

Dear Andrew:

Please include the following comments about the Aging, per your invitation to the public, which specifically address residents in Skilled Nursing Facilities in long term care - in the Final Report of the Task Force on Aging.

November 6, 2024

Madam Chair and Members of the Task Force on Aging:

My name is Sonja Schmieder; I am 78 years old, an elderly person by all accounts, residing in a Skilled Nursing Facility (SNF) in Minneapolis.

I suffer from a rare neurological (not inherited or contagious), painful condition known as Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS), which affects the nerves and muscles and whose symptoms include numbness and tingling in the arms and legs, thereby impeding movement and mobility. This rapid onset-slow to recover disorder is the reason why I have spent almost two years in a SNF.

This means that I am not only an old individual, but one who is infirm and disabled, as well. My experience- at one of many SNF's found throughout our state - has provided me with a bird's-eye view of resident life within this kind of "elderly housing," and of all who reside, therein, which I now readily share with you.

I commend the State of Minnesota and the members of the Task Force for taking on this monumental responsibility, e.g., establishing a cabinet-level department, coordinating efforts of groups working on issues affecting the Aging population, providing increased funding for such efforts. Your findings - recommendations and decisions- could have wide-ranging, significant effects and impact on the Aging population for decades to come.

A Consideration

It would behoove all of us - prior to making decisions about what must be done FOR our Aging population, to demonstrate a thorough understanding of WHO are "the aging" - including statistical information about this fast-growing group of individuals, of course, and also information that describes them accurately, does not negatively stereotype them, and provides a more precise, yet, comprehensive understanding of this target audience as people, and not just potential or current "occupiers of beds," or those with frustratingly diminishing faculties.

The following comments describe

The Aging in Skilled Nursing Facilities in Long Term Care - The old and the oldest - of the Aging population.

This is a plea to know and understand better, who we are.

Long Term Care Residents

You can be sure that even though we are both elderly and sick adults, we love our families and friends, most memories, a good idea, a good joke, and having a plan - one likely to sow a bit of mischief!

Contrary to popular belief (or gross exaggeration), most of us are not going to drop dead in the next five minutes, or even, for years, yet!

We are not nearly as active, as vigorous, enthusiastic, or “fresh” as we once were; we are, instead, knowledgeable, experienced, and seasoned.

We feel sad and bad that what you see is not who we are, nor who we were “back then,” when we could add value, when we thought we really mattered, when we looked good.

We mourn the loss of our independence. We long for some privacy.

We do not like that we are invisible, to most people. We hate being ignored, or worse, avoided.

We do not want to be excluded or isolated - from most things; we have a fear of missing out (FOMA).

We do not appreciate our awkwardness, our inelegance. We are self-conscious about any impairment. We think we must look funny, and that is not okay.

We do not handle well our failing eyesight, or of having to say, “Pardon me. What did you say?” repeatedly.

No matter the state of our being, we fight to survive, to remain alive! (So like a sick puppy, or leaves wilting on a tree),

We believe in God and trust in prayer.

At this final stage in our lives, we have ceased to care about accumulating “things” or to making it “big” in our respective careers, being liked by everyone, or being first or the best, at anything. (Except at Bingo!)

We care that our bodies are clean, our minds able to function, and our words readily available.

At times, we (still) long to go home, attend a regular church service, drive our own car, take part in community activities, meet someone for happy hour, attend a really important family event, or have an intellectual, even argumentative, discussion.

We believe there is value and worth in work; we miss terribly, our respective worlds of work.

We cherish our nurses - our comforters and cheerleaders.

We continue to make new friends.

We care that everyone practices good manners, and shows respect for each other. (We demanded that of our children).

We have a strong sense of fairness and justice: what’s right is right and in the end, it is right that always wins. (We told our children that).

We honor our civic duty; we respect the rule of law, pay our taxes, and vote.

We notice and care when things are not well-planned or nicely coordinated. But, we do not want to be in charge of anything!

Even now, we like to learn, and enjoy, even yet, a gifted teacher.

We care that someone reaches out to us. Or for us.

There are days, or just (powerful) moments when we feel we need to “go back” in time; we have trouble accepting that we cannot do so.

Ever-optimistic, we look to the future. As we always have.

We can talk about our older adults in terms that will change our initial and too often reported, perceptions of them as too sick to recover, feeble, slow, tired, retired, unsteady, dependent, wrinkled, lonely, grumpy, etc. - even though some of these words do apply to some - to more hopeful language that includes an emphasis instead on such words as knowledgeable, wise, insightful, sensible, experienced, courageous, determined, decisive, clever, and seasoned.

Can you imagine how an emphasis on the positivity of the aging adult could affect the self-image and esteem of this group of individuals, and their emotional and physical health, as well? Can you even guess how uplifting a message you would send to those who might be written off, discarded, or abandoned as hopeless, or just “marking time?”

You have the power to positively change the perception of the Aging in Minnesota - through your attitudes and the words you choose to define these individuals.

Thank you.

Sonja Schmieder