

To fix caregiver shortages, we need officials to start leading

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(Photo: Daniel Mirer, Getty Images/Stockphoto)

"Today, America and Iowa exist in a challenging world. But we must seize the opportunity to make it a better place."

That statement was made by Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad to state legislators in his recent Condition of the State address.

I applaud the governor. And I encourage him, the lieutenant governor and legislators to apply the words to the immense challenges Iowa faces in ensuring an adequate supply of qualified paid caregivers needed to meet the exploding demand for services.

Previously, I've written about:

- The growing numbers of aging Iowans and people with disabilities and their reliance on paid caregivers (direct care workers such as home care and home health aides, certified nurse aides and personal support attendants).
- The difficulty in recruiting Iowans to, and keeping them in, this workforce due to inadequate wages, benefits and training.
- The delay, denial and poor quality of service that occurs due to the thousands of direct care job vacancies existing in nursing homes, assisted living centers, home care agencies, etc., and
- The solutions to this workforce crisis that, if addressed, would greatly improve the quality of life for hundreds of thousands of consumers and their families.

And I've posed the question asked of me by readers: "If the problems are known, and if the solutions are known, why aren't we addressing them?"

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Two fundamental obstacles stand in the way:

- Aging and caregiving issues have not been a public policy priority in Iowa, and
- There hasn't been bold leadership that drives action.

The lack of priority

Do elected leaders care about aging and caregiving issues? Yes.

The reality, however, is that these issues are in constant competition with hundreds of others for attention and funding, and routinely get drowned out by what one legislator called "sexier" issues; those that have large numbers of activists who always show up and speak out, hold rallies and command the headlines.

Those lobbying for aging and caregiving issues are exceptional people, but they are often outmanned and outgunned by lobbyists who work to maintain the status quo, and who have political action war chests that funnel big dollars to legislative campaigns.

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A lack of bold leadership

I learned a valuable lesson about political leadership years ago during a trip to Washington, D.C. During a meeting with a powerful legislator's chief of staff about the need for greater priority on the issues of aging and caregiving, he interrupted me and said: "John, we agree with you. We know how important these issues are. We know action is needed."

"Well, if that's the case, why aren't you doing anything," I asked.

The staffer said, "Because we're not hearing anything about this from people back home."

The lesson? Those we elect are often following rather than leading. They prioritize things that people back home are asking them to act on.

That's not a criticism, it's reality. We elect people to do what we ask them to do. The number and volume of voices typically dictates what gets done.

But there are some leaders who also get out in front and pull people along.

Think of President John F. Kennedy and going to the moon.

OPPORTUNITIES. THE CAREGIVER SHORTAGE IS JUST ONE OF THEM.

That's what we need to address the critical problems in the direct care workforce; someone at a high level who says: "We've talked about these issues for too long. Now it's time to take action."

Will it happen? Will someone step up to lead?

Could an unconventional President Donald Trump be that leader? After all, the aging and caregiving problems in Iowa also exist in 49 other states.

Could it be our next governor, Kim Reynolds, or other potential Republican or Democratic candidates for that office?

Who will do what Branstad asked — seize the issues as opportunities to make Iowa and America a better place?



(Photo: Special to the Register)

Whoever leads will earn the respect, and support, of hundreds of thousands of Iowans and millions of Americans who need their help.

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