Glendale, Greenfield, Grobschmidt in South Milwaukee, Jewish Community Center, Kajsiab Senior Center, Muslim Health & Community Center, Oak Creek Community Center, Oasis Senior Center through Milwaukee Public Schools, Shorewood Senior Resource Center, Hart Park in Wauwatosa, and West Allis Senior Center.

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Due to a variety of circumstances, Unison unfortunately failed in 2019. Its many senior programming contracts were distributed to several other nonprofits. Serving Older Adults of Southeast Wisconsin formed out of this dissolution with the primary goal of continuing programming at the Milwaukee County owned senior centers, a relationship that continues today. Yet Serving Older Adults no longer has the advantage of the diverse funding base or control of other OAA funded programming for older adults that Interfaith had in the past. Thus, the County operates and programs its senior centers based on a model developed decades ago. While still attracting a diverse participant base of older adults, these senior centers have struggled to attract increased participation even as the County's population ages. In recent years, the centers attracted 5500 unique individuals across the five centers for meals and programs, with average *monthly* participation of less than 2500 older adults. Yet the population of older adults eligible for participation in Milwaukee County stands above 185,000. The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated this concern.

County funding for senior center programming has remained flat or modestly declined. Programming and maintenance at the Milwaukee County owned senior centers has been funded entirely through County tax levy – a funding source that is expected to be exhausted by 2027 unless the state legislature provides fundamental reform. Inadequate staffing capacity and insufficient programming adversely impacts the centers' ability to enhance quality of life. In addition to limited program offerings, the northwest and southwest sectors of the County do not even have senior centers even though they have a large population of older adults. Other drawbacks include limited hours of operations which are not conducive to the schedules of working older adults, inadequate access for residents with disabilities, and a lack of convenient bus stops.

## A Search for New Directions

Given the information gained through the 2017 comprehensive assessments of facilities, coupled with the subsequent changes in the programming provider and faced with stagnant or declining funding, the Commission on Aging sought an independent third party to study alternative models of senior center programming and operation. The Commission set a goal in the 2019-2021 Area Aging Plan to “use the third-party report, as well as feedback from the report, to shape a senior center programming RFP that meets the needs of existing seniors as well as the seniors of the future.” The Wisconsin Policy Forum (WPF) was chosen to conduct this third-party assessment of senior center programming models in jurisdictions similar in size and population to Milwaukee County. After examining older adult programming in five peer counties and



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national guidance established by the federal Older Americans Act, the WPF published *Young at Heart: Exploring the Future of Senior Centers in Milwaukee County*.<sup>5</sup>

The WPF found that the five alternative jurisdictions surveyed used a variety of priorities, processes, and funding sources to deliver senior services and use senior centers. Strategies varied from the abandonment of senior centers as a mode for delivering social supports to senior centers incorporated within larger multi-generational community centers. The *Young at Heart* report suggested that the current senior center model in Milwaukee County may not constitute the best use of the limited resources available to promote older adult independence.

In contemplating an improved model, the WPF report asked policymakers and residents to address the following questions:

- Should Milwaukee County own and pay for programming in large facilities that are exclusively devoted to older adult services?
- Should Milwaukee County consider, instead, the use of multi-generational community centers in the hope of expanding the benefits of such facilities to the broader community?
- If county leaders deem it impractical or unaffordable to own senior or multi-generational facilities, should Milwaukee County focus on funding outside agencies to provide senior center-type programming in their own facilities?
- Alternatively, should the county allow senior centers to be the exclusive domain of municipal and community-based partners, and instead use county resources for expanded services in areas like transportation and an expanded call center?

The *Young at Heart* report also noted that:

*Census bureau reports show today's older adults are more educated, have higher incomes, have better health, and are more likely to live alone and have fewer children on whom they can rely for assistance. They are also living longer, creating distinct cohorts of seniors who have very different needs. This includes younger independent and active seniors, seniors in transition between independence and the need for assistance, and frail older seniors who require additional support (Young at Heart, p. 4).*

Having established a baseline analysis of the infrastructure, programming, and participation at the five Milwaukee County owned senior centers, as well as a comparison with other models operative in peer jurisdictions, the Aging Advisory

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<sup>5</sup> See: <https://wispolicyforum.org/research/young-at-heart-exploring-the-future-of-senior-centers-in-milwaukee-county/>

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Council convened a series of community listening sessions. The objective was to present a summary of these findings and to seek the input of senior center participants as well as the older adult public at large. These sessions allowed the attendees to provide their insight on the value of senior centers and what type of programming and infrastructure would best serve future participants.

Over the course of 2019 the Aging Advisory Council hosted a dozen of these community conversations and solicited feedback through an online survey. More than 500 residents contributed their thoughts, hopes, and ideas for the future of senior centers. These included many residents who participated in senior centers and many who did not. The resounding theme was that senior centers remain worthwhile and relevant. These responses were presented in a third report: *Envisioning the Future: Milwaukee County Senior Centers*, published in January of 2020. Responses were grouped into the following categories:

- I. Promoting the Senior Centers (Local Outreach, Advertising, Differentiating Programming to Appeal to Broader Base, and Improving Access)
- II. Attractive Programming (Lifestyle, Sports & Fitness, Health & Wellness, Arts & Crafts, Educational)
- III. Envisioning New Models (New Locations, Accessibility, Facility Design)
- IV. Funding and Partnerships (Fundraising, Fees & Revenue Generating Activities, Programming Partnerships, Public Support)

After cataloguing hundreds of individual suggestions, the *Envisioning* report concluded with a series of general recommendations that were proposed to the full Commission on Aging:

- 1) Advocate for a dedicated base of support from Milwaukee County for senior center programming in Milwaukee County.
- 2) Advance the Fair Deal initiative to respond to the need for additional revenue to address senior center infrastructure and programming by strengthening the partnership between Milwaukee County and the State of Wisconsin.
- 3) Maintain and sustain the existing Milwaukee County senior centers, build on them, and improve them to promote equity of services and activities in all centers.
- 4) Explore other models of senior centers that include public-private partnerships such as travel, recreation, housing, banking, education, and health care.
- 5) Address access to senior centers by establishing transit stops at each Milwaukee County senior center and adding other up to the door transportation.

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6) Ensure Americans with Disability Act standards are met at all centers.

7) Establish a working Senior Center Committee of the Milwaukee County Commission on Aging to: Evaluate the suggestions provided by the public; Characterize these suggestions as long or short term; Review and prioritize the infrastructure needs at each of the senior centers; Develop and monitor both short and long-term strategic plans for senior centers and; Determine what resources will be necessary to carry out the plan.

8) Add or assign a staff member or independent contractor within the Department on Aging to: Provide staff support for the proposed Senior Center Committee; Assist the Commission to develop and monitor its strategic plan for senior centers; Work to ensure access to senior center programming exists across the county; Assist the senior center programming vendor in identifying best practices; and Coordinate interdepartmental efforts within County government and between County and municipal governments, foundations, and private firms to pursue new grants, partnerships, revenue streams, and capital financing.

### Formation of the Select Committee on Senior Centers

In response to general recommendation seven (7), the Commission on Aging established a Select Committee on Senior Centers (the Committee) and charged the Aging Advisory Council to determine its composition and recruit membership. Over the course of the next six months the Advisory Council, under the leadership of Dr. Sharon Abston-Coleman, Ed.D. determined that the new select committee would be composed of twenty individuals, led by a Commissioner from the Commission on Aging, with representation as follows:

- Three members of the Commission on Aging;
- Three non-Commissioner members of the Advisory Council;
- Five active participants, one from each Milwaukee County owned senior center;
- Five active participants in senior programming other than the Milwaukee County owned senior centers;
- One representative from the current Milwaukee County senior center programming vendor, Serving Older Adults of Southeast Wisconsin;
- Two Members at Large interested in senior center and senior programming
- One Milwaukee County Supervisor

After an application and vetting process, the Commission appointed members and the Select Committee on Senior Centers hosted its first meeting in March of 2021.

The Committee reviewed each of the previous reports, giving special deference to *Envisioning the Future of Senior Centers*. The Committee also heard testimony from current senior center participants, MPS Recreation, suburban senior programming directors, the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, Milwaukee Public Museum,

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Milwaukee Public Library, and various agencies within Milwaukee County government that touched the Milwaukee County senior centers including the Parks Department, Facilities Management, Strategic Facility Planning, Housing Services, Transit System, and Health and Human Services.

Carefully following its charge outlined in recommendation seven (7), the Committee initially divided into three workgroups in alignment with the general grouping of recommendations contained in the *Envisioning the Future of Senior Centers* report:

- Programming and Promotion
- New Models and Infrastructure
- Partnerships and Funding.

The Programming and Promotion workgroup considered the bulk of recommendations made in the Envisioning report as well as progress that had been made in the ensuing years to institute new programming at the Milwaukee County senior centers. The Partnerships and Funding workgroup recognized the need to expand both funding and partnerships well beyond the relationship between the Milwaukee County Area Agency on Aging and its vendor network if many of the Envisioning recommendations were to be implemented.

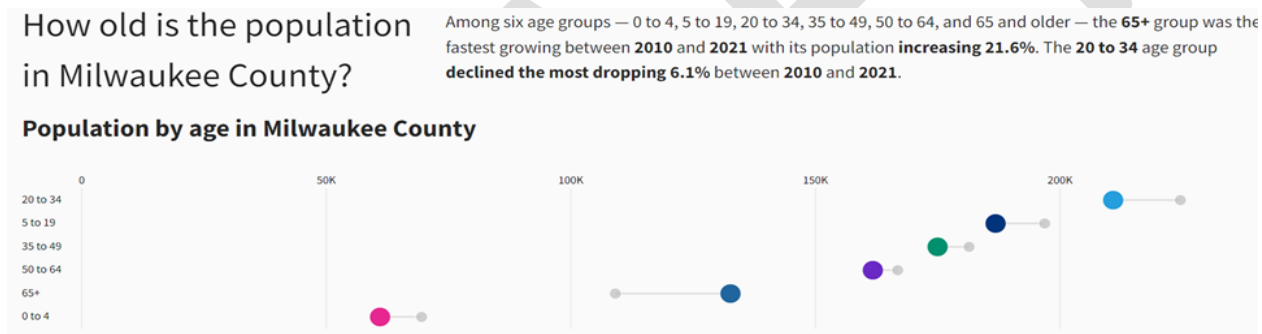
The central question of the value and model of senior centers was taken up by the New Models and Infrastructure workgroup. This workgroup recognized the need to look beyond senior centers as they currently existed and reimagine what senior centers ought to be in order to serve older adults in the twenty-first century. After deliberating within these workgroups, the Committee as a whole reconvened to develop a common set of attributes that would guide a new vision for senior centers in Milwaukee County.

## Changing Demographics of Milwaukee County

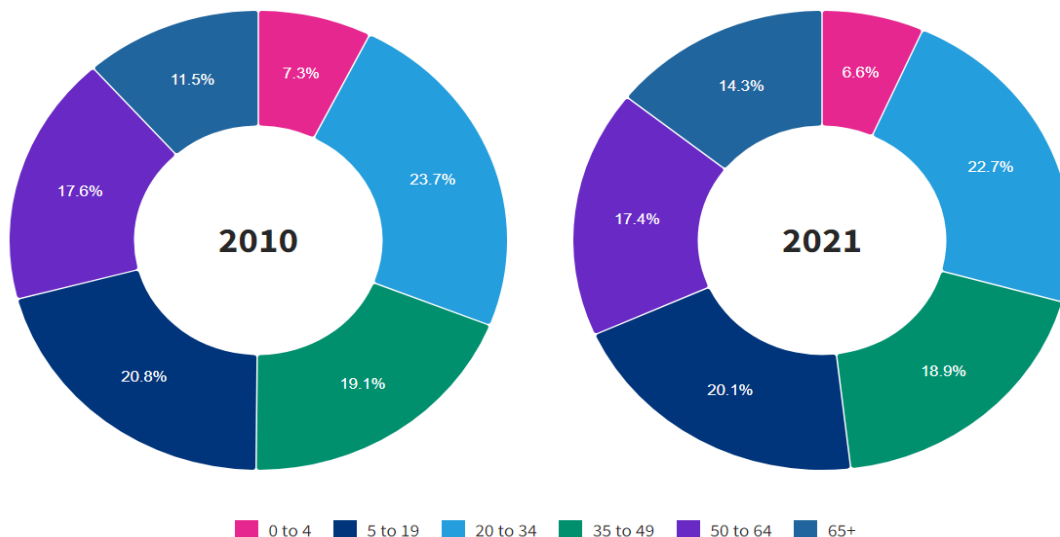
To set the context for the attributes, vision, and recommendations that follow, the Committee considered the political, social, and demographic conditions of the County and its residents. Fundamentally, if the County is going to support the development of senior centers is there a populace that will want to utilize them? Secondly, do senior centers represent a wise investment of increasingly scarce resources to advance the County’s overall strategic objective to become the healthiest county in Wisconsin by achieving racial equity?

The population of Milwaukee County is growing older. While Milwaukee County's population shrank overall by 2.1% from 2010 to 2020 to 928,059, its share of the population 65 years and older increased from 11.5% to 14.3%. Based on the most recent Census estimates, Milwaukee County now has 183,848 adults aged 60+.

This trend will accelerate in the next decade as the share of older adults in Milwaukee County is expected to reach 22% by 2040, including an increase of 30,000 in the cohort of residents aged eighty-five years and older.



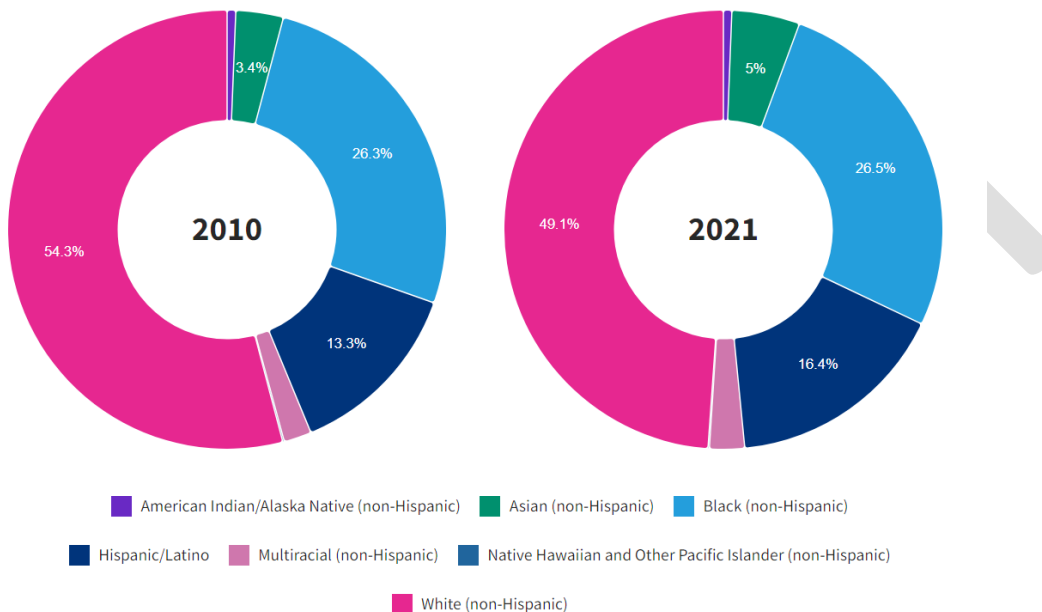
### Age makeup of Milwaukee County



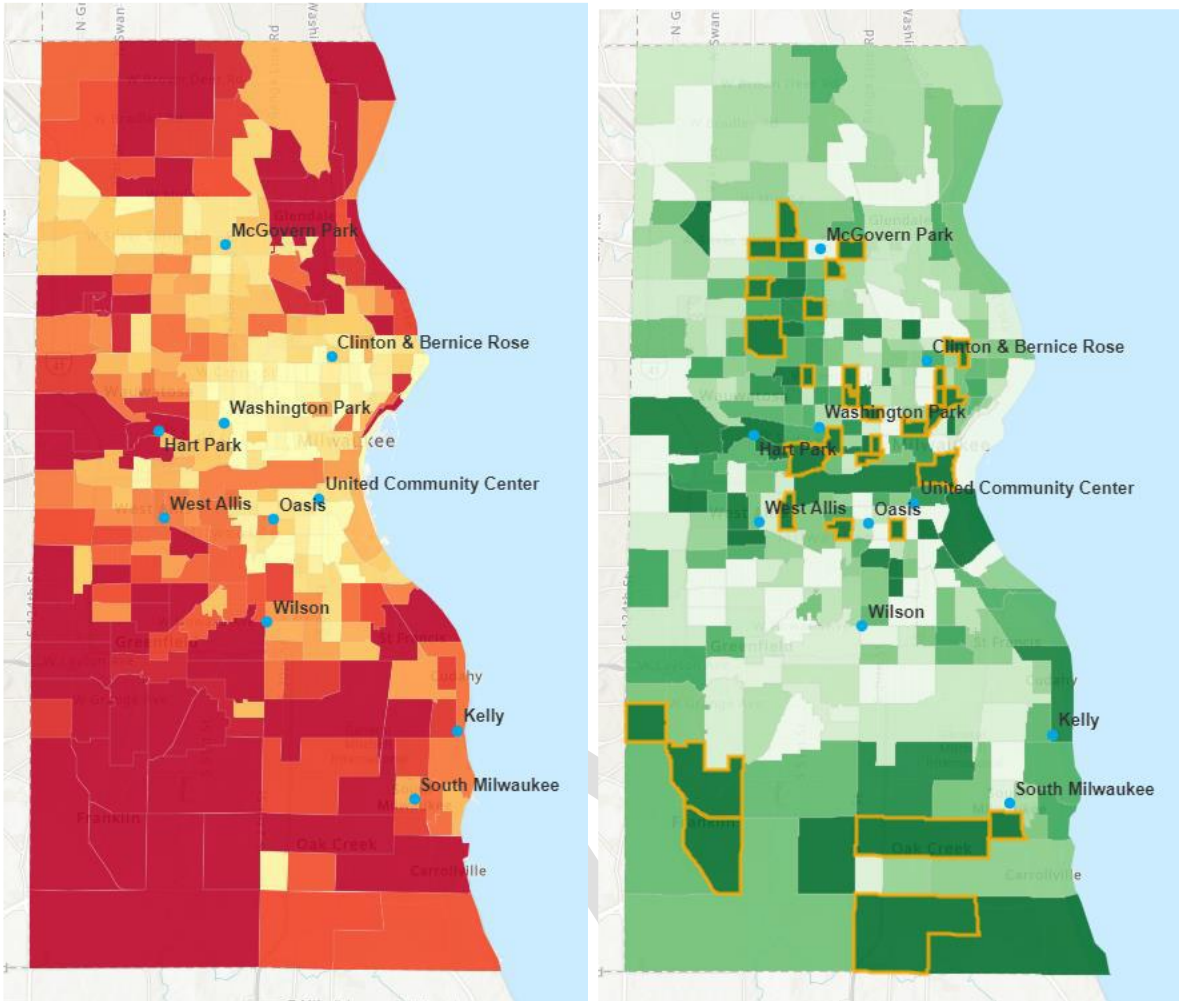
## Race and Ethnicity among Older Adults

Milwaukee County hosts the most diverse population in Wisconsin. The growth in older adults will be most prominent among its residents of color, particularly the Black and Latino populace. Older adults in Milwaukee County today remain predominately White, making up seventy percent (70%) of the populace aged 60+. Yet the majority of Milwaukee County’s population is already non-white. As the share of residents of color continues grow and as this relatively younger population ages, the cohort of older adults of color will gain proportionally.

**Racial makeup of Milwaukee County**



Yet this data does not tell the whole story. The legacy of racism and the concurrent public policies that excluded Black residents from access to housing, wealth, and healthcare has taken a terrible toll. In Milwaukee County overall life expectancy for Whites from birth was 77.9 years. For Black Milwaukee County residents, life expectancy from birth was only 70.0 years. The percentage of Black adults who die between ages 60-69 is nearly double that of Whites. The Wisconsin Population Health Institute has calculated that between 2018 and 2020 the Black population lost a collective 8,800 more years of potential life per 100,000 due to death before age 75 than the White population. Given the County’s population and life expectancy, this equates to at least 1088 Black lives missing from Milwaukee County’s older adult population.



**Projected 2027 Population 65+**

**2022-2027 Change in 65+ Population  
(Gold box tracts have largest increase)**

Structural Racism also drove the hyper-segregation of Milwaukee County’s population by race. Whether through government sanctioned policies like red-lining in the housing market, displacement due to expressway construction and “slum clearance”, or self-imposed exile due to racially motivated fear, the result on the older adult population is stark. Older adults in Milwaukee County are highly concentrated in largely white suburbs, places where senior centers and services are more difficult to access.

Given these demographic realities, how might Milwaukee County view investments in seniors as institutional models to advance its strategic objective?

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## Senior Centers as Public Social Institutions

Given the legacy of structural racism and its effects on the health of the entire population, Milwaukee County declared racism a Public Health Crisis in 2019. Facing the prospect of declining county revenue, deteriorating infrastructure, and diminishing participation, the Milwaukee County Department on Aging undertook the process outlined earlier to evaluate the cost and benefit of maintaining programming within the five senior centers it owned and operated. Along the way, those conducting this evaluation faced a more existential question: Given the rise of technology and the precipitous decline in participation in religious, civic, and social clubs among the rising population of older adults, are senior centers worth continued investment, or relics of a bygone era that would divert precious resources away from more pressing needs?

Is there a better way to serve the senior population of the future than to invest in senior centers and the programming and socialization that they currently offer? If county residents viewed senior centers as important social institutions worth preserving and even enhancing, how might that be accomplished? What models existed elsewhere that might help guide this discussion? The Select Committee on Senior Centers turned its attention to these more existential questions and it grappled with answers to the critical questions that resulted as illustrated below.

What then, of the most basic question facing us: Are senior centers worth continuing? The answer turns out to be a resounding yes – and for reasons that go well beyond the loyalty and enthusiasm of current participants or the nostalgia of past models. Senior centers are quintessentially public social clubs, operating across race, gender, class, and social strata. As noted recently<sup>6</sup>:

*Over the last few decades, sociologists and political scientists have found that American clubs of all stripes have experienced steep declines in their memberships .... In other words, there are fewer clubs that bring together people of different socioeconomic backgrounds across the country .... All of this is changing the social landscape of the United States. Television and the internet, for instance, encourage people to spend their leisure time on their own, rather than with other people. Social media allows people to feel like they are in a kind of community, but they don't actually have deep relationships with them.*

*This is a problem because reams of research show that people embedded in associations in their communities are better able to weather poverty and unemployment .... Many political scientists say that the withering of America's clubs*

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Segran, Ph.D., [Fast Company](#), *Social clubs died out in America. Now, venture capital is bringing them back* (May 28, 2019).



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*and associations makes the country worse off. It means that fewer people are embedded in a community, which is known to help people feel happier and even live longer. But it also makes our nation worse off because people become increasingly removed from those who are unlike them.*

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*Theda Skocpol, the Harvard political scientist, believes that to create a better society we need to break down some of these class lines. Priya Parker, the author of...The Art of Gathering, encourages people to invest in public spaces that tend to bring people of different backgrounds together...in [their] community. This means spending time in these spaces and inviting people from less well-off neighborhoods to enjoy these public spaces as well. It means helping to support these spaces financially if the need arises and you have the means. This will allow people to spend time with their neighbors and begin to get to know people from different walks of life.*

*"It takes deep creativity and a sense of purpose to think about how you collectively create a public community," Parker says.*

Thus, the work of the Select Committee on Senior Centers takes on particular importance in view of Milwaukee County's strategic goal to become the healthiest county in Wisconsin by achieving racial equity. Equity addresses imbalanced social systems and provides redress for disparities in opportunity among groups of people, however those groups are defined.

Senior Centers that attract older adults across racial, social, cultural, and economic dissimilarity provide an opportunity to redress disparities in social and political capital, health and wellness, education and vocation. Most importantly, they build community. Yet senior centers can help us move toward equity only if we imagine them as public centers that are as attractive and as well-resourced as private centers with programs that appeal to and benefit all our residents. The "attributes" of senior centers included in this report, and confirmed by the Commission on Aging, set a standard for public spaces that embrace this vision of a beloved community and reaffirm Milwaukee County's commitment to Senior Centers as valued Public Social Institutions.

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## Aligning with the 2022-24 Area Aging Plan

During this time, the Commission on Aging was itself developing a newly expansive long-term vision to guide the Milwaukee County Area Agency on Aging over the next several decades in alignment with the County's strategic direction. The Commission incorporated this vision into the 2022-24 Milwaukee County Area Aging Plan:

*The Aging Network will improve the health and well-being for all older adult residents of Milwaukee County by acknowledging and overcoming structural racism, promoting health equity, improving communication and collaboration, and addressing all dimensions of wellness.*

Under this vision, the Commission on Aging set forth broad Aging Network goals focusing on health equity, coordination and communication, and the dimensions of wellness. The Select Committee on Senior Centers was asked to identify a set of goals specific to senior center development to include in the Area Aging Plan. After extensive discussion, the Select Committee on Senior Centers identified goals in each goal category: Health Equity, Communication and Collaboration, and the Dimensions of Wellness – following the pattern of the overall Aging Network Vision statement. These goals were presented to the Aging Advisory Council and adopted by the full Commission on Aging in 2021 and incorporated into the final approved 2022-24 Milwaukee County Area Aging Plan.

Each of these Senior Center Area Aging Plan goals constitutes a “final recommendation” of the Select Committee on Senior Centers that was already approved and is already being implemented by the Area Agency on Aging. Yet the Committee's work was far from over. While these Area Aging Plan goals focused on short-term improvements to the Milwaukee County owned senior centers culled from some of the public suggestions in the *Envisioning* Report, the Committee now turned its attention to the broader question of how a network of senior centers might be developed and supported that furthered the Area Network vision and appealed to 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibilities.

## Senior Centers

The Older Americans Act provides for “multi-purpose senior centers” through which a wide range of supportive social services can be delivered to “secure and maintain maximum independence and dignity . . . for older individuals.”

2022-24 Goal Ideas	SMART Measures
<b>Health Equity</b>	
Provide periodic screening, testing, and preventative healthcare services (ensure care is culturally competent and addresses conditions for which black older adults are at greater risk) at senior centers in partnership with local healthcare providers.	By 2024 at least three Milwaukee County operated senior centers, including two with a majority of participants of color, regularly offer providers to administer periodic screening, testing, and preventative healthcare services.
Ensure that all senior centers are fully accessible to older adults with disabilities.	By 2024 all Milwaukee County senior centers meet the Architectural Barriers Act standards.
<b>Communication &amp; Collaboration</b>	
Explore the feasibility of public-private sector partnerships to create new senior centers combined with other uses such as housing.	Approach at least three private entities to partner in the creation of new centers that will increase access for all seniors; diversify programming to appeal to future generations; and achieve racial equity.
Establish a dedicated presence on the Internet and social media by offering virtual & social media programming. Provide training, support, and access to computers and mobile devices to participants to ensure they can access enhanced programming.	Demonstrate an increased presence on social media through website hits and virtual program participation. By 2024, 75% of senior center participants will indicate they feel competent accessing Internet & social media.
Ensure Senior Companions, Foster Grandparents, RSVP, and Senior Employment programs are available for MC senior center participants.	By 2024, hold events at each senior center for RSVP, Senior Companions, Foster Grandparent, and Senior Employment.
Expand access to Milwaukee County parks in which senior centers are located.	By 2024 sponsor at least 2 recreational events on the Milwaukee County park grounds in which each Milwaukee County owned senior center is located.
<b>Dimensions of Wellness</b>	
Lifelong learning programs address all dimensions of wellness s/a culinary, performing arts, financial mgt & intellectual pursuits.	By 2024 develop new programming for the MC senior centers in two of eight dimensions of wellness that are not currently addressed.
Modify the Milwaukee County senior centers to accommodate new programming.	By 2024 accommodate new programming with needed updates to senior centers.

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## Attributes and a Vision

Today we find ourselves in a society with a distinctly different social construct than we had experienced during the period when the current Milwaukee County Seniors Centers were conceived and developed. For this reason, the Select Committee intentionally widened its focus beyond simply addressing the current functionality and physical condition of the existing senior centers. Placing the re-envisioning process of senior centers in Milwaukee County within the context of current trends, it has explored the implications of three important considerations that are shaping the form of 21st Century solutions.

First, newer generations of users are actively participating in the use of these buildings. In addition to the current influx of Boomer generation users, the first wave of Gen-Xers will turn 60 in 2025. Together these groups along with current long standing Silent and Civic generation users will comprise a diverse collection of four generations of mature Milwaukee County residents. Together they will inevitably change the way that aging is experienced and takes place. Together they can embrace the opportunity to reshape their lives, connect with and help one another and change the world for the better. Together they can learn, grow, make a difference, and live fulfilled lives. It is doubtful that the five current Senior Centers, as currently configured and programmed, will be able to meet the high and varied expectations of these new users.

Second, the pandemic has permanently changed the way that we interact with each other in both large and small-scale social and service settings. As a society we have quickly become familiar and comfortable with events that are either partially or fully “virtual”. What remains unanswered is what the consequences of this trend will have for older adults, especially those who are not yet comfortable, nor have easy access to the technology needed to access these virtual environments and opportunities. To combat loneliness and isolation, gathering in congregate settings is vital to wellbeing. At the same time the aging process leaves older adults highly vulnerable to infectious diseases in group settings. Finding the correct balance will be a critical consideration for the future of senior centers in Milwaukee County.

Finally, an enlightened vision for the future of senior centers in Milwaukee County must be responsive to the Area Aging Network Goals – to strive for Health Equity, to enhance Communication and Collaboration, and to promote wellbeing as defined by the Dimensions of Wellness.

The future composition of the Milwaukee County population will be enriched by a greater number of older adults across a wide range of generations, perspectives, and experience. These older adults will enjoy broad knowledge of services, supports, and opportunities that easily connect them with their peers, are easy to access, and are coordinated among many different provider groups.

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## Critical Questions

These considerations raised anew a broader set of existential questions regarding Milwaukee County's commitment to senior center programming and infrastructure. Through extensive deliberation and consultation, the Commission agreed upon common guidance to address these critical issues which were originally raised in the Wisconsin Policy Forum's *Young at Heart* report.

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

While the existing Milwaukee County owned centers, as currently constructed, are well loved by the participants who utilize them, 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.

- 2) Should Milwaukee County continue to own and operate *all five existing Milwaukee County Senior Centers* for the next decade?

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

- 3) Should Milwaukee County consider the construction of new senior centers to supplement or replace existing centers?

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. Two smaller facilities (Kelly and McGovern) were not designed to be used as senior centers and meet few of the attributes contained in our 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 use and programming at the smaller facilities until such time as new centers would be fully operational. We suggest that there should be additional centers which could be smaller but more focused to serve discreet populations. In particular there is interest in locating senior centers in areas with high concentrations of older adults who do not currently have a

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dedicated senior center or where County assets are few. Such additional facilities need not be owned by Milwaukee County.

- 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?

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.

- 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?

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?

It is the sense of the Committee that Milwaukee County should commit to long term funding of public senior center programming aligned with the stated attributes in at least five sites supervised by Milwaukee County. Given the uncertainty of County tax levy in future years and the fact that senior center programming is discretionary, 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.

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For all senior centers, the Committee recommends a new vision for programming as well as infrastructure. The Committee emphasizes that programming is as important a consideration as infrastructure. New approaches to programming as well as new modes to deliver such programming, including virtual options and the invitation of other collaborative partners to provide programming within existing facilities must be pursued.

Further, to respond to this series of 21st Century trends and considerations, a re-imagined kind of “presence” needs to be explored and envisioned. This “presence” can potentially take on several different forms both physical and virtual. However, before discussions begin about specific solutions it’s necessary to first imagine a series of experiences which either individually, or taken as a whole, will enrich the quality of life and participation for all those who come to enjoy them.

Think of the statements that follow as a list of attributes. These attributes, in turn, can be used to evaluate how well the existing senior centers align with them when considering renovation strategies. They can also be used as the basis for the design and programming of any new senior center environments that may evolve from this envisioning process.

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## 21st CENTURY ATTRIBUTES

### YOU HAVE ARRIVED

Imagine a covered canopy to provide protection from the elements for auto or bus drop-offs and pickups for individuals or group events. Imagine an exciting and energizing Welcome Center that clearly indicates the full range of services, programs and activities contained within. Whether you're a regular or a first-time user you will experience a feeling of welcome, glad you can be here – join us!

### A SENSE OF PLACE

Imagine an easily navigable Main Street that provides clear and convenient access to the wide variety of opportunities that will be available. It might also provide cozy little nooks to just sit and watch, read, or talk with another.

### EASY SOCIALIZATION

Imagine inviting gathering areas at various scales located both indoors and outdoors that are designed to allow conversation and camaraderie. Some might be the scale of a residential living room and others might be much larger and available to rent for a banquet. All will be fully accessible with convenient access to refreshments to keep you hydrated and keep the conversation flowing. Of course, there will be adequate restrooms within easy reach for all.

### LET'S EAT

Imagine attractive dining venues that are the antithesis of current cafeteria-like settings. Some might be designed to create a coffee shop atmosphere while others might be more like a café or a grab-and-go and developed in partnership with local ethnic food providers. Or perhaps there will be an intentional outdoor space to allow regular visits by local food trucks. There might even be a drive-up window to accommodate those looking for a quick convenience. How about a demonstration kitchen and hands on space for cooking classes to foster the importance of good nutrition and long-term health?

### KEEP FIT

Imagine a Fitness Center modeled after popular health clubs. Imagine spaces designed for state-of-the-art exercise equipment along with studio areas for aerobics, tai chi, yoga, dance, and other activities. Potential partnerships with local fitness providers will allow space and support for massage and other soothing therapies along with rooms for fitness counseling. And of course, refreshments will be readily accessible.

### STAY WELL

Imagine a Wellness Clinic created in partnership with local health care providers that will have spaces for simple exams, screening events, vaccinations, and counseling for



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routine health concerns. Imagine formal and casual classroom-like environments where programs that promote awareness of one's body and an understanding of the relationship between sound nutrition and good health can be presented.

## **EASY ACCESS TO THE SUPPORT YOU NEED**

Imagine a Senior Services Support Center designed specifically to help users and visitors navigate the complex web of senior oriented services available to Milwaukee County residents. Imagine a series of casual gathering areas and counseling offices designed to assist seniors as they transition to the need for more assistance and for caregiver support groups who now require more complex support systems for their frailer loved ones. Imagine activities that can both feed your soul and provide spiritual support when needed. Imagine the opportunity to create base locations for various Senior Advocacy Groups to meet, organize and strategize as they seek ways to support and advocate for best outcomes for all concerned.

## **YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD TO LEARN SOMETHING NEW**

Imagine Lifelong Learning Settings created in partnership with local higher learning institutions. Imagine formal and casual classroom-like environments as well as spaces for larger lectures that could become a home for regular classes and activities during the day and early evening as well. This component would also serve as a launch point for a wide variety of tours to community events, intentional connections to the County Park System amenities, and other cultural activities.

## **EMBRACE HYBRID GATHERING STRATEGIES**

Imagine Hybrid Solutions that allow the flexibility to do things together in the same space and/or to participate virtually. Imagine environments that enable older adults and people of all ages to come together and find ways to learn, work, create and harness all the technological tools available in today's digital age.

## **LET'S MAKE SOMETHING**

Imagine a well-planned Creativity Center with ample studio spaces and storage areas to support a full range of creative activities. Imagine spaces properly designed to facilitate wood-working, weaving, lapidary projects, art, stained glass, ceramics, sculpture, sewing, gardening, photography, video production, creative writing, and other endeavors. Imagine Gift Shops and Galleries where these creations can be proudly displayed and marketed.

## **GET TECH SAVVY**

Imagine a Tech Center with up-to-date devices in a learning environment that will allow you to stay ahead of rapid technological change. Imagine managing the social media

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messaging that will become a vital component of what will make each location unique and attractive.

### **KICK BACK AND HAVE SOME FUN**

Imagine taking part in thoughtfully programmed Recreational Activities with friends both old and new. Imagine inviting spaces to play cards or board games, shoot pool, play shuffleboard or pickle ball, watch sports games on TV, participate in a variety of performances, enjoy some movies, concerts, dance, and sing or just relive great moments. Imagine a space to sponsor a cultural event or host a banquet. Imagine a place where you don't have to be serious and productive all the time.

### **CREATE A 7AM TO 10PM CULTURE**

Imagine well-coordinated programming and partnerships created to maximize use through the day and evening to ensure the facility is cost-effective and used to capacity. Imagine the possibility of increasing the visibility of mature generational programming, of creating opportunities for intergenerational programming, and of building larger community support.

### **THINK BIG AND THINK SMALL SIMULTANEOUSLY**

Imagine renovations to the larger existing locations to keep them in alignment with the desired Attributes AND AT THE SAME TIME. Imagine smaller centers strategically located and scaled to align with the unique cultural nuances of Milwaukee County's diverse population.

### **CREATE AN APPROPRIATE BRAND NAME**

If the goal is to create a place where Mature Milwaukeeans (note the lack of the use of words like senior or elderly in the future) can gather to live fully engaged lives, then advocate for the development of a series of MKE HUBS. A hub, per the Oxford Dictionary, is "the effective center of an activity, region or network". Imagine a place where the full network of Milwaukee County Senior Services is readily accessible.

### **A 21st Century Vision for Senior Centers**

*Imagine innovative and vibrant environments programmed and designed to encourage a holistic approach to an engaged life.*

*Imagine spaces, activities and experiences created to support the vital and active lifestyles of new and existing generations of mature Milwaukee County residents.*

**IMAGINE THE MKE HUBS!**

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## Infrastructure Initiatives to Uplift Spirits

After adopting this vision and these attributes, the Committee wanted to demonstrate how each of our five Milwaukee County owned senior centers could be adapted to allow these attributes to take root and grow. Meeting with both staff and participants at each center, the Committee developed a set of recommended infrastructure improvements common to all five centers, as well as specific infrastructure priorities unique to each center.<sup>7</sup> The following constitute the most important of these initiatives the Committee believed could be addressed in the short term:

### ENHANCED ENTRY/ARRIVAL

Construct new entry canopies of adequate height and size to shelter and accommodate vehicular drop-offs, public transportation buses, tour buses and emergency vehicles.

Create entry vestibules of adequate size with automatic doors to facilitate wheelchair and mobility device access, deliveries and to reduce heat loss.

Encourage Milwaukee County Transit System to divert public transportation to make direct drop-offs at the entrance of the existing Senior Centers.

Ensure barrier free accessibility from the nearest public transportation drop-off point and all on-site parking lots to the primary entry of each Senior Center.

Enhance the visual appeal of the entry to each Senior Center by coordinating signage, updating landscaping, adding seating opportunities, providing adequate lighting and ensuring security.

### WASHINGTON PARK / WILSON PARK PARKING LOTS

Study the feasibility of relocating/reorienting surface parking locations to create more logical adjacencies to the originally conceived main entry for each of these Centers; and/or

Study the feasibility of relocating interior space usage to allow the eastern wing of Washington Park and the southeastern wing of Wilson Park to serve as the primary entrances and Welcome Centers for each of those buildings.

### BRANDING/SIGNAGE

Create and strategically place new electronic building signage pylons to reflect a common brand identity for all Senior Centers.

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix C for a detailed list of recommended modifications to each of the Milwaukee County senior centers consistent with these attributes.

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Create and strategically place new welcome desks in each Senior Center, again designed to reflect a common brand identity.

Design and install a coordinated and consistent interior signage system (including a building map at the welcome desk) in each Senior Center that reflects a common brand identity.

## **FOOD SERVICE**

Rethink all Food Service facilities in each Senior Center to make them more “forward facing” to respond to 21st Century expectations including open designs, demonstration cooking/cooking classes to promote healthy eating, facilities to support catered events and secure storage.

Provide easy access to snacks and refreshments by installing vending machines, water fountains, coffee machines/bars.

Create coffee shop/internet café/library atmospheres near the primary entry with Grab and Go capability and consider opening them to the public.

Eliminate “cafeteria-like” eating venues by creating more intimate seating arrangements.

Create intentional, secure outdoor dining spaces/opportunities wherever possible.

## **WELLNESS / SOCIAL SERVICES**

Create a multi-functional suite to serve as a home for both health/wellness activities as well as social services information and counseling.

Spaces should include a waiting area, exam/counseling offices, a resource center, touchdown spaces for both healthcare and social services providers, a toilet and secure storage.

## **TECHNOLOGY**

Provide trustworthy, reliable internet access and connectivity throughout all Senior Centers.

Provide state of the art audio-visual technology throughout all Senior Centers that can support virtual participation for all users and allow access to the full range of services, activities and programming that are offered.

Update existing classrooms and large gathering spaces with state of the art audio-visual technology to support modern presentation and communication capabilities and expectations.

Update internal public address technology at each Senior Center.

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## **FURNISHING FIXTURES AND EQUIPMENT**

Inventory all existing interior and exterior furnishings and upgrade as necessary to provide modern seating, tabletops, work surfaces, classroom fixtures, eating surfaces, stages, and room partitions to ensure proper ergonomic support, ease of maintenance/installation, setup/breakdown and convenient storage.

Upgrade all lighting to support various functions, create a pleasant atmosphere, and achieve energy savings.

Upgrade computer labs, equipment and furnishings to support a flexible approach to modern technology training programs at all Senior Centers.

Upgrade and standardize all fitness equipment, flooring materials, lighting, sound systems, TV's, mirrored walls and storage capabilities to reflect modern fitness center expectations at all Senior Centers.

Upgrade all interior and exterior security lighting and systems as necessary.

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## Funding Strategies

Recognizing that changes to both infrastructure and programming to realize these attributes would require a significant investment of funding as well as new programming. The Committee emphasized the imperative to develop new partnerships with local municipalities, foundations, healthcare, and other service entities.

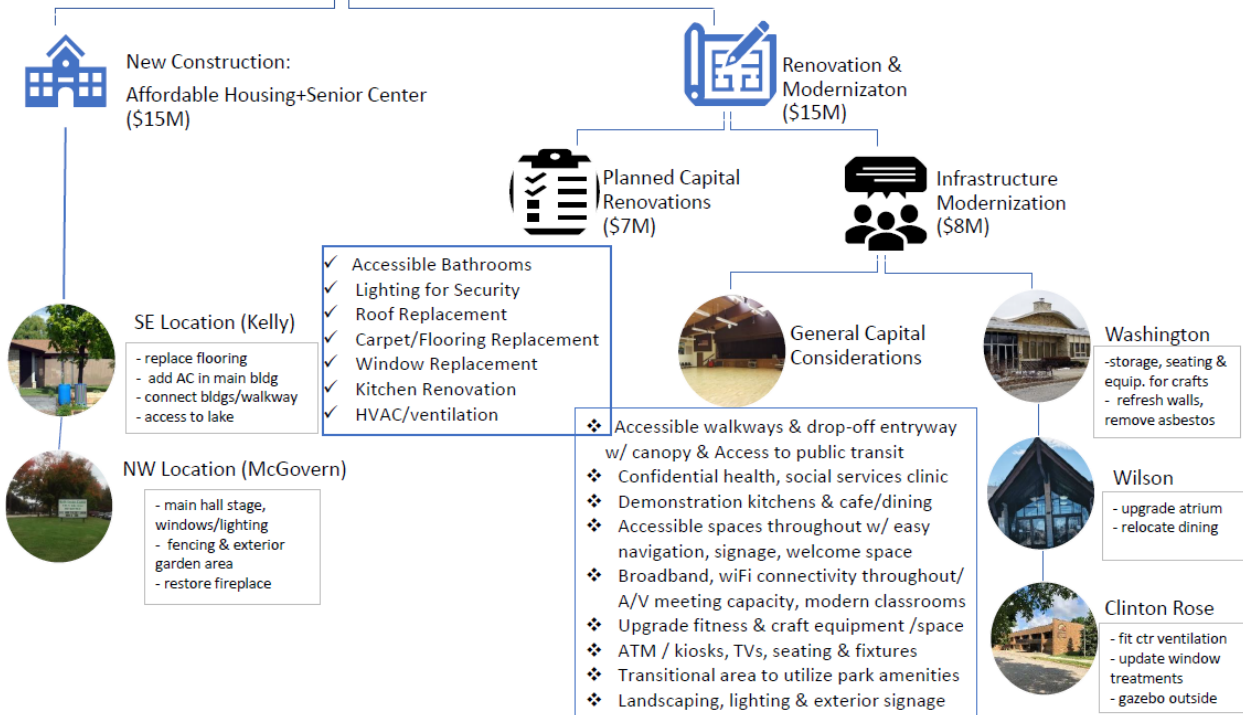
At the time, the Committee recommended leveraging ARPA, affordable housing, and County capital funding opportunities for construction and building renovation purposes, as well as pursuing multiple new partnerships with foundations, community partners, and private businesses that would enhance the offerings at the centers. The Committee recommended that some 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.

Given the moment, the Committee put forward a request to commit up to \$30 million in County ARPA funding to repair, remodel, and, if necessary, rebuild the five Milwaukee County senior centers. This request was based upon the 2017 facilities report estimate of \$26 million in replacement value, plus an additional \$4 million to account for inflationary costs, parkland and parking improvements, and existing capital projects. Recognizing the size of this request was not likely to gain traction, the Committee subsumed within this proposal \$7 million in infrastructure projects that had been included in earlier capital plans, and \$15 million that would be committed to new affordable housing development with the opportunity for senior centers to occupy the ground floor of the buildings. Ultimately, the County Board committed an additional \$3.5 in capital projects, along with \$15 in affordable housing incentives. The Committee continues to work with Housing Services to identify potential suitable development opportunities.

Despite these modest successes, the Committee recognizes that to realize its vision, a comprehensive strategy must be put forth that attracts a significant amount of capital investment through new partnerships with philanthropy, housing and community economic development, municipal governments, healthcare, private businesses interested in serving older adults, and other social agencies. The Committee notes that Milwaukee County's ability to sustain further long-term investments in senior centers is highly constrained without significant intervention from the state legislature allowing or providing additional revenue.



**ARPA Senior Center  
Funding Request**



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## Prioritization of the *Envisioning* Report Suggestions

After adopting a vision and applying the attributes it had developed, the Committee returned to review and to prioritize each of the hundreds of recommendations contained in the *Envisioning* report. It noted that some had already been implemented by Serving Older Adults of Southeast Wisconsin or the Milwaukee County Facilities team. Further it identified others that could or should be implemented in the short term if additional resources were available. Finally, it deferred yet others for future consideration.<sup>8</sup> We urge any new initiatives to take account of these valuable suggestions. While a more extensive analysis was conducted, the Committee echoes here what was stated in the original *Envisioning* report:

*Senior centers continue to serve an important role in the mix of programming offered through the Milwaukee County Area Agency on Aging to address social isolation, provide opportunities for recreation and physical exercise, and improve nutrition and food security. Senior centers and their programming must continue to grow and adapt to the changing needs and desires of an aging populace. New and creative solutions for both the programming and the buildings within which this programming is offered must be pursued if senior centers are to continue to be sustainable and vital focal points for older adults in Milwaukee County.*

Of the many ideas shared through this community feedback process, the most frequent suggestions in each category included:

### I. Promoting the Senior Centers

- Utilize participants to conduct outreach in neighborhoods surrounding the centers.
- Utilize County resources to better promote the value of the senior centers.

### II. Attractive Programming

- Provide a communal kitchen to hold cooking classes and prepare meals on site.
- Provide a wide range of regularly scheduled exercise and fitness classes including more challenging offerings.

### III. Envisioning New Models

- Establish new fully accessible senior centers in areas underserved by existing centers with higher concentrations of older adults.

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix D for a chart of all recommendations and their prioritization by the Committee



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- Create new public/private partnerships particularly with health care and higher education institutions to provide more services and programs on site.

#### **IV. Funding and Partnerships**

- Provide transportation options that deliver participants directly to the centers.
- Seek corporate and philanthropic sponsorship and support for the senior centers.

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## Final Recommendations

In 2020 the Milwaukee County Commission on Aging accepted the findings of the *Envisioning the Future Milwaukee County Senior Centers* report. During listening sessions held in 2019, hundreds of older adults throughout the county testified that the Milwaukee County Senior Centers have played an important role in helping them age well. Their feedback called for further promotion of senior centers, continued development of attractive programming, encouragement to envision new models, and suggestions to explore additional funding and partnerships to support senior centers.

Further, the report urged the Commission on Aging to adopt the following recommendations:

- Advocate for a dedicated base of support from Milwaukee County for continued senior programming.
- Advance Milwaukee County and state of Wisconsin economic initiatives to respond to the need for additional revenue and to reduce the current reliance on property tax levies.
- Maintain and sustain the current senior centers, build on them and improve them to promote equity of services and activities.
- Explore other models of senior centers that include both public/private partnerships as well as other community resources to increase participation and revenue.
- Address accessibility issues as it pertains to transit, transportation, and ADA standards at all centers.
- Establish a Select Committee on Senior Centers to review, evaluate and prioritize items raised in the report as well as to develop a strategic plan and possible resources to implement potential improvements.
- Add or assign a staff member within the Area Aging Unit with responsibility to coordinate, develop, facilitate, and implement the findings of the Select Committee.

Based on the findings of this initial report, the Milwaukee County Commission on Aging directed its Advisory Council to create a Select Committee on Senior Centers which began its deliberations in 2021. This Committee has now completed its work and presents its findings in this final report. In doing so, the Select Committee now respectfully presents its Final Recommendations.

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The Select Committee on Senior Centers recommends that the Commission on Aging work quickly and decisively to enact a thoughtful and aggressive Path Forward. One that ensures that all older adults in Milwaukee County can enjoy a wide range of attractive programming as well as easy access to all the services available through the Area Aging Network. One that supports a healthy and engaged life in the community through facilities that are accessible, available, enjoyable, and economically viable. One that will require the support and involvement of existing participants, vendors, and various levels of Milwaukee County leadership. One that will pursue additional investments from new resources and additional funders, partners, and service providers who can bring this exciting new vision to reality.

This Path Forward will necessitate a heightened awareness of the important role that the MKE Hubs can play in the revitalization of community and civic engagement for older adults throughout Milwaukee County.

Most importantly, the Commission on Aging must not simply settle on a Path Forward that only “polishes the stones” of the existing centers. Rather it should make an intentional commitment to seek and advocate forward-thinking 21<sup>st</sup> Century solutions that take a holistic approach toward creating both physical environments and virtual strategies that encourage and support purposeful and engaged living for all current and future older adults in Milwaukee County.

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century Solutions Must Be Accessible**

All facilities in which programming and services are offered need to be welcoming and easily navigable by all residents. Convenient public transportation connections must be prioritized. Private vehicle, transit service, bicycle and pedestrian access strategies will need to be safe and convenient. Full compliance with the guidance of the United States Access Board must be adhered to. Such considerations must also include the grounds on which the centers are located, including the ability of all persons to easily get to and through their doors.

Accessibility will also necessitate creative approaches to visibility issues. Distinctive exterior signage promoting and calling attention to the senior centers that can be easily viewed by the public at large will be required as well as clear interior signage that facilitates easy wayfinding within the buildings.

It is important that new senior center programming be accessible to the wide range of ethnic and cultural communities in Milwaukee County. This means an enlightened future vision must consider the unique and multi-faceted cultural and linguistic context in which senior centers operate.

Finally re-envisioned senior centers must provide convenient accessibility to the myriad of social services currently offered by Milwaukee County and the Area Aging

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Network. A carefully considered new model can bring these essential services directly to potential users right in their own neighborhoods. Thoughtfully designed social service suites will promote Health Equity and Communication and Collaboration, two important goals of the current Area Aging Plan.

## **21<sup>st</sup> Century Solutions Must Be Available**

Today, the existing Milwaukee County Senior Centers, with their many assets and resources, remain mostly dormant outside of limited weekly hours. Future solutions must consider the expansion of building and programming availability to attract multiple mature generations of participants and to make the highest and best use of these physical resources.

The current distribution of the Milwaukee County Senior Center locations does not necessarily match current concentrations of older adult residents nor the location of established ethnic communities. In addition, senior centers throughout the county are not well coordinated beyond the five county-owned centers. Some parts of the county are devoid of any senior center programming. Creative collaborative strategies including an intentional dialogue between the County's nineteen municipalities regarding programming and services must be pursued. Alternatives to the high cost of single use, free standing centers should be pursued.

The recent experience of the pandemic has taught us that virtual programming can expand the reach and engagement of older adults who remain most isolated. Renovations and new construction must incorporate the best available technology to allow seamless transitions from live to virtual experiences. Finally, clear perceptions of safety and security are of the utmost importance to ensure that visitors and participants feel safe when using the facilities and the grounds on which they are located, which will require upgraded security systems, lighting, and ergonomics.

## **21<sup>st</sup> Century Solutions Must Be Enjoyable**

Senior centers must be fun, active spaces, that appeal to a wide range of interests in the appropriate cultural context. Numerous studies have demonstrated the civic, health, and psycho-social benefits of bringing residents together in a shared public space across all social, political, and cultural strata. Such spaces build community cohesion, reduce social tension, encourage healthy behaviors that extend the lifespan, and move us closer to racial and health equity. To achieve these benefits, they must attract a wide audience of participants and thus offer programming and opportunities for growth beyond the current continuum. For this reason, it is critically important that both existing participants and future users be consulted to identify services and activities that are attractive, challenging, engaging, and enjoyable.

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## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Solutions Must Be Economically Viable

Without new sources of funding, resources, and partnerships, this report's ambitious agenda will fall far short of its transformative potential. Fortunately, the work of the Select Committee on Senior Centers and its public engagement to date has demonstrated a high level of interest and support for re-envisioned senior centers among both policymakers and the public at large.

Milwaukee County already has senior centers that provide model services – existing facilities that can serve as a launchpad for network expansion – and a committed cadre of older adults supporting senior centers that meet their needs and interests. Using this report, the Commission on Aging can establish a context for public support by intentionally working together and sharing information with a wide variety of current and potential stakeholders for the purpose of solving this complex problem. A collective impact initiative focused on the potential of the MKE HUBS can play a crucial role in advancing the model so that all constituencies may benefit from its long-term economic viability.

### A Path Forward – Resources for Implementation

The Milwaukee County Commission on Aging should continue to serve as the central co-ordination agency regarding the re-envisioning of the Milwaukee County Senior Centers.

The Milwaukee County Commission on Aging should establish a Senior Centers standing committee.

The Milwaukee County Area Agency on Aging should hire a coordinator to facilitate the findings of this report and to develop a strategic plan for its implementation.

The Senior Centers standing committee should take an active role in preparing the next Request for Proposal for the Milwaukee County Senior Centers service provider to ensure that the intent of the applicable 21st Century Attributes listed in this report are appropriately addressed.

The Milwaukee County Commission on Aging should authorize a comprehensive rebranding initiative to reintroduce the existing Senior Centers as the MKE HUBS.

Milwaukee County should continue to provide programming and services at its five existing senior centers. Simultaneously, new alternatives should be explored to find ways to bring enlightened senior services and programming closer to existing seniors in a wider variety of ethnic and cultural communities.

Any short- or long-term physical improvements to the five Milwaukee County owned senior centers must take into consideration and be responsive to the 21st Century Attributes listed within this report.

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The Milwaukee County Commission on Aging should initiate a constructive dialogue between all nineteen municipalities in Milwaukee County, along with all other current senior center providers to explore strategies to provide intentionally coordinated senior services and programming in a cost-effective, collaborative, and equitable manner.

The contents of this report should be presented publicly to select groups to garner strategic support.

The Milwaukee County Commission on Aging should explore the possibility of charging membership fees in an equitable fashion to raise additional funding to support services, facilities and programming.

The Milwaukee County Commission on Aging should continue to aggressively pursue long term partnerships with philanthropic organizations, not for profit entities and like-minded service providers who will benefit from the vision of engaged mature generations of Milwaukee County residents as described in this report.

A separate non-profit fund-raising entity, modeled on the Friends of the Parks, should be created to build support for Senior Centers as necessary public institutions.

## Commencement

This Committee has worked diligently over the past two years to uphold the trust placed in it by the Commission on Aging. These recommendations honor the vision of past generations who built and sustained the network of senior centers in Milwaukee County yet speak to a new 21<sup>st</sup> Century vision. One that can facilitate the desire of the public to sustain public spaces where older adults can meet and mingle, debate and deliberate, create and recreate, exercise and educate, all the while breaking down the fears and barriers that limit our potential and renewing the democracy that binds us together.

Just as a graduate steps away from academia hoping to bring newly gained skills and insights to the challenges of daily life, so this Committee passes on this document of vision for the MKE HUBS to the Commission on Aging, Milwaukee County, and the public at large, in hope of the realization of its promise and implementation. This then is not a conclusion, but a commencement of the task that lies ahead, which will require no small commitment of resources, talent, and political will. We hope you will share with us our passion to see this vision through and look forward to visiting with you in the autumn of our years in a beautiful place renewed in spirit and structure, a public space where all are welcome, and all may come to be well together.