

CalHealthReport

Who Will Be Our Aging Champion?

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By Suzanne Reed

“Is California prepared to meet the needs of the aging baby boomer generation?” That was the question posed three years ago by the California State Senate Select Committee on Aging and Long-Term Care chaired by Senator Carol Liu (D-La Canada), where I served as Chief of Staff.

After a year of research, briefings by experts, and public hearings, the Select Committee replied with a resounding, “No, it is not.” The committee’s report, **A Shattered System: Reforming Long-Term Care in California** concluded that the current hodgepodge of a system fails to organize around consumer needs and is almost impossible to navigate. It identified 112 aging-related programs distributed over 20 different agencies, departments and offices, with little or no communication or coordination among them.

A Shattered System concluded with over 30 recommendations for creating a new aging and long-term care system supported by thorough data and infused with leadership and accountability. These recommendations were transformed into legislation that produced 35 bills authored by 17 different state senators and assembly members – a legislative first for a Select Committee. Equally impressive was the breadth and extensive detail found in A Shattered System, a rarity for reports of this kind. The report included inquiries with academics, practitioners, advocates and the public.

Ignored by Most Media

Nonetheless, the level of attention the media gave the report and its recommendations was a complete disappointment. In spite of appropriate notice and outreach to the media, the presence of several legislators from both houses and support from a range of statewide advocacy organizations, labor, and service providers not a single reporter attended the press conference releasing the report and announcing the legislative package.

The Select Committee set about moving its bill package through the legislative process using a carefully constructed internal and external communications strategy. Jurisdiction over aging and long-term care issues spans several standing committees in the Senate and the Assembly (Health, Human Services, and Insurance) as well as the Assembly Aging and Long-Term Care Committee. (There is no standing Aging and Long-Term Care Committee in the Senate).

Periodically, the Select Committee met together with staff members from the bills’ authors, as well as consultants from the relevant committees, hoping that early discussions could facilitate passage of the bills. The Select Committee emphasized that each bill was important in its own right and was also a key component of a more comprehensive aging and long-term care system.

Our strategy focused on heightening support from advocacy organizations, finding witnesses to testify for the bills, securing letters of support, and continuing lobbying efforts. At the same time, the bills' authors and several committee consultants pushed the agenda in speeches and public appearances.

A continued attempt was made to interest the media in the impending crisis by trying to place local stories about folks who were struggling inside a broken system of services and supports. Still nothing seemed to gain traction.

Rally Gains Attention, Not Money

In May 2016, a senior rally at the State Capitol called for restoring the budget cuts made to aging services as California clawed its way back from a deep recession-era debt. Organized by advocates and members from the Senate's Select Committee and the Assembly Committee on Aging and Long-Term Care, the rally cry was "Seniors Count!" Based on the number of attendees from around the state and the number of legislators who addressed the crowd, the event was an enormous success.

However, the effort failed to direct more state funding toward aging and long-term care services. Both good and bad news followed.

By the end of the 2015-2016 legislative session one third of the legislative package was enacted. A major disappointment, however, was Gov. Jerry Brown's refusal to sign Senator Liu's bill requiring collaboration among those 112 disparate state agencies, departments and offices to produce a comprehensive State Aging and Long-Term Care Plan.

What Does The Future Hold?

As we move forward in 2017, the future of the aging and long-term care agenda is unclear.

Who will be our champion?

No new legislators have as yet emerged to replace the termed-out Senator Liu and reactivate the Senate Select Committee on Aging and Long-Term Care. At the same time, it's unclear what agenda Ash Kalra (D-San Jose), will pursue as the new chair of the Assembly Committee on Aging and Long-Term Care. He assumes the reins from Assembly Member Cheryl Brown, a staunch caregiver advocate who was defeated in her reelection bid.

Ironically, it's possible that a federal assault by the Trump administration on our already meager aging services and supports may become the needed rallying cry to reenergize collaboration among advocacy organizations and inspire a champion to step forward. Time will tell.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Although not in attendance at the launch, the California Health Report covered the Shattered System report's release after speaking with several experts for its story [Reports or Rebellion: Aging at a Crossroads](#) and followed up a year later with [Waiting For Super Aging Man](#).