

THE MKE HUBS

Reimagining Senior Centers
for Milwaukee County
in the 21st Century



MARCH 7, 2022

MILWAUKEE COUNTY COMMISSION ON AGING
Select Committee on Senior Centers



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

Executive Summary

The MKE HUBS: Reimagining Senior Centers for Milwaukee County in the 21st 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.

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!

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.

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 21st 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.

21st 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

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.

21st 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.

21st 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.

21st 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.

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 21st 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.