



Challenging demographics

Minnesota responds to the graying of the baby boomers with initiatives to support seniors and improve education system

by Minnesota Lt. Gov. Yvonne Prettner Solon

The nearly 80 million Americans born during the postwar era already have left their mark on our country — from the March on Washington and Vietnam to Woodstock and the Space Race, they have created a legacy of social, cultural and economic change.

And while America's baby boomers are most closely associated with the social revolution of the 1960s, they are once again transforming society today.

Now in 2014, we are undergoing a dramatic demographic revolution that is silently changing the face of our country. The United States is getting older and significantly more diverse. Like other states across the Midwest and the country as a whole, Minnesota is experiencing these same changes.

The situation is reflected in the following statistics from the Minnesota State Demographic Center:

- By 2020, Minnesota will have more residents 65 years and older than it will have schoolchildren — a first in state history.
- By 2020, the number of Minnesotans with disabilities living in the community is expected to increase by 20 percent and to almost double among people ages 65 to 75.
- Since 1990, the percentage of foreign-born residents in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area has doubled.
- Currently, only 3 percent of adults 85 and older are people of color, while 30 percent of children under age 5 are people of color.
- Historically, Minnesota has added 30,000 new workers every year. By 2025, that number will decline to just 3,000.

The implications of these demographic changes are astounding, yet they remain largely undiscussed and unaddressed.

In Minnesota, we have begun to realize the profound implications of these changes. And as lieutenant governor, I have been working to prepare our state for a grayer and, paradoxically, more colorful future.

Happy, healthy and engaged

For decades, American culture has encouraged people to focus on staying young, while disregarding older people. With the retirement of baby boomers, this attitude is no longer practical — we simply cannot afford to ignore the largest, best-educated generation in history. And luckily, baby boomers are not interested in sitting on the sideline either.

In Minnesota, we have been working to tap into the “What's next?” spirit of baby boomers with our One Stop Shop for Seniors. Through this new initiative, older Minnesotans can quickly find volunteer and work opportunities in their communities across the state.

So far the service is having a major impact — since May 2012, Minnesota seniors have used the One Stop Shop to volunteer an estimated 20,176 hours across our state.

Projected % of population aged 65 and over in Midwest, 2015-2030				
State	2015	2020	2025	2030
Illinois	13.6%	15.0%	16.7%	18.0%
Indiana	13.9%	15.4%	17.0%	18.1%
Iowa	16.3%	18.4%	20.7%	22.4%
Kansas	14.7%	16.6%	18.7%	20.2%
Michigan	14.2%	16.0%	18.0%	19.5%
Minnesota	13.7%	15.4%	17.4%	18.9%
Nebraska	15.2%	17.1%	19.2%	20.6%
North Dakota	17.0%	19.8%	22.9%	25.1%
Ohio	15.2%	17.0%	19.0%	20.4%
South Dakota	16.1%	18.5%	21.2%	23.1%
Wisconsin	15.0%	17.1%	19.4%	21.3%
U.S. average	14.5%	16.3%	18.2%	19.7%

Source: U.S. Administration on Aging

Encouraging seniors to use their significant skills and talents does more than benefit our communities. When retirees stay engaged, active community members, they live longer, happier and healthier lives. That's great for our seniors, and — as a policymaker I can tell you — it also benefits our state budget.

Sound budgeting, compassionate care

With an aging population, identifying sustainable and compassionate approaches to health care is critical. Studies show that at least 70 percent of people over age 65 will require some long-term care services at some point in their lives.

Many people assume they can rely on Medicare or Medicaid to help pay for these services. However, since the passage of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, the federal government has sent a clear signal: Paying for long-term care is a personal responsibility.

These troubling trends are why, in 2011, Gov. Mark Dayton and I started the Own Your Future campaign, which asks Minnesotans to take stock of their financial options, assess the costs of long-term care, and make a plan to meet their own unique needs for their retirement years.

To raise awareness, we launched a public engagement campaign complete with letters and Internet marketing. We then arranged meetings with employers, Rotary clubs, church groups and other community organizations.

In addition to this public engagement campaign, we are working with Minnesota's departments of Human Services and Commerce and an advisory group of interested long-term-care insurers and providers. Together, we are identifying and developing high-quality, affordable financial tools for long-term care.

In addition, in an effort to fully solve Minnesota's demographic puzzle, we have been working to dramatically improve our state's education system. With our educated workforce shrinking, we simply cannot afford to leave anyone on the sideline.

Unfortunately, Minnesota's current education

system is bifurcated — serving white, middle- and upper-income students quite well, while leaving low-income families and children of color behind. As our state becomes older and increasingly diverse, the economic imperative for improvement has caught up with the moral one.

Post-secondary education more crucial

By 2020, research shows, 70 percent of all jobs will require post-secondary education — compared with 28 percent in 1973. And right now, we are not doing a good job of preparing all Minnesotans. A 2012 study from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development found that 87 percent of all job vacancies are open, at least partially, because people do not have the skills needed to fill them.

To improve graduation rates and other educational outcomes and to better prepare all young Minnesotans, Gov. Dayton and I partnered with our state Legislature to make significant investments in early and K-12 education in 2013. These comprehensive investments support every child from cradle to career and represent one of the largest influxes of new resources in decades.

We also understand that more resources alone without planning or reform will not solve our problems. That is why we worked to make smart investments in high-impact areas such as early education. Our budget provides 8,000 more children with access to high-quality, affordable early-learning programs and ensures that 46,000 Minnesota kids can attend free all-day, every-day kindergarten.

And we also have been improving our academic assessment tests. Right now, we are developing an innovative new exam, based on the ACT, which will better measure college and career preparedness. Not only will this serve as an academic assessment test, but Minnesota students will also be able to use their scores for admission to our public colleges and universities.

Fifty years ago, America's baby boomers looked for a new path. And today, we too must find a new way forward. I firmly believe that better supporting seniors and improving educational outcomes provide us a great chance to create a more equitable society, while ensuring long-term economic growth. ★

Minnesota Lt. Gov. Yvonne Prettner Solon was elected in 2010 after having served as a state senator from 2002-2010.

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