The View from Augusta:

Developments Growing Out of the Speaker's 2013 Round Table Discussions and 2014 Aging Summit

by Mark Eves and Jessica Maurer

Mark Eves and Jessica Maurer describe the significant progress made since 2013 in addressing aging-related issues through collaboration between legislative and community-based efforts. The Maine Aging Initiative, formed in 2014 and coordinated through the Maine Council on Aging and the House Speaker's office, plays a significant role in supporting these efforts.

Over the next few decades, the United States will experience a considerable growth in its older population. The aging of the baby boomers, who began turning 65 in 2011, is largely responsible for this dramatic increase in the population aged 65 and older (Ortman, Velkoff, and Hogan 2014).

With the oldest population in the nation, Maine is at the epicenter of this demographic shift. We have the highest concentration of baby boomers per capita. One in four Mainers will be over the age of 65 in the next two decades (Fralich et al. 2012). Adding to the challenge of an aging population, Maine has the nation's third lowest number of working-age adults (age 20–64) per 100 persons age 65 and above (Fralich et al. 2012). Maine also has a low rate of in-migration. Without a significant infusion of working-age adults, the state's employment needs are expected to continue to grow. This demographic shift has huge implications for our economy and our state.

The aging challenges we face are significant—and will have an impact on all of us. Whether you are among the aging population struggling to stay in your home, a family member balancing work with caring for an aging parent, or an employer with a retiring workforce, you are one of the Mainers who are directly affected by these demographics.

Though the policy, economic, and social implications are large, we cannot allow Maine to become paralyzed as we cope with the demographic shift in population and the impact that it will inevitably have on our people and local communities. Mainers must work together to address this change head on and proactively. Along with the clear challenges there is great opportunity as science, medicine, and technology allow Mainers to live longer, healthier lives and provide all of us with the opportunity to benefit from the wisdom and experience of our older neighbors. Older Mainers are an asset, not a problem, and keeping them healthy and active in our communities will enrich us all. If we act now, we can ensure that our seniors have an opportunity to age independently and with dignity. We can support employers as they prepare for a retiring workforce. We can prepare local communities for the changes that will inevitably occur as they adapt to meet the needs of older citizens. Success will require coordination of efforts at the legislative level to change statewide policy and at the community level to implement concrete and innovative solutions.

The good news is that since we focused our efforts in 2013 we have already had success in sparking significant interest in addressing this important policy imperative, which has led to passing needed legislation at the state level and the expansion of community efforts to support seniors and build more age-friendly communities.

In fall of 2013, the Maine Council on Aging and Speaker of the Maine House [and co-author of this article] Mark Eves convened the Speaker's Round Table on Aging and in January 2014 hosted the first Maine Summit on Aging. The response was overwhelming and underscores that Maine leaders understand we must rise up to face these challenges and embrace the opportunities. These two events brought together more than 500 leaders from business, higher education, health care, finance, philanthropy, and state and local government to map out a community-based approach to turning the challenges of Maine's aging population into an opportunity that will benefit all Mainers. Participants learned about our aging demographic, considered its implications, and shared ideas about innovative solutions and potential opportunities on both the local and state level.

During the discussions, it became clear that a broad cross-section of individuals—including Maine employers, health and education professionals, and municipal and state leaders—will need to work together to *develop and implement innovative ways to attract and retain workers, create housing and transportation options for older adults, and deliver supports and services to keep people healthy and thriving in their homes*. The Speaker's Round Table and the Aging Summit generated a series of community-based and legislative recommendations, which are compiled in the Blueprint for Action on Aging.

Following the Summit, the Maine Aging Initiative was formed. The Aging Initiative, coordinated through the Maine Council on Aging and the Speaker's office, supports the formation and implementation of community based initiatives and the work of the legislature's Caucus on Aging.

The Speaker's Round Table and the Aging Summit generated a series of community-based and legislative recommendations, which are compiled in the Blueprint for Action on Aging.

COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVES

From the beginning, we knew that local community work would be essential for the success of this initiative. As a result of the round table discussions and the summit, approximately 100 participants and other engaged people started working in one of five workgroups: higher education, workforce and employment, health and wellness, public and private safety, and aging-friendly communities. The groups meet monthly to develop and implement community-based solutions targeted to those critical areas. Along with key members of the Maine Council on Aging, workgroup leaders and participants include representatives from local credit unions and banks, the business community, the university and community college systems, and law enforcement. These groups are charged with driving the implementation of innovative strategies and solutions to build aging-friendly communities with a focus on new models of housing; to support older workers and family caregivers in the workforce; to protect older people from abuse and exploitation; to coordinate health and home-based care; and to support efforts to coordinate and expand aging-related research to build new technology to help older adults age safely at home. The broad range of expertise and experience within the workgroups provides opportunity to accurately assess each initiative from multiple perspectives, increasing the likelihood of success for each activity.

The workgroups have completed their first full year of work. Each workgroup has used this initial period to gather information about the work that is already happening statewide. It is critical to the overall success of the initiative (1) to ensure that community-level efforts are not being duplicated; (2) to identify best practices that can be replicated in other parts of Maine; and (3) to coordinate to the greatest extent possible the work of various groups throughout the state. As conveners of the workgroups, the Maine Council on Aging, in coordination with the Speaker's office, is currently compiling a report highlighting the work completed in the first year. This report was made available at the Second Summit on Aging held on September 15, 2015, in Augusta.

Here are just a few highlights of work completed by the workgroups over the last year:

- **The Aging-Friendly Communities Workgroup** developed two white papers for towns and local leaders. The first white paper focused on concrete recommendations for towns to improve opportunities to help seniors live independently including changing zoning to promote accessory or "in-law" apartments. The second paper offered local leaders detailed information about the return on investments for communities that formally assess and plan to meet the needs of older adults.

- **The Public and Private Safety Workgroup** successfully recruited 20 weekly papers throughout Maine to begin publishing a "tip of the week" to alert older residents to ongoing frauds and scams.
- **The Higher Education Workgroup** has compiled data about research related to aging being conducted in all institutions in Maine and has begun to coordinate these efforts statewide to enhance and expand this work (see Hecker and Gugliucci 2015).

Members of the workgroups have unanimously agreed that this effort must continue, and they are all committed to participating for another 12 months. Most of the workgroups have honed their focus, and we expect that they will spend the next year implementing more important and innovative changes on the local level.

Perhaps the best gauge of the success of the initiative is the substantial support it has engendered in local communities. Hundreds of people have taken action in their own cities and towns to address the needs of older adults. They have joined aging-friendly community initiatives and talked with their municipal officials about addressing the needs of seniors more directly. Several have initiated increased education and training in work environments on age-related issues. Many communities around Maine have held forums to talk about aging in their towns.

LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITY

Policy work is often most effectively and efficiently implemented at the state level. Through our work in the legislature, we quickly discovered that the issue of aging is not a partisan issue and that legislators from both rural and more populated parts of Maine are eager to help their older constituents to lead the best lives possible. Members of the legislature are all either directly affected by this challenge or have constituents who are. People from both sides of the aisle are interested in finding concrete solutions to support seniors and address the changing demographic we face as a state. As the session unfolded, we found that, even in a divided legislature where the Democrats control the House and the Republicans control the Senate, this issue gave us an opportunity to work together to make positive change.

In January 2015, immediately upon convening the first session of the 127th legislature, legislators from both parties formed the first-in-the-nation Legislative Caucus on Aging led by the Speaker and State Senator David Burns (R-Whiting). The caucus included more than 50 members from both parties, met frequently over the session, and tracked 28 specific aging-related bills as they moved through the legislature. The Caucus on Aging gave legislators from across the spectrum a forum to strategize and chart a course for improving the lives of Maine seniors and for jump-starting a Maine economy that will be called upon to meet the needs of our older neighbors. We heard from members who participated and invested their time in these meetings that they found the work of the caucus valuable and are now better equipped to go back to their home districts and make their local communities more age-friendly.

> Through our work in the legislature, we quickly discovered that aging is not a partisan issue....

In addition to the overall success of the caucus, there are some key areas of focus where the legislature was able to make some significant strides in its effort to support seniors. Through his KeepME Home Initiative, the Speaker spearheaded the legislative effort to help older Mainers to age in place. This initiative included legislation to direct state resources to help older Mainers to live independently in their homes and communities by investing in the development of affordable senior housing, increasing property tax relief for seniors, and boosting pay for direct care workers who provide care to seniors in their homes. Each of these efforts is detailed in this article.

The KeepME Home Initiative was part of a broader policy agenda in the legislature. In addition to successfully passing components of the KeepME Home Initiative, the legislature passed legislation to fund critical programs such as Alzheimer's respite care and Meals on Wheels, to protect seniors from financial exploitation, to support family caregivers, and to increase MaineCare reimbursement for assisted-living facilities and nursing homes.

We see this as just the beginning of an effort to address one of the most important policy imperatives for this state. There is still much work to be done, but we are pleased to report that this session the legislature rose to the challenge and passed bipartisan reforms that will begin to address some of the significant challenges facing the future of Maine.

Build More Affordable Housing for Seniors

There is a growing need for affordable housing for seniors. Maine's housing stock is among the oldest in the country and is poorly matched with the needs of seniors. It is often unaffordable, inaccessible, energy inefficient, and too remote from the services and resources older adults need to thrive in their communities. It is expensive to maintain and in some cases even unsafe. A recent report by the independent national research firm Abt Associates estimates that Maine has a shortage of nearly 9,000 affordable rental homes for low-income older Mainers and that this shortfall will grow to more to than 15,000 by 2022 unless we take immediate action to address the fundamental mismatch between our housing supply and housing needs of older Mainers (Henry et al. 2015).

Helping seniors to access personal support services is a wise investment for the state.

As part of his KeepME Home initiative, the Speaker proposed a major investment in Maine's infrastructure through an innovative senior housing bond. This $65 million general obligation bond would be used in combination with a mix of private and public resources to create 1,000 highly energy-efficient homes for Maine's seniors in locations that will enable them to successfully and affordably age in their home communities.

The Speaker worked in partnership with Senator Burns and a broad coalition of stakeholders including Associated General Contractors of Maine and the Maine Affordable Housing Coalition to educate the legislature and the public about the growing need for affordable senior housing. After extensive negotiation, the legislature approved a $15 million bond measure which was approved by voters in November, 2015. This important investment is expected to fund up to 225 housing units of energy-efficient affordable housing for seniors. Preference will be given to projects that are built in or near service centers or downtown areas where health care or other essential goods and services are located. At least four of these projects will be in counties with fewer than 100,000 people, ensuring that seniors in more rural areas will be among those who benefit from this effort. These projects will allow seniors to move out of old homes that they can no longer afford, are too big for their needs, and/or are falling down around them, while still being able to stay in their own communities. They will be able to continue to go to the same coffee shop, to see the same health care provider, and to stay connected to the people they know. We know that this is what older Mainers want and deserve.

While 225 units will meet the needs of only a small number of the Maine elders who need appropriate and affordable housing, it is a huge step forward. We made this significant progress because we listened to Maine people, understood and analyzed the problem, and took the time to educate legislative members and the public about the need for this critical investment. We are hopeful that the bond will be passed by the voters and that we will soon see additional suitable and affordable units available for seniors.

Strengthen the Direct Care Workforce

The Speaker also introduced legislation to boost hourly rates for the direct care workers who care for seniors in their homes as they age. The personal support services provided by these workers are critical to helping Maine seniors maintain independence.

Helping seniors to access personal support services is a wise investment for the state. Providing these services in people's homes helps prevent unnecessary emergency department visits, hospitalizations, and institutionalization in nursing facilities. MaineCare, the state's Medicaid program, spent an average of $558 per month for each client who received personal care services at home in 2010, compared with $4,150 per month for each nursing home resident during the same year (Fralich 2012).

Unfortunately, MaineCare reimbursement for direct care workers has remained stagnant for more than a decade at $15 per hour, with most direct care workers receiving only $9 to $10 per hour for the services that they provide (see Butler 2015 for a further discussion of this issue). Due to low wages and few advancement opportunities, home care agencies are struggling to recruit and maintain a qualified workforce that can meet the current demand. With demand for services growing by leaps and bounds, agencies currently have long wait lists. For example, in a *Portland Press Herald* article (May 18, 2015) highlighting the Speaker's legislation, the executive director of SeniorsPlus, a Lewiston-based agency that coordinates home care statewide, reported she was seeking workers to provide home care services for 471 clients on a wait list.

Through efforts by the Speaker, Representative Espling, other legislators, direct care agencies, and advocates, a small increase in reimbursement rates for direct care workers was funded in the biennial budget passed by the legislature this session. The state budget approved by the Appropriations Committee and supported overwhelmingly by over two-thirds of the legislature made an investment of $4 million over two years to increase the reimbursement for direct care workers for the first time in more than a decade.

As with the housing bond, we see this investment as a start. We need to do more to raise wages and benefits for direct care workers to ensure that agencies are able to recruit a strong workforce and do not lose potential workers to other low-wage industries like fast food restaurants or Walmart. These workers are the backbone of the home care industry and Maine cannot provide the quantity or quality of home-based care that our seniors deserve unless we can attract and maintain a workforce that is well trained and fairly compensated for the difficult job they are called to do. Unfortunately, we have already received clear indications that this increase was not enough. Shortly after the budget passed in the legislature, an agency in Westbrook that served seniors closed its doors, leaving its clients without services essential to maintain their independence and stay in their homes.

Along with increasing wages, we need to expand advancement opportunities for people who enter the health care field as direct care workers. Providing support services for seniors in their homes can be rewarding but grueling work. Many enter the industry because they want to care for and help seniors. However, many are either leaving the field or deterred from entering at all because of low wages and the lack of opportunity for career advancement. There is no structure in place to support direct care workers' use of their experiences and expertise to upgrade their skills to become registered nurses or nurse practitioners. If young adults leaving high school could see potential for advancement, it is much more likely that people would choose to enter the field, even if it meant that they were not making high wages to start.

We were pleased that we were able to provide a small bump in reimbursement rates for direct care agencies, but there is a lot more work to be done to avert a crisis. Agencies are on the edge and public policy needs to support and prioritize the recruitment and retention of direct care workers to ensure that we have the qualified workforce to support seniors to stay in their homes as they age. Unless we take further action to invest in the direct care workforce, there is no doubt the state of Maine will face a caregiving crisis that could jeopardize the quality of life for Maine seniors who need support with daily activities.

Along with increasing wages, we need to expand advancement opportunities for people who enter the health care field as direct care workers.

Property Tax Relief

The third component of the KeepME Home Initiative proposed improving the property tax fairness credit to better target property tax relief to low- and moderate-income seniors. Seniors on fixed incomes are often unable to afford the high cost of property taxes. All legislators report meeting with seniors in their districts who live on fixed incomes and hearing about their struggles to pay their property taxes.

In the new budget this past session, the legislature successfully implemented property tax relief for seniors by doubling the annual homestead exemption from $10,000 to $20,000 for all Maine householders. Unfortunately, the legislature was not successful in passing specific legislation to provide targeted relief for seniors through the Property Tax Fairness Credit.

As with other aspects of the KeepME Home Initiative, the work must continue. Future legislatures must seriously consider improving the Property Tax Fairness Program to make it more effective. We know that seniors want to age in their communities and these property tax fairness programs are critical to achieving that goal.

CONCLUSION

All of these efforts are crucial to the future of Maine. If we are successful in improving Mainers' ability to live longer and healthier lives, and more independently, we will achieve multigenerational success that will benefit all Mainers. Failure is not an option.

The connection between local community response and state public policy has been key to our success. The partnerships that have formed through the Maine Aging Initiative will ensure that this important work will continue. We have had some important early successes, but in many respects, we have just started to lay the groundwork for the future. Thanks to the great work of so many at the community level, in the legislature, and in our media, the public is much more aware of the challenges and the opportunities we face as the oldest state in the nation. We truly are leaders in this effort as we bring together unlikely partners to work on community-based solutions and we break through partisan politics to promote policies that will help seniors to live independently in their homes and their communities. This work will continue, and we look forward to the next stage of this important initiative.

REFERENCES

Butler, Sandra. 2015. "Home Care in Maine: The Worker's Experience." Maine Policy Review 24(2): 113–114.

Fralich, Julie, Stuart Bratesman, Louise Olsen, Cathy McGuire, Tina Gressani, Jasper Ziller, Karen Mauney, Cynthia Shaw, and Catherine Gunn. 2012. Older Adults and Adults with Disabilities: Population and Service Use Trends in Maine, 2012 Edition. University of Southern Maine, Muskie School of Public Service, Portland, ME.

Hecker, Jeffrey E. and Marilyn R. Gugliucci. 2015. "A Call to Action: Maine's Colleges and Universities Respond to an Aging Population." Maine Policy Review 24(2): 36–41.

Henry, Megan, Carissa Climaco, Rebecca Cohen, and Gabe Schwartz. 2015. A Profile of Maine's Older Population and Housing Stock. Prepared for Maine Affordable Housing Coalition. Abt Associates, Cambridge, MA.

Ortman, Jennifer, Victoria A. Velkoff, and Howard Hogan. 2014. The Aging Nation: The Older Population in the United States. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington DC.

Mark Eves of North Berwick is serving his second term as Speaker of the Maine House and his fourth term in the legislature. He has dedicated his time in the legislature and his professional career to improving the lives of children, seniors, veterans, and working families.

Jessica Maurer is executive director of the Maine Association of Area Agencies on Aging. She serves on the Maine Council on Aging; co-authored the 2012-2016 Maine State Plan on Aging; and is leading the Maine Aging Initiative and the Tri-State Learning Collaborative. A licensed Maine attorney, she worked for nearly 17 years in the Maine Office of the Attorney General.