

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

YOUNG AT HEART

*Exploring the Future of Senior Centers
in Milwaukee County*



WISCONSIN
POLICY FORUM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Older Americans Act of 1965 (OAA) established the foundation for publicly-supported programs to help older adults live healthy, independent lives. Reflective of that objective, Milwaukee County’s five county-owned senior centers offer senior-related programming in the community. Each of the centers is located in a county park and, for more than three decades, each has been a place for older adults to go when seeking opportunities for exercise, recreation, education, and social activity.

Unfortunately, each of the senior centers now faces significant facility needs, including aging systems that will be very expensive to replace. In fact, county officials project that the buildings’ overall poor condition will merit full building replacement by 2022.

While the facility challenges pose a huge problem, they also offer an opportunity for Milwaukee County officials and the broader community to re-assess the role of senior centers. The Wisconsin Policy Forum was commissioned by the Milwaukee County Department on Aging (MCDA) to identify possible alternatives for providing senior center infrastructure for senior programming. To inform this analysis, we were also asked to identify best practices in older adult programming nationally, as these practices may help to define the types of infrastructure required.

SENIOR CENTERS IN MILWAUKEE COUNTY

In addition to owning and paying about \$1.1 million per year for contracted services at five senior centers, Milwaukee County also financially supports social/recreational programming at four privately-owned centers. There are additional senior centers throughout the county that operate independently from MCDA, as well as school district recreation programs with offerings similar to many found in senior centers.

While the number of older adult residents in Milwaukee County is growing, attendance at the county-owned centers has declined slightly in recent years. Based on 2018 records, the average monthly attendance was 2,379 with a total of 6,608 unduplicated individuals over the course of the year (4% of the county’s approximately 172,000 senior residents).

Milwaukee County senior center characteristics and 2018 participation

Senior Center	Age	Size (Square Feet)	Avg. Monthly Participants	Annual Unique Participants	Avg. Service Units per month
Clinton Rose	35	35,706	342	1,052	4,628
Kelly	61	17,010	380	1,229	4,741
McGovern	43	12,983	265	655	1,502
Washington	50	30,092	449	1,584	4,312
Wilson	37	35,540	943	2,088	8,488
TOTAL	Ave 45	131,331	2,379	6,608	23,669

Note: Participation numbers do not include most diners, outside meetings, large events, or rentals.



The five county-owned senior center facilities range in age from 35 to 61 years. To better understand the physical status of these buildings, the county conducted a facility condition assessment in 2017. The assessment found the facilities have been reasonably well maintained, but they have systems that are approaching the end of their useful lives. Overall, it is expected that each of the buildings will be graded in poor condition by 2022 and will be in need of full replacement at a combined cost of more than \$24 million.

Pressing senior center facility needs are emerging at a time when the county is facing an overall infrastructure crisis caused by a huge backlog of deferred repair needs and the need for several new and extremely expensive building replacement projects, including a \$300 million justice center. As the Forum has outlined in several previous reports, the county's financial capacity to address these capital challenges is severely limited by the imperative to limit annual borrowing and to preserve property tax resources for operating needs.

As government and community leaders consider the future of the five centers and the affordability of needed infrastructure work, they should consider the changing characteristics of the county's older adults. 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.

Milwaukee County, for the most part, mirrors these national statistics, yet the data indicate some specific areas of concern. Older adults in Milwaukee County live alone at a higher rate than in the rest of Wisconsin, with women living alone at a higher rate than men. Furthermore, while older adult incomes have risen overall, African American and Latino older adults in Milwaukee County are three times more likely to live below the poverty level than Caucasians.

These characteristics of today's older adults provide direction and guidance for what programs should be offered and how they should be delivered, calling for careful development of models that can effectively serve the changing needs of the county's older adult community.

INSIGHTS FROM PEER COUNTIES

To provide additional context for local policymakers and citizens, we explored how and to what extent senior centers like those in Milwaukee County are used in four peer counties in the Midwest: Allegheny County, Pennsylvania; Dane County, Wisconsin; Franklin County, Ohio; and Hennepin County, Minnesota. We also added Arlington County, Virginia, which we identified as one of the few other counties nationally where county government owns senior centers.

Peer County Overview (figures from 2016)

County	Population	Senior Population 60+	% 60+	% of 60+ Minority	County Owns Sr. Centers
Milwaukee, WI	951,448	174,590	18.3	27.3	Yes
Allegheny, PA	1,225,365	306,880	25.0	12.4	No
Dane, WI	531,273	98,095	18.5	6.5	No
Franklin, OH	1,264,518	209,552	16.6	22.9	No
Hennepin, MN	1,232,483	235,783	19.1	12.1	No
Arlington, VA	230,050	33,059	14.4%	29.0	Yes

A surprising diversity of priorities, structures, processes, and funding was observed across these counties reflecting the manner in which they provide senior services and, more specifically, how they make use of senior centers. Several important insights that may be relevant to Milwaukee County emerged from our analysis:

- In **Allegheny County**, consolidation of senior center facilities and creative use of low-cost space has freed up funding for needed programs. That is an approach Milwaukee County leaders may wish to consider as they grapple with the physical needs of the five existing centers.
- In **Dane County**, priority services such as nutrition, adult day care, and extensive case management drive the county's overall approach to addressing the needs of older adults, as opposed to investment in physical locations and services that can be offered at those locations. Milwaukee County may wish to consider a similar approach in which contracted service agencies are responsible for providing and maintaining their own facilities (an approach already used for four of the 10 senior centers MCDA supports).
- **Franklin County** programs for older adults exist as part of a framework in which local municipalities, including Columbus, own and operate senior/community centers. A lesson for MCDA could be the value of exploring where the county's role fits in with older adult services offered by municipalities and local community providers.
- Senior centers do not play a significant role in access to senior services in **Hennepin County**, as officials there rejected them as an effective and efficient way to meet the needs of older adults. In light of limited resources and increasing demands for a broad range of older adult services, would Milwaukee County be better served by placing more resources into options like an expanded call center instead?
- **Arlington County** houses all senior centers in multi-generational, multi-purpose community centers and has been successful in gaining support to address facility needs for the centers. Milwaukee County policymakers may wish to consider whether a similar approach could generate broader support to address facility needs and bring greater visibility to senior services.

SUMMARY AND POLICY OPTIONS

Given the diversity of options we observed nationally – as well as the growth and changing characteristics of Milwaukee County’s senior population – it appears that the current senior center model used by MCDA may not constitute the best use of the limited resources available to promote older adult independence. In contemplating a different model, policymakers and citizens might frame their discussions by addressing the following questions:

- **Should Milwaukee County own and pay for programming in large facilities that are exclusively devoted to older adult services?** This is not the national trend nor the direction of the OAA (though it is important to remember that MCDA does not use OAA funds to support senior centers). Also, given the cost, it appears to be the option that would be the most difficult for the county to maintain.
- **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, achieving more efficient use of space, and engendering broader public support and usage?** This option was supported both by our review of peer counties and as an option identified by the OAA. However, it may require consolidation of senior center operations into fewer facilities, as buildings devoted to multi-generational programming may require modernized infrastructure and costlier operations that the county could not afford to replicate at five distinct sites.
- **If county leaders deem it impractical or unaffordable to own senior or multi-generational facilities, should MCDA focus on funding outside agencies to provide senior center-type programming in their own facilities?** This option was used by each of the counties we observed that uses senior centers as part of its service model and also is used by MCDA at four privately-owned senior centers. It provides the opportunity to consider a broader geographic distribution of senior center services and contractual promotion of efficient low-cost space.
- **Alternatively, should the county simply allow senior centers to be the exclusive domain of municipal and community-based partners, and instead use MCDA’s resources for expanded services in areas like transportation, enhanced community supports, and an expanded call center?** It is possible that call center referrals and expanded transportation services could enhance the value and usage of non-MCDA senior centers by ensuring that greater numbers of seniors have the supports they need to access and utilize the centers. If concerns arise about a lack of recreational programming for seniors, then the county could take a cue from Arlington County by folding such programming into its parks and recreation department or partnering with municipal/school district recreation departments to provide such programming.

These are not easy questions for Milwaukee County leaders, nor for the thousands of older adults who utilize and find great value in the existing county-owned senior centers. Nevertheless, even if the county was not facing steep financial challenges, national policy directives and the changing needs and demands of the county’s older adult population require that these questions be thoroughly and objectively deliberated. We hope this report launches such a community-wide debate and provides initial, important context to inform it.