

We're not getting any younger

As Baby Boomers age en masse, hard-pressed communities are ill-prepared to meet the need for traditional senior services - and not-so-traditional ones too

By Emily Sweeney, Globe Staff | January 17, 2010

The graying of the Baby Boom generation will bring with it more demand for senior housing, more elderly drivers on the road, more people needing rides, and a wave of older adults looking for part-time work and educational opportunities.

The changes will surely be felt in this region, as the suburbs south of Boston are expected to see a dramatic increase in the number of seniors residing there during the next two decades. According to population projections by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, nine towns in the region - Dedham, Hanson, Hingham, Holbrook, Mansfield, Pembroke, Plympton, Sharon, and Whitman - could end up with more than twice as many residents age 65 and older than they had 10 years ago. (See chart on page 4.)

And people are living longer. Barbara P. Coghlan, director of the Walpole Council on Aging, pointed out that her town has four residents who are at least 100 years old and are still living independently.

"We see the bubble that's coming along," she said.

Elder service providers realize their client base is growing significantly, and they're doing what they can - with limited resources - to prepare for the so-called "age wave." But many are struggling to maintain the services they have with dwindling budgets.

Much more needs to be done, according to Marc Draisen, executive director of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council.

As a larger portion of the population grows older, the effect is going to be felt in many different areas - health care policy, education, finance, transportation, and emergency preparedness, said Draisen.

"Overall, I think Massachusetts is not doing nearly enough to prepare for this major shift in the state's demography," Draisen said in an e-mail.

For older folks in the suburbs, transportation is a key issue that needs to be addressed.

"The growing population of senior citizens will need ways to get around," Draisen said. "It is ironic that we are now debating whether to limit elderly access to driving licenses, but not paying attention to alternative means of transport for this population."

Ask elder services providers, and chances are they have a lengthy to-do list, with many services they would like to add or improve. But ever-tightening budgets have left some scrambling just to maintain what they have. In Abington, for example, the budget for the town's Council on Aging, or COA, was cut to zero in October. A local volunteer group has been donating funds to pay staff salaries and heat and electricity bills at the senior center.

In Walpole, a group of volunteers is raising money for a new senior center. The Walpole COA also sees a greater need for transportation, especially for older residents who need rides to medical appointments in Boston, according to director Coghlan. Walpole has three vehicles for seniors - a 19-passenger van, a 16-passenger van, and a Windstar minivan - but it has no budget to expand its fleet.

"The demand for medical transportation - that's our toughest challenge," said Coghlan. The Walpole COA also refers seniors to The Ride, a program operated by the MBTA for passengers with a physical, cognitive, or mental disability. But that doesn't always work out.

"You have to qualify for The Ride," Coghlan said. "But what if they're 83 years old and they don't have physical limitations? They don't qualify for The Ride."

Coghlan said she also sees increasing demand for information on Medicare and health care issues. At the same time,

seniors are also living more active lifestyles, and working longer. They don't view themselves as seniors. Coghlan recently heard someone at the Walpole COA quip, "My age is a number, and I don't give it out."

"Tomorrow's seniors are not your father's grandfathers," said Timothy G. Reardon, senior regional planner for the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, which analyzed demographic trends including births, deaths, and migration and other factors to forecast the changes in populations. "COAs and other organizations that work with seniors must rethink the types of services they provide. It's not going to be all meals on wheels and Sunday suppers at the COA hall."

And that's exactly what COA directors around the region are doing: adjusting their programming to suit residents' changing needs and desires, and introducing programs that appeal to a wider age group - which includes tomorrow's seniors.

In Duxbury, the Duxbury Senior Community Center introduced a Lifelong Learning Program in 2006, offering seniors a chance to take a wide range of academic courses. These classes on Shakespeare, Islam, and US history are taught by volunteers, several of whom are college professors.

Similar courses are being offered to seniors in Sharon, as well as exercise and fitness classes such as Feldenkrais (a class that uses gentle movements to build strength and flexibility), yoga, tai chi, water aerobics, cardio and strength training, and Zumba (a fusion of Latin and international dance music).

"It's all about listening to what community wants," said Norma Simons Fitzgerald, executive director of the Sharon Council on Aging. "One of the things we no longer do is bingo. It just kept losing people. Eventually we just kind of dropped it."

The Sharon COA is making a point to offer programs that appeal to different age groups.

"We have many intergenerational programs," Fitzgerald said.

The agency's headquarters is located within the town's community center, which opened three years ago. The space set aside for seniors is known as the Sharon Adult Center, which "was designed with all ages in mind," said Fitzgerald.

Also at the Sharon Adult Center are foreign films, an art studio, a photography club, an art gallery, and even a virtual bowling league (played on a Nintendo Wii). Fitzgerald said the lobby looks like a Starbucks, and offers Wi-Fi, so people can surf the Internet.

"This is really a focal point in the community and will remain so," she said.

But for many seniors, simply having the ability to continue living in their hometown will be their biggest challenge.

Staying in the house where they raised their families could be difficult. Between costs for repairs and heating, maintaining a large home can be difficult, especially for someone older who is living on a fixed income. Property taxes can also be a deal breaker.

Fitzgerald, who is cochairwoman of the Massachusetts Councils on Aging Property Tax Task Force, pointed out one recent success: The Legislature voted to raise the amount seniors can earn in local tax work-off programs, from \$750 to \$1,000. In the coming years, it's likely more seniors will seek additional property relief as they try to keep up with their bills.

Older residents looking to downsize from the large house in which they raised their families might not have many other options available to them in their community. For that reason, projecting the senior populations for each community can be tricky, because not everyone will be able to stay where they are living now, according to Reardon. The "distribution [of seniors] will be determined by housing," he said.

Efforts to build rental housing for seniors is underway in some communities.

In Hanover, a 66-unit affordable housing complex is planned on town-owned land off Legion Drive. The development will be called Barstow Village, and could be ready for occupancy as early as fall 2012. All of the units will be rented to people age 62 and older.

In Sharon, "the COA advisory board has gotten behind the need for more housing," said Fitzgerald. "For those people who want to downsize, we have met with people interested in developing here. It's not really our specialty. We're not a planning board. . . . But that's one area we've tried to be thoughtful about."

Fitzgerald pointed out that the old Wilber School in her town was recently converted into rental apartments. It has 75 units for lease, and it is less than a half-mile from an MBTA commuter rail station. This type of development - close to shops, services, and public transportation - could help more seniors stay in town, she said. The demand for this type of housing will only go up.

“Many boomers today don’t want to go off to Florida when they retire,” she said. “They want to stay in their community.”

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