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PENNSYLVANIA PREVIEWS MASTER AGING PLAN



By Anthony Hennen,
The Center Square

State officials previewed a 10-year master aging plan to lawmakers this week as Pennsylvania nears a looming demographics cliff.

Estimates suggest that 25 percent of residents will be over the age of 64 by 2030, making Pennsylvania one of the oldest states in the country. Declining birth rates, college unaffordability, and sluggish economic development – all reinforced by pandemic interruptions – strengthen the trend.

“We’re the fifth in the nation for population aged 60 and over,” said Kevin Hancock, special advisor to the secretary of aging and director of the Department of Aging’s Long-Term Care Council, during a public hearing this week. “We have 11 percent of Pennsylvanians who either express a mobility or cognitive disability.”



That’s why, Hancock says, Pennsylvania must move quickly on its own master plan. Programs exist in five other states and 11 others are creating their own.

“We often don’t do things first, but when we do them, we do them fast,” Hancock said.

The master plan, he said, will have five core tenets: transparency; embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion; addressing principles of person-centered planning; creating a living document; and reframing the conversation about older adults and individuals with disabilities.

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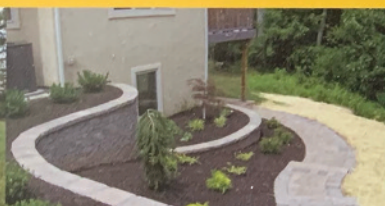
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The Department of Aging will schedule in-person listening sessions over the summer, aiming to hold at least one in every county or ensure that every county will be represented by its region. The department will finalize the plan by February 2024.

However, Hancock said the department doesn't want to establish specific goals, objectives, or initiatives until the listening sessions happen.

"The theme is no closed door in this process and we want to make sure that everybody is heard," he said. "We want to fix some perceived wrongs we see in the state and we think that this is a great opportunity to do it."

Attracting a robust workforce to fill the need for health care and other jobs related to aging services ranks highest on the list of hurdles the state must overcome.

"My question and, by far, largest concern, revolves around workforce," said Rep. Mike Jones, R-York. "My concern is that we might be underestimating the scale of this problem 3-5-10 years down the road."

For health care and long-term care, low wages aren't the only issue at hand in attracting young workers.

"I think it's some of the most important

and righteous work anybody can do, but it's also in some ways some of the least desirable," Jones said. "Money can solve part of that problem, but I'm not sure that throwing money at reimbursements and salaries is gonna solve it."

"Long-term care work is a vocation," Hancock said. "How we frame the work as a vocation and make individuals who might be looking at other types of work recognize how incredibly important, valuable, and contributory this is will be an opportunity and a challenge."

Above all, Hancock said, the master plan will value the importance of the elderly and disabled residents of Pennsylvania. He emphasized ensuring that they "have a positive life experience that includes a high quality of life and is given an opportunity to experience the joy of life that we all should be experiencing if we're lucky enough to age into being older adults."

"We want older adults and individuals with disabilities to be celebrated for what they can offer our communities and our state," he said.

Anthony Hennen is a reporter for The Center Square. Previously, he worked for Philadelphia Weekly and the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal. He is managing editor of Expatalachians, a journalism project focused on the Appalachian region.



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