
Posted on Fri, Jun. 02, 2006

As city grays, needs of its elderly will increase

A conference on urban aging addressed coming changes in Philadelphia's aging population.

By Michael Vitez
Inquirer Staff Writer

In 10 years, Philadelphia's aging population will look far different from the image of the active, healthy baby boomer - and significant resources will be needed to serve growing numbers of elderly immigrants and minorities.

That was one of the conclusions expressed Wednesday at a conference on urban aging hosted by the Philadelphia Corporation for Aging (PCA).

By 2015, among those over age 60, white Philadelphians will be in the minority for the first time - in part because so many whites left the city over the years and so many immigrants moved in. The number of elderly Latinos as well as Asian and Pacific Islanders will nearly double in the next decade.

And while baby boomers in America generally will move through retirement age with less disability, more wealth and more education than ever before, this will not be true for much of Philadelphia's aging population, 19 percent of whom already live in poverty.

Yet, meeting the needs of this changing elderly population is not high on the political agenda at the local or national level.

The catalyst for the conference was a recent PCA report, "Looking Ahead: Philadelphia's Aging Population in 2015."

In pure numbers, the overall population of those 55 and older will rise from 332,000 to 353,000 in 10 years, constituting 25 percent of the city's population. Growing most dramatically will be the "young-old" - the 55-to-64 and 65-to-74 age groups. They will grow by 17 and 11 percent, respectively.

The most vulnerable group of elderly - those 85 and older - will grow 10 percent, from 28,750 to 31,630.

Contrary to the boomer image, many of these Philadelphia seniors are poor, have language and cultural barriers, face a shortage of affordable or available housing, and will suffer increasing levels of disability.

"We cannot allow one group [the healthy boomers] to be identified as the whole generation," said Allen Glicksman, director of research and evaluation at PCA, who provided much of the data for the report. "It will justify cutting back and cutting back and cutting back services to the elderly."

In short, he and others said, the needs of the city's diverse aging population are immense - everything from bilingual home-health-care workers and certified medical translators to more support and money to renovate dilapidated housing so that frail elderly can remain in their homes.

"The physical environment is decaying around the elderly, and that is absolutely a critical issue," Glickman said.

The report, based on 2000 census data and other studies, also predicted significant increases in seniors with mental illness and AIDS, grandparents' caring for grandchildren, and homeless seniors.

Glicksman, 52, who was born in the city, said the most surprising finding for him was that by 2015, "40 percent of elders will have come from someplace else." He grew up thinking everybody in Philadelphia was from Philadelphia, but that is far from true today.

Christine Arenson, director of the division of geriatric medicine at Thomas Jefferson University, called for nothing short of an overhaul in the way health care is paid for in America to ensure that the frail elderly get the care they need.

Arenson, who treats many low-income elderly, sees the biggest challenge as managing such chronic illnesses as diabetes, heart disease, arthritis and dementia.

"We're faced with not being able to provide the care we know how to because it is not paid for," she said. She said the health-care system is

set up to pay for medications and surgeries, but not to make sure people exercise, eat right, get help at home, and take their medicines.

Philip R. Goldsmith, former city managing director, noted that \$1 billion had been cut from city taxes in the last several years; he said aging priorities like those raised at the conference were never on the radar at high-level meetings in all his years in city government.

Goldsmith urged advocates to jump "into the sandbox" - the political arena - and fight for money and services to address these needs.

"Unless there's more involvement from people like you," he told the audience of about 60, "we're not going to have the fairness you want."

Contact staff writer Michael Vitez at 215-854-5639 or mvitez@phillynews.com.

© 2006 Philadelphia Inquirer and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.philly.com>