

DOING BETTER
AT DOING GOOD

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Newer ideas for elderly growth

North Carolina's elderly population growing

Most seniors do best in their own homes

New approaches tried

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Correspondents

Nowhere in the nation is the elderly population growing more than in the Carolinas. According to census numbers, people over the age of 65 grew 28 percent between 2000 and 2010 - almost three times more than the national average.

There are many contributing factors to this growth, including North Carolina's climate, stimulating intellectual environment, and beautiful retirement options. But as our region's elderly population grows, how can we help them flourish in their twilight years?

"Aging in Place in the Carolinas," a report by UNC-Chapel Hill professors Jim Johnson and Allan Parnell for the Duke Endowment makes a compelling argument: seniors do best when they live in their homes as long as possible. Indeed, an AARP study shows that 90 percent of people 65 or older want to age in place.

This wish doesn't come without challenges. Census data shows our elderly population is not only growing but also living longer. Additionally, women are outliving men. By the time people reach the age of 75, almost 60 percent of them are women. By the time they get to 85, 70 percent are women - resulting in many households of single women.

And living alone can be hard. Close to 40 percent of the elderly suffer from one or more aging-related problems, including ambulatory difficulties, hearing loss, and declining mental cognition. Further, most will be increasingly dependent on the state for care. According to the Employee Benefits Research Institute, 64 percent of retired Americans have less than \$50,000 in their retirement accounts. In North Carolina, there are 30 "non-contributing" seniors for every 100 tax-paying workers, making it difficult for local jurisdictions to sustain their fiscal health and economic viability. Currently, the highest concentration of our state's elderly lives in Wake, Guilford, Forsyth and Mecklenburg counties.

VILLAGE NETWORK

But as challenging as it may be to care for the elderly in their homes, it is even more expensive to provide institutionalized care for our elderly. While publicly funded systems and services exist for those with low incomes, the middle class does not qualify - and struggles to afford expensive nursing homes.

Increasingly, innovative strategies to address the needs of our aging community are emerging.

When asked what they need to successfully age in place, surveyed seniors in North Carolina emphasized exercise facilities, safe places to walk, and assistance with daily living, including health care management, as well as someone "to come have a cup of tea and listen." When this kind of support is provided, data shows that it leads to increased cognitive and mental health and longer, happier lives.

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ELDERLY

One strategy to provide this kind of support is a “village to village network” that coordinates access to affordable services through a membership driven volunteer model. Carolina Villages in Chapel Hill, for instance, is a membership organization that organizes a group of volunteers to help aging members of the community with transportation, grocery delivery, home maintenance, check-in calls, “practical, emotional, and spiritual support,” and discounts with vetted service providers.

NEW MODELS

Another innovative aging in place strategy is called the “Purpose-Driven Model.” Hope Meadows in

Illinois, for example, pairs families raising foster children with older residents who volunteer at least six hours a week with babysitting, tutoring, and gardening - in exchange for subsidized housing and supportive care. It would not be surprising to find these kinds of models popping up across our state.

To help more cities understand how to design communities and services to support aging in place, The MetLife Foundation is now working with Partners for Livable Communities to launch a City Leaders Institute on Aging in Place. Asheville has been selected as one of the first 10 cities to participate in the Institute as it

determines a comprehensive plan for supporting the growing senior population.

At the same time, providers like Nurse Care of North Carolina are providing flexible health care solutions as are telemedicine companies like RelyMD - which connect doctors directly to patients through face-to-face consultation using smart phones (perfectly tailored to an increasingly tech-savvy elderly population).

As our state’s elderly population booms, we need to foster more initiatives that enable aging in place and create inter-generational, deeply connected communities where we all can flourish.

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