

To: Area Newspaper Editors

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President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the Older Americans Act into law 45 years ago this month. Because of this Act, older Iowans have more access to community-based services and are able to stay safely in their homes longer. The programs created by this Act pay for critical nutrition services, elder rights programs (including the long-term care ombudsman program), outreach, elder abuse prevention, and other supportive services.

It's no secret that Iowa's population is getting older. Nearly 15% of our population is over the age of 65. It is projected that by 2030 nearly one in every four Iowans will be over the age of 65. Now more than ever, Iowans need to address the unique needs of its aging population. That leadership comes from the Department on Aging, working with the strong network of providers and advocates that have dedicated their lives to improving home and community-based services to older Iowans.

It has been suggested the Department on Aging is too small and too under-resourced, and the state (and older Iowans) would be better served if the Department were merged into a larger agency like the Department of Human Services.

We certainly agree that more resources should be dedicated to preserving services to older Iowans and the focus of our funding should be on helping people age safely in their own homes and communities, avoiding more costly institutional services. By allowing individuals to age in place in their own home they continue to pay real estate taxes, purchase items locally, utilize their funds to employ individuals providing services in their homes, keep their funds in local financial institutions, and continue to support their local communities. A good investment in Iowa's economy!

We are not opposed to discussions around reorganization of state government; on the contrary, we think it is necessary as our service providers are already spread too thin. Now is the time to build on the successful network of service delivery already in place, strengthen the Department on Aging and its programming, and start to examine an enhanced role for the Department, one that advocates for all Iowans with long-term care needs, including those with disabilities. In fact, the National Association of State Units on Aging (the membership organization for the Iowa Department on Aging) just changed its name to the National Association of State Units on Aging and Disability.

Many states have looked at the needs of individuals with long-term care needs, and found they could create more efficient delivery systems by creating an integrated Department that addresses the needs of all persons with long-term care needs. If Iowa really wants to look at creating more efficient services, it should look at expanding the role of the Department on Aging to advocate and serve Iowans with long-term care needs.