

Overview: 2015 Session

The 2014 elections set the tone for a different dynamic at the Capitol this year as divided government returned to Minnesota. Governor Mark Dayton (DFL) defeated all of his opponents to remain in control of the Administrative branch. The Minnesota Legislature, on the other hand, was controlled by two different political parties with the Republicans taking back control of the Minnesota House and the DFL remaining in control of the Senate as they were not up for re-election. The last time this dynamic happened was in 1986, and it proved to be contentious and at times controversial with tension filling the air until the very last minutes of the 2015 legislative session.

Taking care of the needs of Greater Minnesota, including senior care, was a key election issue for many legislative candidates during the 2014 elections. This led to heightened awareness of the challenges facing senior care, including state reimbursement for long term care and workforce challenges.

Recognizing a need to extend our issues to a broader legislative audience, LeadingAge Minnesota and its partner in the Long Term Care Imperative set out to cultivate new legislative champions and create a new Aging and Long Term Care Policy Committee in the newly-Republican controlled Minnesota House. Upon achieving these goals, we then marched toward securing broad bipartisan support for our Senior Care Reimbursement Reform and Workforce Development proposals.

The February Budget Forecast added to our momentum as Minnesota Management and Budget projected another \$832 million in net revenue for the state budget, bringing the total projected surplus to \$1.87 billion. After living through several long years of deficits, it was welcome news that our economy was strong enough to sustain such a healthy budget surplus.

LeadingAge Minnesota elevated the pressure on the need to use this surplus to take care of Minnesota seniors and their caregivers by sending weekly action alerts to members asking them to contact their lawmakers. Our message remained consistent: it is time to reform and transform a system that no longer meets the needs of aging citizens or their caregivers. As 60,000 new seniors turn 65 each year until at least 2030, 2015 was the year to create a system that preserves access to care, promotes quality and invests in our caregivers. This message was well received, and not a week went by where reform was not mentioned at the State Capitol and throughout the media.

With the help of our legislative champions, the surplus and -- most importantly -- our members, LeadingAge Minnesota was able to successfully advance full implementation of Senior Care Reimbursement Reform in 2015. This new system moved away from a year-on-year cost of living adjustment to a new cost based system where the true costs of care are recognized. We also passed funding for two important workforce initiatives: a new scholarship program for Home and Community-Based Services employees working with the senior population and an expansion of the Nursing Facility Scholarship fund to cover additional expenses such as child care and transportation as well as cover the costs of training for nursing assistants.

Overall, we consider this legislative session to be a success and will redefine how our members are able to ensure quality care for our aging population. While we were disappointed that Home and Community-Based Services did not receive a rate increase in 2015, our messaging and commitment to reform and quality opened the door for waiver reform in upcoming legislative sessions.

Agenda

LeadingAge Minnesota advocated at the Capitol for a robust Senior Care Package in the 2015 legislative session, which included Senior Care Reimbursement Reform, creating sustainable funding in Home and Community-Based Services and Senior Care Workforce Development. Our campaign focused on the need to reform a broken system while focusing on five major principles: preserving access for seniors wherever they call home, investing in our caregivers, rewarding quality, preserving dignity and quality of life, and covering the true cost of care. Our campaign moved away from previous years of “crisis speak” and shifted the conversation towards preparing Minnesota to meet the increased need and rising demand for services by its fast-growing aging population. This message shift was well received by both political parties and led to strong bipartisan support throughout session.

Legislative Advocacy

LeadingAge Minnesota was once more joined by our Contract Lobbyist Judy Cook and her team at Cook Girard. LeadingAge Minnesota continues to coordinate advocacy activities at the Capitol with our partners in the Long Term Care Imperative. The Long Term Care Imperative welcomed this year Todd Rapp and his team at Himle Rapp and Company, Inc. to assist with public relations and advocacy. Todd Rapp engaged Swim Creative to help launch our new Face Aging MN campaign, which is designed to raise awareness and grow the conversation around the challenges facing our aging population.

Before the legislative session even began, LeadingAge Minnesota worked diligently to secure our very own Aging and Long Term Care Policy Committee. This committee provided us with the opportunity to tell our story in a variety of different ways and helped develop new legislative champions for senior care. During session, our team worked together with committee chairs, committee members and staff, provided information at meetings, and testified in several different committees, including a few committees outside of our typical Health and Human Services jurisdiction.

Together, Face Aging MN, the Aging and Long Term Care Policy Committee and testifying in front of new committees on issues directly related to the challenges our members face allowed LeadingAge Minnesota to expand our advocacy efforts to new legislators and the broader public.

Grassroots Advocacy

It is safe to say that LeadingAge Minnesota would not have been successful at the Capitol without the help of our members. This year, LeadingAge Minnesota created more tools, distributed these tools in new ways and increased the number of advocacy messages – and our members responded in masses.

With the help and advice of the Public Policy Steering Committee, LeadingAge Minnesota created new tools for members to become engaged. This included sample emails to community leaders and board members urging their involvement, handouts to use with staff, residents and families, letters to the editor, and the very popular postcard campaign. These tools were circulated in a variety of different ways to attract more attention including: Advocacy Calendar, social media such as Facebook and Twitter, Advantage, Capitol News LIVE and through the traditional Action Alerts.

The 2015 legislative session resulted in the highest number of grassroots activities that we have seen in years. LeadingAge Minnesota members, staff, family members and residents sent more than 8,000 letters through our Engage website, nearly 9,000 postcards and more than 3,500 individual letters to lawmakers in St. Paul. These messages highlighted the need to reform the senior care reimbursement system, incentivize quality and investing in our caregivers.

Capitol News LIVE

We again hosted weekly live, interactive webinars throughout the legislative session through our Capitol News LIVE program. These broadcasts were open to all LeadingAge Minnesota members and designed to inform our members of our weekly advocacy activities, including meetings with legislators, developments in hearings and key decisions made by lawmakers. We also answered questions regarding legislative activities and provided an update on our grassroots efforts.

Regional Town Hall Forums

Traditionally, LeadingAge Minnesota would hold District Days at the Capitol allowing members to participate in a day of lobbying at the State Capitol. Due to construction at the State Capitol during the 2015 legislative session, meeting space was very limited and hosting a group of our size was just not feasible. Instead, to ensure our voice was still heard, we held seven Regional Town Hall Forums around the state. We invited area lawmakers to each of the forums to join our members for lunch and listen to their concerns. More than 300 individuals and 27 lawmakers attended our Regional Town Hall Forums, and we were able to secure media coverage and enhanced legislative attention for our Senior Care Reimbursement Reform, needed investments in Home and Community-Based Services and our Workforce Development proposals.

In the coming months, LeadingAge Minnesota will continue to focus on maintaining and increasing the understanding of our issues by key legislators, legislative leadership, the Administration and the general public, as well as preparing for Phase 2 of our Face Aging MN campaign to generate broader public support for how the State of Minnesota cares for its growing aging population.