



**AARP Testimony
House Human Services Finance and Policy Committee**

2/3/2022

Good morning Chairwoman Jennifer Schultz and members of the committee. My name is Mary Jo George, and I am the Associate State Director for Advocacy for AARP Minnesota. On behalf of AARP's 640,000 members and all older Minnesotans, we appreciate the opportunity to testify today on the challenges facing the long-term care workforce.

The gravity of the present challenge will require additional resources and investments to address the workforce shortage crisis to protect residents in nursing homes and other residential facilities, individuals who need assistance in their homes and communities and address the growing health needs of older Minnesotans. That is why it is so important that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis continue to be expansive.

Given the historic budget surplus, Minnesota lawmakers have the opportunity to make needed reforms to strengthen Long Term Services and Supports (LTSS) for older adults devastated by the coronavirus. AARP applauds Governor Walz's recent appropriation of \$50 million to nursing homes and his commitment to hiring 1,000 additional certified nursing assistants, however more critical investments are needed to address the workforce crisis.

To address the pressing workforce shortage crisis, Minnesota must strengthen the long-term care workforce by increasing both wages and expanding access to critical benefits including paid leave, access to health insurance, and retirement needs. It is also important to provide safe working conditions, and career structures that enable advancement for direct care staff. These hard-working dedicated workers put their lives on the line every day and put their own families at risk as they continue to care for the most vulnerable during this crisis.

Without paid sick leave, workers have no choice but to come to work ill putting at risk our most vulnerable Minnesotans for the continual spread of the coronavirus disease. With these dynamics, nursing homes often have chronic infection control deficiencies and persistent staff shortages. That is why it is also important to ensure that new public investments in nursing homes rates be tied to quality improvements and strong oversight to ensure funds are being used to support staffing, wages and benefits.

Covid-19 has been devastating to older adults and laid bare chronic problems in Minnesota's nursing homes. At the height of the pandemic, nursing homes and assisted living facilities represented close to 80% of Minnesota's COVID-19 deaths and sadly, deaths are on the rise again with the emergence of the omicron variant.

Now more than ever lawmakers must reduce reliance on nursing homes and expand access to home and community-based services that offer seniors more choice and saves taxpayers' money as in-home care costs one-third of nursing home care on average in Medicaid.

Today, seniors and people with disabilities who need long term care often wait up to 90 days to establish eligibility. As a result many individuals who prefer home-care, end up being transferred to a nursing home instead. Minnesota should follow the lead of several states that have implemented

policies that fast-track applicants likely eligible for Medicaid to start receiving services in their home when a need arises and avoid unnecessary admissions to nursing homes.

Finally, AARP urges lawmakers to do more to support family caregivers who are the backbone of our long-term care system. Too often, individuals and their loved ones cobble together a patchwork of ways to get the services they need. A paid family leave program, passed by this committee, along with respite care and additional in-home supports could help alleviate the financial, health, and emotional stress faced by family caregivers and help retain participation in the labor force, especially women who provide the bulk of eldercare.

In conclusion, AARP looks forward to working with lawmakers this session to help solve the workforce crisis, make nursing homes safer and help seniors stay in their own homes. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.