



## When long-term care becomes *wrong-term care*

We need a new civic and intergenerational approach to aging

by Sean Kershaw

In the movie *Moonstruck*, Olympia Dukakis' character Rose Castorini cautions her philandering husband Cosmo: "I just want you to know that, no matter what you do, you are going to die just like everyone else."

Sometimes the first step to solving a problem is admitting that there is a problem.

But Cosmo's reply is equally revealing. He says, simply, "Thank you, Rose."

Sometimes acknowledging the problem isn't enough.

We have created a system that citizens and consumers fear and don't *want*.

We have a problem with our system of long-term care and aging services in Minnesota, and, much like Cosmo, we don't seem to want to talk about it.

Our system of long-term care is perhaps second only to the nuclear power industry in terms of regulation. It's dominated by government and service-based nonprofits. Its workers are underpaid and culturally isolated from the people they serve. The system encourages families to abdicate their role in care and frustrates those who don't want to. It's economically unsustainable for the operators and for taxpayers. Its complexity confuses and frustrates the wonkiest among us.

And perhaps most telling, we have created a system that citizens and consumers fear and don't *want*. Frankly, it's a credit to the over-worked people in the system that it isn't in more of a crisis.

It is not enough to say that the current system needs dramatic changes. We have to redefine aging and reinvent the politics of how we address its challenges and opportunities. The good news is that our impending long-term care crisis offers Minnesotans an opportunity to develop new intergenerational and entrepreneurial

solutions. And the Citizens League's civic approach to policy making, and the insights we are learning through our Minnesota Anniversary Project (MAP 150), give us a unique vantage point from which to envision more sustainable solutions.

### Redefining the problem

The term "long-term care" is revealing. Long-term care is usually about long-term loss: the loss of authority, money, health, and connections to family and community. Our system is based on an expert and medical model of passive consumption and limited choices. And because none of us really want this, we avoid talking about it or planning for it.

We need to begin an intergenerational discussion to redefine the issue in radically new—civic—terms.

We should talk about how we all age, not just about "the elderly"; about harnessing wisdom and building individual capacity, not just providing more/better services and care. We should talk about health and wellness, not just chronic illness; about taking personal responsibility for our retirement and for the economic health of future generations, not just how we pay the bills for the current troubled system.

### Redefining solutions

The problems plaguing our long-term care system are becoming more acute as the "silver tsunami," the impending retirement of the baby boom generation, comes crashing toward our civic and political shores. It is time to admit that, just like public education, our long-term care system was not designed to address our current and future realities.

But it isn't enough to define the problem differently or simply to present a better ideal or model; we need the capacity to change. We need better political and policy solutions. Our current approach is on course to require younger generations to sacrifice to provide more services for baby boomers and older generations in this failing system. This won't—and shouldn't—work.

So what would a new civic political and policy strategy look like? I don't know the answer but I can begin to see how we can shape a better process to find better answers.

We need to ask stakeholders from all generations and all sectors both what they expect and want, and what they would be willing to contribute to create better solutions as families and individuals. We're learning through MAP 150 that citizen motivations matter, and that citizens are willing to make better decisions given the opportunity and the information to do so.

We also need all institutions to play a role: employers and community organizations as well as government and nonprofit service providers. We need systemic policies that expect wellness, encourage delayed gratification, recognize and reward family obligation, and facilitate connections to neighborhoods, families, and home-based care. We should start small—with what we are all able to do in the places we spend time—rather than by reinventing another huge hierarchical government program.

### Intergenerational connections

Later in *Moonstruck*, when Cosmo complains that his life is "built on nothing," Rose finally breaks through to him when she reminds him of his connections to her and his family that span their differences and their distances. Cosmo ultimately changes not because he knows he will die, but because he knows he is connected to the very alive people around him.

As we watch this silver tsunami begin to break on our shores, we can choose to stay isolated and locked in fear, unable to change or even acknowledge our problems. Or we can view this policy challenge as a new civic opportunity to build and express our connections to each other, and to current and future generations of Minnesotans. ●

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