



For Immediate Release

Contact: Rob Henken, President

(414) 276-8240, Ext. 1

[rhenken@wispolicyforum.org](mailto:rhenken@wispolicyforum.org)

### **Report Explores New Senior Programming Models in Milwaukee County**

*Senior Centers Challenged by Vast Facility Needs and Changing Older Adult Characteristics*

A new report by the nonpartisan, independent Wisconsin Policy Forum (WPF) finds that the five Milwaukee County-owned senior centers face substantial repair and replacement needs, which poses a particular challenge given the county's overall backlog of needed infrastructure projects. At the same time, these facility needs "offer an opportunity for Milwaukee County officials and the broader community to re-assess the role of senior centers."

The report – "Young at Heart" – was commissioned by the Milwaukee County Department on Aging (MCDA) to explore the appropriate role for senior centers in Milwaukee County. WPF researchers explored the condition and usage of the county-owned centers, examined national best practices in older adult programming, and analyzed programming models used in five peer counties.

The five county-owned senior center facilities – all located in county parks – range in age from 35 to 61 years. According to 2017 facility assessments conducted by the county, the facilities have been reasonably well maintained, but they have systems that are approaching the end of their useful lives. 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.

Meanwhile, the number of older adult residents in Milwaukee County is growing, but 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).

"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," says the report. "Older adults are living longer, creating distinct cohorts of seniors who have very different needs."

To provide context for such consideration, the report explores how senior centers are used in four Midwestern peer counties: Allegheny County, Pennsylvania; Dane County, Wisconsin; Franklin County, Ohio; and Hennepin County, Minnesota. Arlington County, Virginia, also was included, as it is one of the few other counties nationally where county government owns senior centers.

WPF researchers found a surprising diversity of approaches in how these counties provide senior services and, more specifically, how they make use of senior centers. Several important insights that may be relevant to Milwaukee County emerged:

- In **Allegheny County**, consolidation of senior center facilities and creative use of low-cost space has freed up funding for needed programs.
- 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.
- **Franklin County** programs for older adults exist as part of a framework in which local municipalities, including Columbus, own and operate senior/community centers.
- Senior centers do not play a significant role in access to senior services in **Hennepin County**; officials there rejected them as an effective and efficient way to meet the needs of older adults.
- **Arlington County** houses all senior centers in multi-generational, multi-purpose community centers and relies on its parks and recreation department to administer programming.

The report concludes 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.” It suggests that in contemplating a different model, policymakers and citizens 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- Alternatively, should the county 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?

“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.”

The complete report can be downloaded [here](#).