

## **THE ISSUE: Defining the Problem**

[Aging In Place: New Steps to an aging issue](#)

[Defining the Problem](#)

[Housing](#)

[Transportation](#)

[Quality of Life](#)

## **AGING IN PLACE: NEW STEPS TO AN AGING ISSUE**

While aging is a natural progression in life, the United States has not braced itself for one of the fastest-growing populations in the world. In ten years, nearly 10,000 people will turn 65 each day. As millions of baby-boomers begin to retire, the nation will witness a dramatic shift in economic and social forces. A recent report to Congress by the Commission on Affordable Housing and Health Facility Needs for Seniors in the 21st century has deemed the growing requests of the increasing number of elderly Americans to be a 'quiet crisis.' While the topic of aging has been a main agenda within the professional aging lobbies, healthcare and the elderly population, it has caught the attention of only a few outside organizations. Partners For Livable Communities, a non-profit, Washington DC-based organization views retrofitting housing, transportation, and quality of life crucial to the needs of burgeoning seniors. By the year 2030, 1 in 5, or 80 million Americans will be termed elderly. The U.S. will be confronted with unprecedented demands on its already-strained social services, appropriate housing issues and transportation problems. While each community cannot be placed in a one-size-fits-all aging model, it is imperative for community and regional cooperation to take the initiative on this rising dilemma.

## **DEFINING THE PROBLEM**

People are living longer in the United States. Advances in medicine and health care, more in depth knowledge of healthy lifestyles and an increase in environmental standards have shaped longevity in humans. The consequences of a prolonged life are multi-faceted. The issue of health care services for elderly is selling a lot of attention. But as the senior population rises, challenges in housing, transportation and quality of life are also dramatically increasing.

Without a doubt, the senior aging process is filled with many difficulties. Many barriers prevent older persons from remaining a part of their community, and not enough emphasis is placed on developing a realistic, workable strategy to overcome these issues. The process of aging crosses racial, jurisdictional, and socio-economic boundaries to reach millions of people across the nation. The subject of aging eventually affects everyone, becoming a sizeable quality of life issue.

## **HOUSING**

There are many reasons for encouraging older persons to remain in their own homes. The strongest argument being older adults overwhelmingly report that they

want to grow old in their homes and communities. Another rationale is that providing the necessary home and community supports and services that enable older adults to age in place have shown to be the most cost-effective model for aging. Nursing homes are not only an expensive way of delivering services, but tend to propel people into a system that may not require such intense care.

Although 89 percent of baby-boomers claim they want to grow old in their own homes, many American communities cannot support appropriate housing needs for seniors living in their own homes. Ideally, seniors should be able to find housing that best suits their particular situation. But too often, many seniors go straight from their house to a nursing home or assisted living care facility with few options in-between.

In 2001, there were 21.8 million households headed by persons 65 years or older. Of these, 80 percent were owners. Elderly property owners face increasing maintenance over the need to make modifications to their homes while their own health and ability to cope with these issues is deteriorating. Retrofitting homes for safety, to accommodate changing health needs, providing medical and fitness programs and other kinds of support systems are practical and effective measures for aging in place. Certain home modifications are necessary based on individual health and mobility, no matter where the home is located.

While many turn to increasing assisted living facilities to solve the problem, they fail to see a structure of livability that will benefit all groups and strengthen communities on a broad level. This strategy would allow the elderly to live at home longer, significantly increasing the diversity and vitality of a neighborhood and allow elderly persons to have more independence.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

Communities must take into consideration transportation programs that support a variety of people's needs. While many urban and metropolitan areas have several public transportation options, the majority of public systems are not yet fully integrated or have significant gaps in service and access. Although many seniors still have a license, there will be a time when they are unable to drive themselves and must change their lifestyle to accommodate new developments.

According to an AARP Public Policy Institute Fact Sheet "Transportation: The Older Person's Interest," the elderly use private vehicles more than any other mode of transportation, traveling as a passenger or a driver. Even in urban areas where public transit is more accessible and less expensive, private vehicles are still preferred by the majority of older people. Due to convenience, comfort and accessibility, it is important for able seniors to drive. Yet by continuing to focus on driving, we are deliberately creating places with the built-in necessity for driving, and thereby eliminating options.

### **When driving is not an option**

Driving is not an option for nearly 7 million older Americans aged 65 and older. Of these 7 million, individuals are more likely to walk than take public transportation. Using this information, communities must advocate walking and make mass transit more appealing to this demographic. Issues of fear for personal safety, inconvenience and difficulties in negotiating the system are factors that deter the elderly from using public transportation. Design issues can pertain to the specific needs of the elderly, but take the entire community into account as well. More benches at bus stops, additional street lighting, increased signage and wider sidewalks can be designed for seniors but ultimately benefit all community members, even visitors.

## **QUALITY OF LIFE**

With increasing discretionary income and time on their hands, elders can contribute more than a friendly presence in the community. Retired elders have invested significant time and money into communities making them large economic generators. Elders have given hours through volunteer activities such as mentoring school children, providing childcare, and aiding various public programs. Forty-five percent of people over 65 volunteer annually, donating 1.8 billion hours of their time and expertise worth \$22.7 billion. By controlling the majority of wealth in this country, seniors have supported local arts and cultural programs through philanthropic donations, boosted economic development in communities and regions and donated billions of hours to community service.

Yet senior citizens can only contribute to economic development if a broad-based community is understood. If seniors cannot use public transportation or walk to the city center to eat lunch and buy a book, or experience a play or lecture, they cannot make as strong an impact. Leaders must see their community through a holistic eye. If mixed housing is not an option, transportation is limited and seniors are stuck in a nursing home, there is a direct effect on the economic impact the elderly will make.