

PRESS RELEASE

Milwaukee County Reveals Strategy that Eliminates Department on Aging

Silence Broken after Continual Probing

By Richmond Izard, Chairman, Milwaukee County Commission on Aging

The County Executive's Office informed the Commission on Aging Friday, September 25, 2020 of plans to demote the Milwaukee County Department on Aging (MCDA) to an organizational unit underneath the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

- Aging's \$305,000 proposed budget reduction for 2021 is eminent because of tax levy reductions
- At risk is seniors' hope to maintain an independent Department on Aging and full-time director
- Commission remains concerned about lack of transparency, input and unsung governing authority

Sep 28th, 2020, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

The Milwaukee County Commission on Aging has been in investigative mode all year. Rumors and suspicions of department reorganization prompted the commission's Advocacy Committee and full commission in January to include "maintain[ing] an independent Milwaukee County Department on Aging" among published 2020 top local priorities. At a later June commission meeting, Chairman Richmond Izard expressed concerns about an unannounced "No Wrong Door" pilot. The initiative merged MCDA's Elder Abuse and DHHS's Adult Protective Services units. Shakita LaGrant-McClain concurrently served as Interim Executive Director for the Department on Aging, as well as Interim Executive Director of DHHS at the time. The Chair and Executive Committee discerned and warned the commission that the pilot might be the first visible action taken toward reorganizing the larger departmental structure.

"I'm really concerned about will there even be a Department on Aging, making sure it's free-standing and that it still exists and doesn't get gobbled up somewhere," expressed Vice Chair Sharon Abston-Coleman a couple weeks earlier during the June Executive Committee meeting.

Initial signs that the department was not being transparent and forthcoming date back to February. The department informed the Advisory Council that the county would be adopting a "No Wrong Door" approach to delivering services, centered around removing silos and improving access. Commissioner and Advisory Council Chairwoman, Bettie Rodgers asked for a copy of an existing "No Wrong Door Whitepaper" on February 13 but did not receive it until September 14. The natural transition process from one administration to another has made it that

much more challenging to gather current and timely information, especially with staffing, budget and COVID-19 pandemic troubleshooting early in the queue.

The Department on Aging is currently facing a \$305,000 budget cut for 2021 due to tax levy reductions. In concert with merging the department, administration plans to “un-fund the Executive Director position” and currently vacant positions to help cover the deficit. The commission objects, however, because the department has completely excluded the commission and voice of older adults from discussions that inform budget development.

[“I asked at the time I was appointed and interviewed, ‘Are we a rubber-stamp commission?’ I’d like to know the answer to that,”](#) said Commissioner and Legislative Officer George Pumphrey.

Chairman Richmond Izard advises that transparency is a basic principle of good governance. [“I can’t understand why the department and administration has delayed releasing this information to the commission and public,”](#) said Izard. **But ultimately, power is in the unified voice of 170,000 seniors. They and other fellow residents must contact their [County Supervisors](#) immediately to voice any opinions or concerns prior to adoption of the 2021 budget.** Former Commissioner and County Supervisor, Steve F. Taylor successfully defeated a [failed attempt to merge the departments in 2016](#). The Committee on Finance, Personnel and Audit unanimously approved a resolution 8-0 before sending it to the full County Board for successful approval at that time.

About the Department on Aging

The Aging unit split from the Department of Health and Human Services in 1991 and became the stand-alone Department on Aging. Decision makers deemed older adults better served by separate opposed to merged departments. MCDA’s mission is “Committed to the Independence and Dignity of Older Adults Through Advocacy, Leadership and Service.” All programming and policy extend from administering the Older Americans Act of 1965, as amended.

About the Commission on Aging

The commission is an advocacy and research agency charged with representing the voice and interest of older adults in Milwaukee County pursuant to Wis. Stat. 46.82 and Chapter 53 of the Milwaukee County General Code of Ordinances. The commission and department serve 170,000 senior citizens comprising 20% of the county population, as well as their caregivers and partners.

Name of Press Contact: Richmond Izard

Phone: 414-737-2167

Email: richmond.izard@milwaukeecountywi.gov