



**MILWAUKEE COUNTY
Department on Aging**

Holly Davis
Executive Director
(414) 289-6010

Commission on Aging

Barbara Wyatt Sibley
Chair

Fred Kneueppel
Vice Chair
Chair, Advocacy Committee

Sup. Jason Haas
County Supervisor

Bettie Rodgers, J.D.
Chair, Advisory Council

Jordan Luhr
Chair, Service Delivery

Elizabeth Meyer-Arnold
Chair, Wellness Committee

Sharon Abston-Coleman, PhD
Ronald Byington

Gladys Carroll-Weathersby
Maria Castrejon-Pérez
Patsy Delgado

John Griffith
Debra Jupka
Cesar Pabon
Charles Vang

Pastor Johnny C. White, Jr.

April 10, 2019

Wisconsin Joint Committee on Finance

**Testimony of the Milwaukee County Commission on Aging
Oak Creek Community Center**

Hon. Alberta Darling and Hon. John Nygren, Honorable members of the Wisconsin Legislature's Joint Committee on Finance:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you about the concerns of older adults living in Milwaukee County. I am Fred Kneueppel, the vice chair of the Milwaukee County Commission on Aging and the chair of the Advocacy Committee. With me to speak are Committee members:

John Griffith

Bob Haase

Gary Mikolajczyk, and

Barbara Wyatt Sibley (Gary Mikolajczyk) – chair of the Commission on Aging

Like you, the Commission on Aging is a representative body authorized under the federal Older Americans Act and charged with advocating on behalf the more than 170,000 adults over the age of 60 living in Milwaukee County.

Many items in the state budget affect our seniors. We have submitted in writing a summary of all our State Budget priorities for your consideration but wanted to take this time to highlight a few of them.

When my wife and I met many years ago, we were also blessed with a strong network of friends and family who supported us. One of those lifetime friends, Judy, had the misfortune of suffering a traumatic brain injury that caused her to lose some capacity for independent living. Judy now lives in an Assisted Living facility and her children live far away. My wife and I do what we can to support Judy, but it is not always enough to meet her needs. Judy is fortunate that she benefits from assistance in the assisted living facility, but we know many people who cannot afford – or find -- this level of support. And many do not have family or friends who can help provide the level of care they need. Even if they qualify for Family Care, IRIS, or Medicare Advantage, they cannot find the professional caregivers they need – not only to help them live independently – but to perform the basic activities of daily living. Personal care workers and nursing assistants are among the lowest compensated healthcare workers in our State. For \$9.00 per hour, it is hard to recruit and retain these critical long-term care professionals. Moreover, because of these low wages, many of those who do choose to pursue professional caregiving are themselves eligible for Badgercare.

We urge you to support increases in the Medicaid reimbursement rates for both home and community based and facility-based caregiving professionals in this biennial budget -- making it possible for these long term care workers to earn a livable wage, obtain private healthcare coverage, and fulfill the promise of support we have made to our seniors.

Hello, I am Bob Haase. As Fred mentioned, caregiving for our aging population is a critically important need in Wisconsin. As you know, a growing proportion of our population is reaching advanced age. As they do, many need additional supports and care to help them live healthy lives. While many individuals with disabilities or dementia will need professional caregivers, family caregivers provide hundreds of millions of dollars of uncompensated care to their loved ones. This is as it should be – family and neighbors helping us as we age. Yet the needs of elders can strain even the most well-intentioned family caregiver. Family members should not have to lose their jobs, abandon their own responsibilities to their children, or go into debt because they are helping an aging parent or grandparent when there is no one else to do so.

Thus, we support expanding the Wisconsin Family and Medical Leave Act to require employers with 25 or more employees to grant them unpaid leave without fear of job loss when they are assisting an aging family member. We also support a modest tax credit for family caregivers who provide their own resources to assist a family member in the aging process. We also support the expansion of Dementia Care Specialists across the State – and an additional Dementia Care Specialist position here in Milwaukee County – to help family members navigate the difficult challenges that arise when they find themselves in relationship with a loved relative with Alzheimer's or other dementia.

Milwaukee County's Commission on Aging recognizes the tremendous difficulty that many older individuals face across the State in accessing transportation that can keep them independent and engaged in community life. Like me, John Griffith, sometimes it is time to give up our driving privileges. Sometimes, older adults can no longer afford to maintain a vehicle. Sometimes, driving was never a possibility. All of us, however, want to live a vibrant life, engaged in the community. We want to be able to get to the grocery store, or barber shop, or community meal site. This requires an investment in a public transportation system that works for everyone. For many years, while road building has gone on, our public transit and specialized transit resources were all but ignored. We support the increases proposed in this biennial budget for public transit, specialized transit, and paratransit and welcome the proposal to increase cooperation across artificial county boundaries that inhibit access to all that life has to offer for those lucky enough to drive beyond them.

1220 West Vliet Street, Suite 302 | Milwaukee, WI 53205

(414) 289-6874 | TRS: 7-1-1 | Fax: (414) 289-8568

county.milwaukee.gov/aging | aging@milwaukeecountywi.gov

Committed to the Independence and Dignity of Older Adults Through Advocacy, Leadership and Service



I know a thing or two about artificial boundaries and barriers to access. I am Barbara Wyatt Sibley and as chair of the Milwaukee County Commission on Aging, I have seen firsthand how our seniors – in the most populous and ethnically diverse county in the State – have struggled to gain the resources they need – that our public compact promised them – to live freely and equitably in their own cities and neighborhoods. Despite a common perception, Milwaukee County does not receive “all the resources” from the State. In fact, Milwaukee County citizens pay in more tax dollars and receive proportionately less than any other county. Indeed all counties and municipalities, where services are delivered at the local level, have been starved of resources. We support this budget’s proposed increase in shared revenues, so that all counties and municipalities can benefit from more local resources. With additional funding we can meet needs for transportation, socialization, caregiving, and public safety that benefit us all. We ask that the Committee consider the proposals of the Fair Deal initiative to provide Milwaukee County with compensation for the state mandated services it provides with little state reimbursement.

Finally, we support expanding Medicaid coverage to 82,000 low income citizens, providing Wisconsin an estimated \$325 million dollars in additional federal revenue. Regardless of what may happen in the future, that money is real today and will help us support many vital services such as those mentioned by my colleagues for long term support, as well as mental health, dental, and community health benefits that our residents so desperately need. Leaving this money off the table – and depriving people of such important care would be irresponsible.

Thank you again for this time and opportunity. We look forward to working with you to craft a budget that helps to fulfill the dreams and aspirations of all our seniors here in Milwaukee County and across the State.