

# Senior 'lawmakers' grill candidates for governor

## Branstad, Hatch talk at session of Older Iowans Legislature

By Jason Noble

jnoble2@dmreg.com

Activists for Iowa's elderly got a chance to hear directly from their candidates for governor Tuesday.

Republican incumbent Terry Branstad and Democratic challenger Jack Hatch each addressed a morning session of the Older Iowans Legislature at the Capitol, a group that advocates for funding, services and care for the elderly.

Representatives of the group from across the state are holding mock legislative sessions this week to discuss the measures they will lobby for next year.

Branstad, the incumbent Republican seeking his sixth term in office, didn't tailor his remarks to the crowd, but faced several tough questions on his approach to elder policy.

Two questioners wanted to know why he vetoed portions of legislation increasing funding and staffing for services to the elderly.

In 2013, Branstad nixed plans from the Legislature to increase the number of state long-term-care ombudsmen from eight to 10 and vetoed \$8.7 million aimed at reducing waiting lists for in-home and community-based care for the elderly.

Branstad said the vetoes were necessary to keep the budget balanced and avoid cuts later should state revenues decline. He pointed to Gov. Chet Culver's 10 percent across-the-board cut in 2009 as a consequence of overspending.

"I'm not going to just give a blank check to everybody that says they have a waiting list," Branstad said.

Responding to a question about raising pay and professionalizing Iowa's in-home and nursing home care workers, the governor cited the property tax reform he signed into law in 2013 and declining employment taxes levied on businesses.

Under the reform, care facilities will be assessed at residential rather than commercial property tax rates, lowering tax bills by millions of dollars statewide, Branstad said.

"It would be my hope and desire that those homes would use the savings from the property tax reduction, from the reduction in the employment tax, to increase salaries and benefits for the direct-care workers who are employed in those facilities," he said.

In contrast to Branstad, Hatch, a state senator from Des Moines, devoted most of his speech to his work on senior and health care issues.

He spoke directly to the group's concerns about pay and training for home-care workers, telling the crowd he supports a proposed caregivers tax credit as well as licensing and certification for the workers.

If elected, Hatch said, he would double the state's staff of long-term-care ombudsmen, drawing a sharp contrast with Branstad. He also emphasized his support for in-home care and the major push among elder-care advocates to allow seniors to remain in their homes for as long as possible.

"The longer you stay in your home and the longer and better care we can provide you in your home, you will be healthier, you will be happier and you will live longer," Hatch said. "We will continue to make that one of our highest priorities."

He faulted the governor for moving too slowly to encourage enrollment among Iowans in Medicaid health coverage and for being too stingy at a time when state finances are strong. Hatch noted the state's large surplus and healthy bond rating as evidence that Iowa can afford to help seniors.

"The thing that will guide me as governor is not how much money it costs or doesn't cost, because we can find the money to help you," he said. "It's whether or not we can save someone's life, whether or not we can provide their lives with dignity."