



# THE MKE HUBS

Reimagining Senior Centers for  
Milwaukee County in the 21st Century

MILWAUKEE COUNTY COMMISSION ON AGING  
Select Committee on Senior Centers



MILWAUKEE  
COUNTY

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 an inspired 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.**

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.

Based on the findings of the *Envisioning* 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.

## HISTORY WORTH REPEATING

### If 21st Century Obstacles Can Be Overcome

Milwaukee County is not unique in evaluating the purpose, function, and modernization of senior centers. Numerous public and private bodies have published such studies. Just this past year, the National Council on Aging established a “Modernizing Senior Centers Resource Center.” From Washington, D.C. to Portland, Oregon these studies echo the concerns that led to Milwaukee County’s senior center re-envisioning process and the formation of the Milwaukee County Commission on Aging’s Select Committee on Senior Centers.

### Current Senior Centers

Milwaukee County’s first senior center located at Washington Park opened in 1968 under the Department of Parks and Recreation, when the County’s Office on Aging operated independently, but prior to the formation of the Department on Aging. The purpose of this center was to provide nutritious meals, socialization, and physical fitness. Subsequently other centers were opened at Kelly in 1971, McGovern Park in 1976, Wilson Park in 1982, and finally Clinton & Bernice Rose in 1984. In addition to the growth of Milwaukee County’s own senior centers, many other municipal and non-profit senior centers grew out of “senior citizen” clubs that had been meeting formally or informally since the 1950s or 1960s.

These centers expanded and offered a wide variety of programming including dance, exercise, applied arts and crafts, social games and sport, gift shops and eventually computer labs. This model did well to meet the needs and interests of seniors for many years. Yet, with the notable exception of the more recent United Community Center senior center, as the population evolved these senior centers were not updated to meet accessibility requirements or the more complex interests of newer generations of older adults in the County.



**WASHINGTON**  
1968



**KELLY**  
1971



**McGOVERN**  
1976



**WILSON**  
1982



**CLINTON ROSE**  
1984

By the mid 2000’s the County’s fiscal challenges, coupled with an array of aging institutions and infrastructure, forced a reevaluation of both program delivery and facility maintenance. This was true for both the City of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County. For example, the Granville Senior Center, operated by the County in a building leased from the City was closed in 2006 due to deteriorating infrastructure that neither government could afford to remediate. Senior dining and senior dining programs were moved to the Elks Lodge.

In 2017, the County undertook its first large scale evaluation of the infrastructure and programming at each of the five County-owned senior centers. These five senior centers are between 40 and 65 years old and each face different capital needs, are not fully accessible, and have faced significant deferred maintenance. This comprehensive facility assessment found that:

*While these buildings are currently in acceptable condition, they are of an age where building systems need to be replaced. The current cost of repairs or system replacements needed in 2017 is approximately \$680,000. That same total through 2022 is \$9.5 million and through 2036 is \$23 million... These numbers do not include any soft costs or contingencies. For planning purposes, an additional 50% increase could be considered on top of these values.*

The study also documented declining participation in the center’s programs. While valuing their senior centers, participants expressed a desire for safe, clean, comfortable, accessible, modern, welcoming, and fun senior centers with more activities, hot topics, and improved technology. They wanted progressive programming, building upgrades, and maintenance that made the space inviting, with modern exercise equipment, fitness programs, and senior dining options.

## Operational and Programming History

Since the mid-1970s, the County operated the senior centers it owned in partnership with Interfaith Milwaukee, a nonprofit senior social services organization which provided a wide range of social services for older adults, including family caregiver support, senior dining, community outreach, senior centers, senior volunteer and employment services, neighborhood outreach, telephone reassurance, and long-term care case management. Through Older Americans Act (OAA) funding, the County also supports programming in several other senior centers, as well as nutrition only programming at several others. In 2017 Interfaith merged with SET Ministries and formed a new entity called Unison.

Due to a variety of circumstances, Unison unfortunately failed in 2019. Its many senior programming contracts were distributed to several other nonprofits. Serving Older Adults of Southeast

Wisconsin formed out of this dissolution with the primary goal of continuing programming at the Milwaukee County owned senior centers, a relationship that continues today. However Serving Older Adults no longer has the advantage of the diverse funding base or control of other OAA funded programming for older adults that Interfaith had in the past. Thus, the County operates and programs its senior centers based on a model developed decades ago. While still attracting a diverse group of older adults, these senior centers have struggled to attract increased participation even as the County's population ages. In recent years, the centers attracted 5,500 unique individuals across the five centers for meals and programs, with average monthly participation of less than 2,500 older adults. Yet the population of older adults eligible for participation in Milwaukee County exceeds 185,000. The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated this concern.

County funding for senior center programming has remained flat or modestly declined. Programming and maintenance at the Milwaukee County owned senior centers has been funded entirely through County tax levy—a funding source that is expected to be exhausted by 2027 unless the state legislature provides fundamental reform. Inadequate staffing capacity and insufficient programming adversely impacts the centers' ability to enhance quality of life. In addition to limited program offerings, the northwest and southwest sectors of the County do not even have senior centers to serve the large population of older adults. Other drawbacks include limited hours of operations which are not conducive to the schedules of working older adults, inadequate access for residents with disabilities, and a lack of convenient bus stops.



## 21ST CENTURY CONTEXT

### Aging Demographics In Milwaukee County

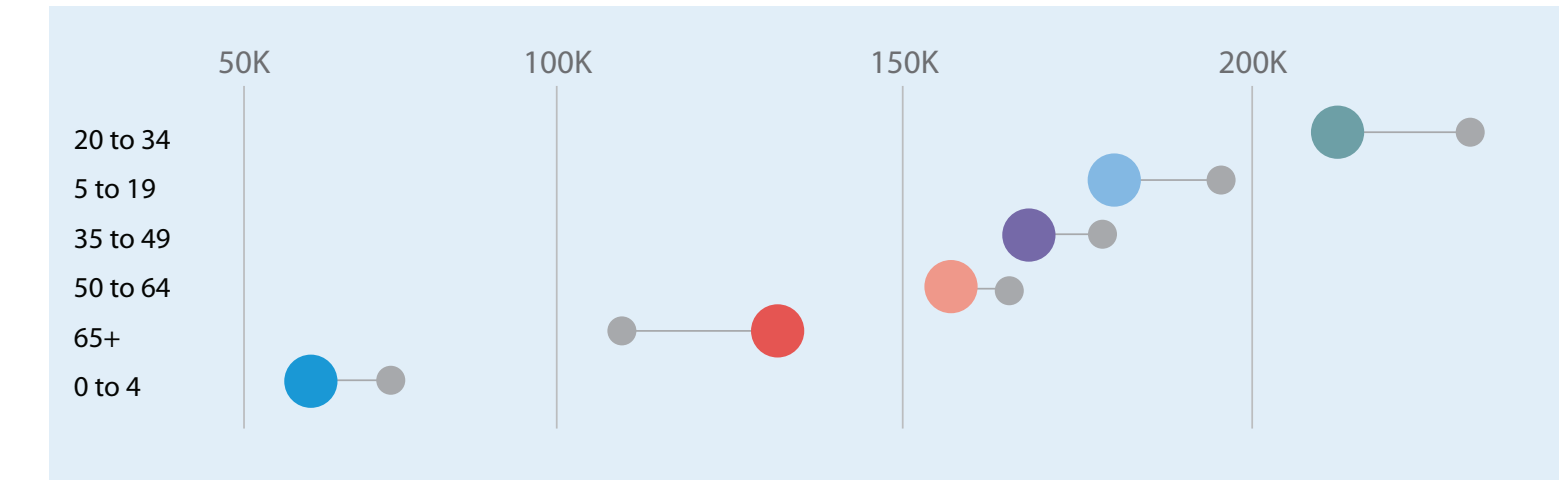
To set the context for the vision and recommendations that follow, the Committee considered both the short- and long-term political, social, and demographic conditions of the County and its residents. Fundamentally, if the County is going to support the development of senior centers is there a populace that will want to utilize them? Secondly, do senior centers represent a wise investment of increasingly scarce resources to advance the County's overall strategic objective to become the healthiest county in Wisconsin by achieving racial equity?

The population of Milwaukee County is growing older. While Milwaukee County's population shrank overall by 2.1% from 2010 to 2020 to 928,059, its share of the population 65 years and older increased from 11.5% to 14.3%. Milwaukee County now has 183,848 adults aged 60+, based on the 2010 Census this represents 19.8% of the population.

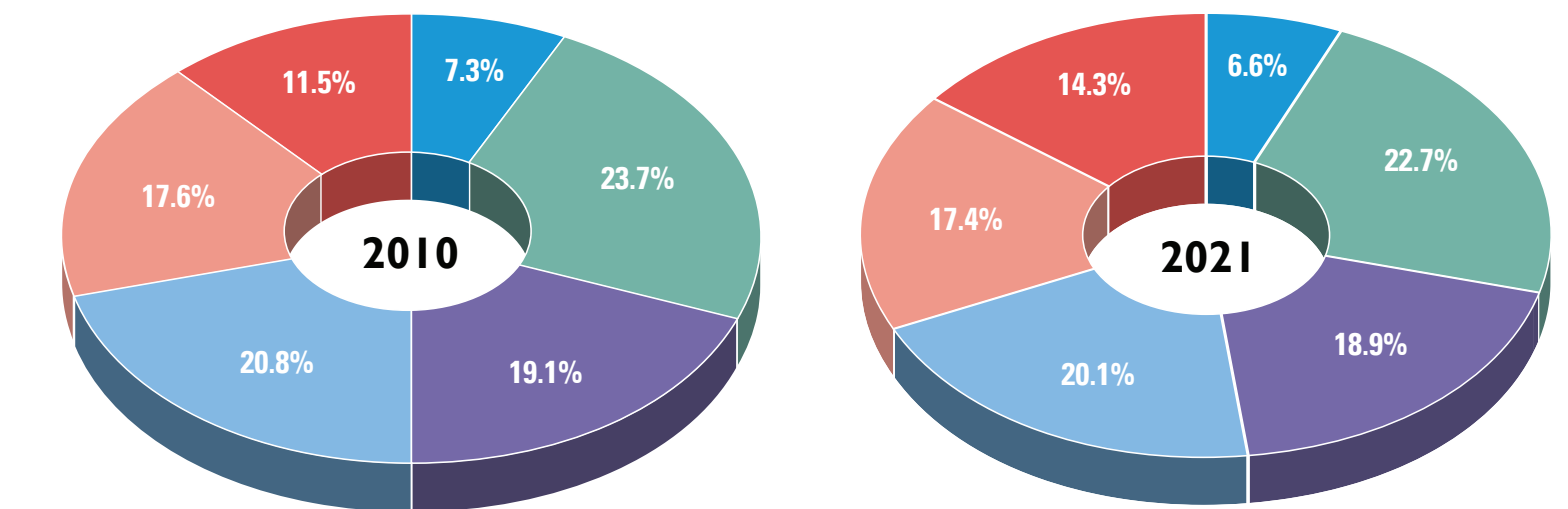
This trend will accelerate in the next decade as the share of older adults in Milwaukee County is expected to reach 22% by 2040, including an increase of 30,000 in the cohort of residents aged eighty-five years and older.

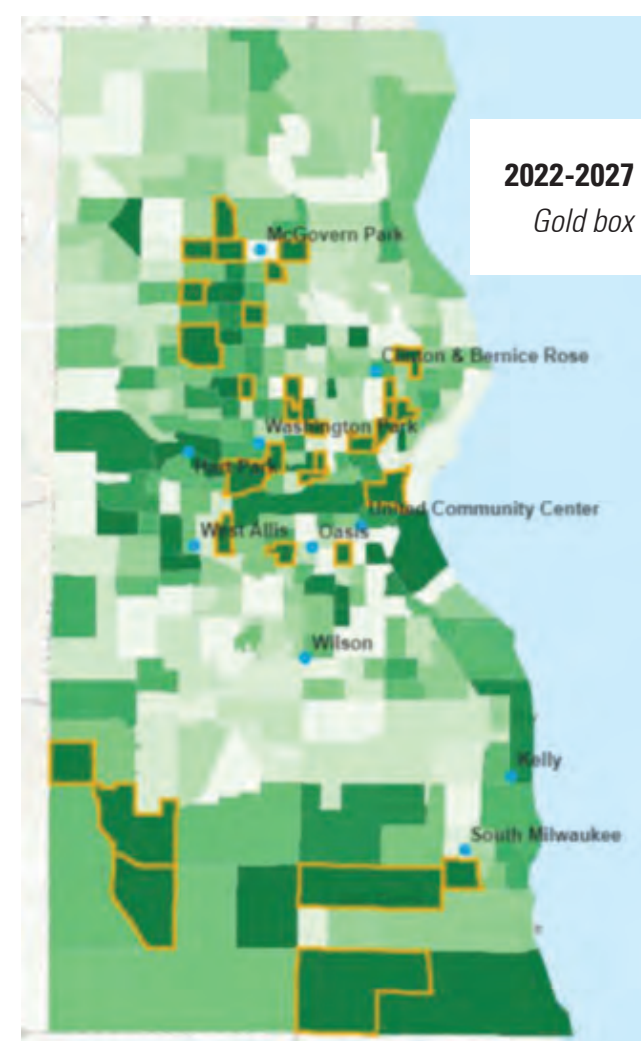
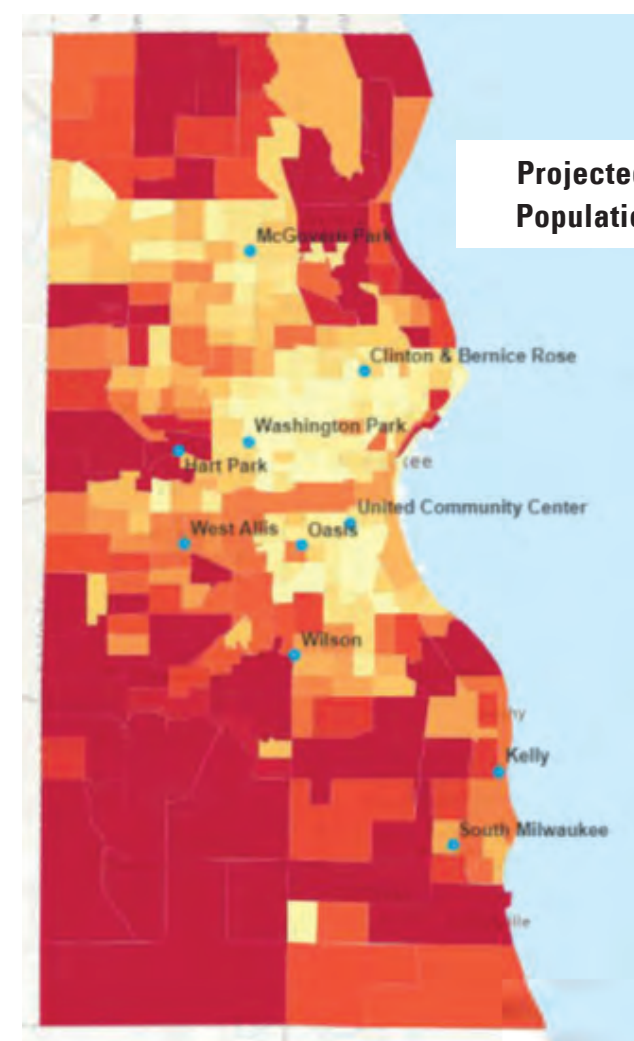
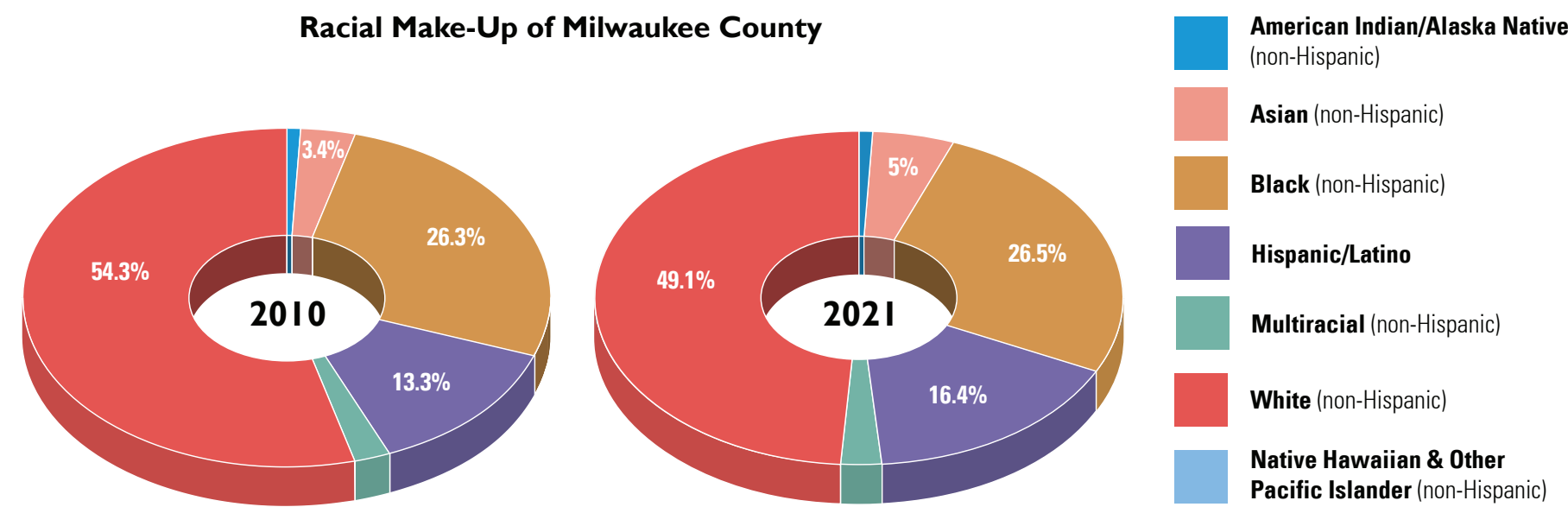
### Population by Age in Milwaukee County

Among six age groups—0 to 4, 5 to 19, 20 to 34, 35 to 49, 50 to 64 and 65+, the **65+** group was the fastest growing between **2010** and **2021** with its population **increasing 21.6%**. The **20 to 34** age group **declined the most dropping 6.1%** between **2010** and **2021**.



### Age Make-Up of Milwaukee County





## Race and Ethnicity Among Older Adults

Milwaukee County hosts the most diverse population in Wisconsin. The growth in older adults will be most prominent among its residents of color, particularly the Black and Latino populace. Older adults in Milwaukee County today remain predominately White, making up seventy percent (70%) of the populace aged 60+. Yet the majority of Milwaukee County's population is already non-white. As the share of residents of color continues to grow and as this relatively younger population ages, the cohort of older adults of color will gain proportionally.

Still, this data does not tell the whole story. The legacy of racism and the concurrent public policies that excluded Black residents from access to housing, wealth, and healthcare has taken a terrible toll. In Milwaukee County overall life expectancy for Whites from birth was 77.9 years. For Black Milwaukee County residents, life expectancy from birth was only 70.0 years. The percentage of Black adults who die between ages 60-69 is nearly double that of Whites. The Wisconsin Population Health Institute has calculated that between 2018 and 2020 the Black population lost a collective 8,800 more years of potential life per 100,000 due to death before age 75 than the White population. Given the County's population and life expectancy, this equates to at least 1,088 Black lives missing from Milwaukee County's older adult population.

Structural Racism also drove the hyper-segregation of Milwaukee County's population by race historically. Whether through government sanctioned policies like red-lining in the housing market, displacement due to expressway construction and "slum clearance", or self-imposed exile due to racially motivated fear, the result on the older adult population is stark. Older adults in Milwaukee County are highly concentrated in largely white suburbs, places where senior centers and services are more difficult to access.

## Senior Centers as Public Social Institutions

Given the legacy of structural racism and its effects on the health of the entire population, Milwaukee County declared racism a Public Health Crisis in 2019. Facing the prospect of declining county revenue, deteriorating infrastructure, and diminishing participation, the Milwaukee County Department on Aging undertook the process outlined earlier to evaluate the cost and benefit of maintaining programming within the five senior centers it owned and operated. Along the way, those conducting this evaluation faced a more existential question: Given the rise of technology and the precipitous decline in participation in religious, civic, and social clubs among the rising population of older adults, are senior centers worth continued investment, or relics of a bygone era that would divert precious resources away from more pressing needs?

Is there a better way to serve the senior population of the future than to invest in senior centers and the programming and socialization that they currently offer? If county residents viewed senior centers as important social institutions worth preserving and even enhancing, how might that be accomplished? What models exist elsewhere that might help guide this discussion? The Select Committee on Senior Centers turned its attention to these more existential questions, and it grappled with answers to the critical questions.

What then, of the most basic question facing us: Are senior centers worth continuing? The answer turns out to be a resounding yes—and for reasons that go well beyond the loyalty and enthusiasm of current participants or the nostalgia of past models. Senior centers are quintessentially public social clubs, operating across race, gender, class, and social strata. As noted by Elizabeth Segran, Ph.D. in the magazine *Fast Company* – May 28, 2014:

*Over the last few decades, sociologists and political scientists have found that American clubs of all stripes have experienced steep declines in their memberships .... In other words, there are fewer clubs that bring together people of different socioeconomic backgrounds across the country.... All of this is changing the social landscape of the United States. Television and the internet, for instance, encourage people to spend their leisure time on their own, rather than with other people. Social media allows people to feel like they are in a kind of community, but they don't actually have deep relationships with them.*

*This is a problem because reams of research show that people embedded in associations in their communities are better able to weather poverty and unemployment .... Many political scientists say that the withering of America's clubs and associations makes the country worse off. It means that fewer people are embedded in a community, which is known to help people feel happier and even live longer. But it also makes our nation worse off because people become increasingly removed from those who are unlike them.*

*Theda Skocpol, the Harvard political scientist, believes that to create a better society we need to break down some of these class lines. Priya Parker, the author of... The Art of Gathering, encourages people to invest in public spaces that tend to bring people of different backgrounds together... in [their] community. This means spending time in these spaces and inviting people from less well-off neighborhoods to enjoy these public spaces as well. It means helping to support these spaces financially if the need arises and you have the means. This will allow people to spend time with their neighbors and begin to get to know people from different walks of life.*

*"It takes deep creativity and a sense of purpose to think about how you collectively create a public community," Parker says.*

Thus, the work of the Select Committee on Senior Centers takes on particular importance in view of Milwaukee County's strategic goal to become the healthiest county in Wisconsin by achieving racial equity. Equity addresses imbalanced social systems and provides redress for disparities in opportunity among groups of people, however those groups are defined.

Senior Centers that attract older adults across racial, social, cultural, and economic dissimilarity provide an opportunity to redress disparities in social and political capital, health and wellness, education and vocation. Most importantly, they build community. Yet senior centers can help us move toward equity only if we imagine them as public centers that are as attractive and as well-resourced as private centers with programs that appeal to and benefit all our residents. The "attributes" of senior centers included in this report and confirmed by the Commission on Aging, set a standard for public spaces that embrace a vision of a beloved community and reaffirm Milwaukee County's commitment to Senior Centers as valued Public Social Institutions.

**Senior centers continue to serve an important role in the mix of programming offered through the Milwaukee County Area Agency on Aging to address social isolation, provide opportunities for recreation and physical exercise, and improve nutrition and food security.**

Senior centers and their programming must continue to grow and adapt to the changing needs and desires of an aging populace. New and creative solutions for both the programming and the buildings within which this programming is offered must be pursued if senior centers are to continue to be sustainable and vital focal points for older adults in Milwaukee County.

## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY CONSIDERATIONS

Today we find ourselves in a society with a distinctly different social construct than we had experienced during the period when the current Milwaukee County Seniors Centers were conceived and developed. For this reason, the Select Committee intentionally widened its focus beyond simply addressing the current functionality and physical condition of the existing senior centers. Placing the re-envisioning process of senior centers in Milwaukee County within the context of current trends, it has explored the implications of three important considerations that are shaping the form of 21st Century solutions.

**First**, newer generations of users are actively participating in the use of these buildings. In addition to the current influx of Boomer generation users, the first wave of Gen-Xers will turn 60 in 2025. Together these groups along with current long standing Silent and Civic generation users will comprise a diverse collection of four generations of mature Milwaukee County residents. They will inevitably change the way that aging is experienced and takes place. Together they can embrace the opportunity to reshape their lives, connect with and help one another and change the world for the better. They can learn, grow, make a difference, and live fulfilled lives. It is doubtful that the five current Senior Centers, as currently configured and programmed, will be able to meet the high and varied expectations of these new users.

**Second**, the pandemic has permanently changed the way that we interact with each other in both large and small-scale social and service settings. As a society we have quickly become familiar and comfortable with events that are either partially or fully “virtual”. What remains unanswered is what the consequences of this trend will have for older adults, especially those who are not yet comfortable, nor have easy access to the technology needed to access these virtual environments and opportunities. To combat loneliness and isolation, gathering in congregate settings is vital to well-being. At the same time the aging process leaves older adults highly vulnerable to infectious diseases in group settings. Finding the correct balance will be a critical consideration for the future of senior centers in Milwaukee County.

**Finally**, an enlightened vision for the future of senior centers in Milwaukee County must be responsive to the Area Aging Network Goals—to strive for Health Equity, to enhance Communication and Collaboration, and to promote well-being as defined by the Dimensions of Wellness.

The future composition of the Milwaukee County population will be enriched by a greater number of older adults across a wide range of generations, perspectives, and experience.

These older adults will enjoy broad knowledge of services, supports, and opportunities that easily connect them with their peers, are easy to access, and are coordinated among many different provider groups.



## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY ATTRIBUTES

The Dimensions of Wellness, as defined by the International Council on Active Aging provide important guideposts for living an engaged and purposeful life. Adapting each dimension to a 3-dimensional, innovative environment requires imagination and inspirational imagery.

Think of the statements that follow as a list of attributes. These attributes, in turn, can be used to evaluate how well the existing senior centers align with them when considering renovation strategies. They can also be used as the basis for the design and programming of any new senior center environments that may evolve from this envisioning process.



## You Have Arrived

Imagine a **Covered Canopy** framing a main entrance and offering protection from the elements as visitors arrive and depart via cars or buses for individual or group events. Imagine an exciting and energizing **Welcome Center** with signage and staff to share the full range of services, programs, and activities contained within. Whether you're a regular or a first-time user you will experience a sense of arrival, warmth, and hospitality, a true welcome—Glad you are here—*join us!*



## A Sense of Place

Imagine an easily navigable **Main Street**, like our favorite frequented streets around the city, that provides clear and convenient access to the wide variety of opportunities that will be available. It might also provide cozy little nooks to just sit and watch, read, or talk with another.



## Easy Socialization

Imagine inviting **Gathering Areas** at various scales located both indoors and outdoors that are designed to allow conversation and camaraderie. Some might be the scale of a residential living room and others might be much larger and available to rent for a banquet.

All will be fully accessible with convenient access to refreshments to support hydration and keep the conversation flowing. Of course, there will be adequate restrooms within easy reach for all.



## Let's Eat!

Imagine attractive **Dining Venues** that are the antithesis of current cafeteria-like settings. Some might be designed to create a coffee shop atmosphere while others might be more like a grab-and-go café and developed in partnership with local ethnic food providers.

Or perhaps there will be an intentional outdoor space to allow regular visits by local food trucks. There might even be a drive-up window to accommodate those looking for a quick convenience. How about a demonstration kitchen and hands on space for cooking classes to foster the importance of good nutrition and long-term health?



## Keep Fit

Imagine a **Fitness Center** modeled after popular health clubs. Imagine spaces designed for state-of-the-art exercise equipment along with studio areas for aerobics, tai chi, yoga, dance, and other activities. Through potential partnerships with local fitness providers, space and services will support massage and other soothing therapies along with rooms for fitness counseling. And of course, refreshments will be readily accessible.



## Stay Well

Imagine a **Wellness Clinic** created in partnership with local health care providers that will have areas for simple exams, screening events, vaccinations, and counseling for routine health concerns. Imagine formal and casual classroom-like environments where programs that promote awareness of one's body and an understanding of the relationship between sound nutrition and good health can be presented.





## Easy Access to the Support You Need

Imagine a **Senior Services Support Center** designed specifically to help users and visitors navigate the complex web of senior oriented services available to Milwaukee County residents. Imagine a series of casual gathering areas and counseling offices designed to assist seniors as they transition to the need for more assistance and for caregiver support groups who now require more complex support systems for their frailer loved ones. Imagine activities that can both feed your soul and provide spiritual support when needed. Imagine the opportunity to create base locations for various Senior Advocacy Groups to meet, organize and strategize as they seek ways to support and advocate for the best outcomes for all concerned.



## You're Never Too Old to Learn Something New

Imagine **Lifelong Learning** settings created in partnership with local higher learning institutions. Imagine formal and casual classroom-like environments as well as spaces for larger lectures that could become a home for regular classes and activities during the day and early evening. This component would also serve as a launch point for a wide variety of tours to community events, intentional connections to the County Park System amenities, and other cultural activities.



## Get Tech Savvy

Imagine a **Tech Center** with up-to-date devices in a learning environment that will allow you to stay ahead of rapid technological change. Imagine managing the social media messaging that will become a vital component of what will make each location unique and attractive.



## Embrace Hybrid Gathering Strategies

Imagine **Hybrid Solutions** that allow the flexibility to do things together in the same space and/or to participate virtually. Imagine environments that enable older adults and people of all ages to come together and find ways to learn, work, create and harness all the technological tools available in today's digital age.



## Let's Make Something

Imagine a well-planned **Creativity Center** with ample studio spaces and storage areas to support a full range of creative activities. Imagine spaces properly designed to facilitate woodworking, weaving, lapidary projects, art, stained glass, ceramics, sculpture, sewing, gardening, photography, video production, creative writing, and other endeavors. Imagine **Gift Shops and Galleries** where these creations can be proudly displayed and marketed.



## Kick Back and Have Some Fun

Imagine taking part in thoughtfully programmed **Recreational Activities** with friends both old and new. Imagine inviting spaces to play cards or board games, shoot pool, play shuffleboard or pickle ball, watch sports games on TV, participate in a variety of performances, enjoy some movies, concerts, dance, and sing or just relive great moments. Imagine a space to sponsor a cultural event or host a banquet. Imagine a place where you don't have to be serious and productive all the time.



## Create a 7AM to 10PM Culture

Imagine **Well-Coordinated Programming and Partnerships** created to maximize use through the day and evening to ensure the facility is cost-effective and used to capacity. Imagine the possibility of increasing the visibility of mature generational programming, of creating opportunities for intergenerational programming, and of building larger community support.



## Think Big and Think Small Simultaneously

Imagine renovations to the larger existing locations to keep them in alignment with the desired attributes. AND AT THE SAME TIME—**Imagine Smaller Centers Strategically Located** and scaled to align with the unique cultural nuances of Milwaukee County's diverse population.



## Senior Centers Without Walls

Imagine Senior Centers not bound to specific places and structures.

**Imagine a Multi-faceted Network** of experiences and opportunities in the community at large. Imagine unfettered chances for activism, volunteerism, mentorship, and giving back to society.



## Create an Appropriate Brand Name

If the goal is to create a place where Mature Milwaukeean (note the lack of the use of words like senior or elderly in the future) can gather to live fully engaged lives, then advocate for the development of a series of **MKE HUBS**.

A hub, per the Oxford Dictionary, is “the effective center of an activity, region or network”. Imagine a place where the full network of Milwaukee County Senior Services is readily accessible.



## Clinton & Bernice Rose Senior Center

*Together, creating healthy communities.*



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Select Committee on Senior Centers recommends that the Commission on Aging implement a strategy to ensure that older adults in Milwaukee County enjoy a healthy, engaged life through a wide range of attractive programming and facilities that are accessible, available, enjoyable, sustainable, and not necessarily tethered to a structure. This strategy will require the support and involvement of existing participants, vendors, and various levels of Milwaukee County leadership. With an investment of new resources and support from additional donors, partners, and service providers, this inspired vision can become a reality. MKE Hubs can reignite community and civic engagement with older adults throughout the County.

### Accessible

Perhaps most importantly, we must ensure that our vision for senior center programming is accessible to all communities in Milwaukee County - and that the facilities in which programming is offered are welcoming and easily navigable by all residents. This means we must consider the cultural and linguistic context in which senior centers operate, as well as full compliance with the guidance of the United States Access Board. Such considerations must also consider the grounds on which the centers are located, including the ability of all persons to easily get to and through their doors. Pedestrian, bike, vehicle, and transit access are critical to ensuring true accessibility to these facilities. Access will also require signage promoting and calling attention to the senior centers that can be viewed by the public at large from the outside, as well as signage that facilitates easy navigation within the buildings.

### Available

Today, many public buildings that serve as senior centers with their many assets remain closed outside of limited weekly hours. We must consider the expansion of building and programming availability, if we are to attract the next generation of participants. The distribution of senior center locations does not necessarily match the concentration of older adults in the county. Senior centers throughout the county are not well coordinated beyond the five county-owned centers, and some parts of the county are devoid of any senior center programming. Moreover, 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. Usage of the centers would also be promoted by ensuring residents feel safe when using the facilities and the grounds on which they are located, which will require upgraded security systems, lighting, and ergonomics.

### Enjoyable

Senior centers must be fun, active spaces, appealing to a wide range of interests in the appropriate cultural context. It is critically important that both existing and potential participants be consulted in the design of facilities and programming. 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 lifespans, and move us closer to racial and health equity. In order to achieve these benefits, they must attract a wide audience of participants and thus offer programming and opportunities for growth beyond the current continuum. They must be attractive, challenging, engaging, and enjoyable.

### Sustainable

Without new sources of funding, resources, and partnerships, our ambitious agenda will fall far short of its transformative potential. Fortunately, the work of this Committee and its public engagement has demonstrated a high level of interest and support for senior centers among both policymakers and the public at large. We already have 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. With this report the Commission can establish a context for public support using a “collective impact” model, describing the MKE HUBS project and identifying how different constituencies can play a role in advancing the model and benefiting from it.

### Untethered

Future Senior Centers need not be confined to the walls of a particular place or structure. Successful programming will support opportunities and experiences that will encourage seniors to get out and participate in a wide variety of activities, tours, trips, hikes, visits, and other forms of engagement. Furthermore, cutting-edge 21st Century Senior Centers will acknowledge new and future generations of older adults who are passionate about “giving back” to society at large and provide opportunities for them to do so. Many look forward to a new kind of self-fulfillment as activists for causes they care about, to meaningful intergenerational mentorship, to volunteer opportunities, and to participation in events that shape our world. To be an older adult in Milwaukee County does not necessarily mean you should be confined to programmed Senior Center activities at a particular locale. That’s just a reboot of the existing model. Instead, Senior Centers must endeavor to encourage older adults to expand their lives and engage in all that the world has to offer beyond the walls of the building itself.

## OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING THE MKE HUBS VISION

**OUTDATED FACILITIES**, EACH WITH A SIGNIFICANT BACK-LOG OF YET TO BE COMPLETED CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS, LIMIT THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPAND SERVICES, REVITALIZE PROGRAMMING AND RE-ENVISION FOODSERVICE CAPABILITIES.

IMAGINE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS TO CREATE 21ST CENTURY SENIOR CENTERS AT MCGOVERN PARK AND KELLY SENIOR CENTER

IMAGINE SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENTS AT THE CLINTON ROSE, WASHINGTON PARK AND WILSON PARK SENIOR CENTERS TO MAKE THEM ALIGN WITH THE 21ST CENTURY ATTRIBUTES

IMAGINE CATALYTIC NEW SENIOR CENTERS ON THE GROUND FLOOR OF MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENTS LOCATED IN UNDESERVED MILWAUKEE COUNTY REGIONS AND OLD ESTABLISHED NEIGHBORHOODS SERVING SPECIFIC ETHNIC COMMUNITIES



## OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING THE MKE HUBS VISION

**LACK OF SUSTAINABLE LONGTERM FUNDING** SOURCES SERIOUSLY LIMITS SERVICES, PROGRAMMING, STAFFING AND BUILDING STATE OF THE ART FACILITIES.

### RESOLVE SHORT AND LONG-TERM FUNDING THROUGH:

- Increased public funding
- Committed philanthropic partners
- Dedicated funding to upgrade existing Senior Centers
- Innovative solutions with public/private partnerships



## OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING THE MKE HUBS VISION

**LACK OF COMMUNITY PARTNERS EMBEDDED IN SENIOR CENTERS** TO OFFSET THE GAPS IN CRITICAL SERVICES AND PROGRAMMING NEEDED TO ACHIEVE THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF THE VISION.

IDENTIFY HEALTHCARE AND MENTAL PROVIDERS TO FUND AND OPERATE SPACES DEVOTED TO PROMOTING HEALTH EQUITY FOR OLDER ADULTS IN MILWAUKEE COUNTY



IDENTIFY FOODSERVICE PROVIDERS TO SUPPORT AND OPERATE DINING VENUES THAT ARE ATTRACTIVE AND FOSTER THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD NUTRITION AND LONG-TERM HEALTH



IDENTIFY EDUCATION FOCUSED PARTNERS INTERESTED IN CREATING AND SUPPORTING ENGAGING LIFE-LONG LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES ON SITE, VIRTUALLY AND IN THE COMMUNITY AT LARGE



## OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING THE MKE HUBS VISION

IS THERE A COMMUNITY-WIDE **COLLECTIVE WILL** TO RAISE THE PROFILE OF THE ALMOST 200,000 OLDER ADULTS WHO MAKE SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN MILWAUKEE COUNTY BY IMPLEMENTING THE MKE HUBS VISION?

### WHO WILL STEP FORWARD?

- ❑ Milwaukee County Government Leadership?
- ❑ Milwaukee County Supervisors?
- ❑ Local Community Service and Philanthropic Organizations?
- ❑ Public/Private Partnerships?
- ❑ Older Adults Themselves?





## CALL TO ACTION

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.



### 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.

Created to be effective centers of community engagement throughout the county.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The exciting story told within this MKE HUBS report was produced through the dedication, deliberation and diligence of the members of the Select Committee on Senior Centers who held more than forty meetings between March 2021 and March 2023.

All of the committee members were volunteers who contributed their time, talent, expertise, and lived experience to this project.

The Milwaukee County Area Agency on Aging wishes to thank each member for their unique contribution to this important process:

**Gloria Pitchford-Nicholas, Chair**

**Eugene Guszowski, Vice Chair**

**Ruth Bevenue**

**Leon Davis**

**Patricia Delmenhorst**

**Sharron Fitak**

**John Griffith**

**Jason Haas**

**Lorraine Jacobs**

**Victoria Jensen**

**Debra Jupka**

**Deborah Lewis**

**Sally Lindner**

**Kelsie Lyons**

**Dain Maddox**

**M. Kent Mayfield**

**Howard Snyder**

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**Cherie Swenson**

**Sequanna Taylor**

**Cathy Wood**

In addition to the official members of the Select Committee on Senior Centers many other community members and Milwaukee County staff contributed to this work. Although too numerous to name here, the information, ideas, and advocacy they brought to this project was invaluable in forging a new path forward for senior centers in Milwaukee County and we owe them all a debt of gratitude.



  
**MILWAUKEE  
COUNTY**