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Report: Life in high country for seniors presents challenges and opportunities

Writer:

M. John Fayhee

Byline:

Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

The stereotypical image of life in the Colorado high country does not include much in the way of grey hair and liver spots. This is a place dominated by the image of free-spirited youth and youthful pursuits.

But, like most of the country, the percentage of the population in the high country past Social Security-collection age is increasing dramatically — a reality that will have profound impacts on everything from transportation to health care to the soul of the community.

According to figures in a report recently released by the Alpine Area Agency on Aging, 17 percent of Pitkin County's 17,910 permanent residents, totaling 3,024 individuals, are aged 65 or older — the highest percentage of any of Colorado's major ski counties. And the number of older residents is predicted to rise in the next two decades — topping out at 19 percent, or 4,098 senior residents, by 2035.

The implications are multifaceted, according to Erin Fisher, director of the Alpine Area Agency on Aging, which commissioned the report.

“Seniors represent the fastest-growing population demographic in the country,” Fisher said. “This is a result of the Baby Boomer generation reaching retirement age. Since 2011, 10,000 people a day have turned 65, and that trend is expected to continue until 2029. In northwest Colorado, the number of those reaching 65 is expected to double by 2030 and triple by 2050. Clearly, there are implications.”

The report is titled, “Gap Analysis of Home- and Community-Based Services for an Aging Population in the [Northwest Colorado Council of Governments] Region.” It is the second such comprehensive age-gap report. The first was released in 2011.

The current report was based upon interviews with 492 older residents in the NWCCOG area, as well as input provided by 47 “key actors” — senior service providers, government staff and elected officials — and an analysis of existing services and facilities.

The report examines life for seniors in NWCCOG's membership area — which includes Grand, Summit, Eagle, Jackson and Pitkin counties — on two macro levels.

“We look at our membership area as a place for seniors to live and a place for seniors to retire, which essentially means seniors who are already here and seniors who are thinking of moving

here,” Fisher said. “In many areas, the interests and concerns of those two groups overlap, and in other areas, they do not overlap.”

Ninety-four percent of seniors already living here rate their community as a place to live either “excellent” or “good.” Ninety-three percent rate the overall quality of life as excellent or good.

Both of those numbers stayed stable between 2011 and 2016.

But only 64 percent of the seniors surveyed ranked the NWCCOG administrative area as a good place to retire — down from 70 percent in 2011.

Clearly, the message is, if you’re already here, life in the Colorado high country is good. If you’re thinking of moving here after retirement, it can be a bit more challenging.

“The single biggest issue in this report is the cost and availability of housing in our membership area,” Fisher said. “This is an issue that effects both longtime residents and those considering retiring to this area.”

The report asked seniors to evaluate a total of 28 categories associated with life in northwest Colorado. Those categories included such things as “neighborliness of your community,” “valuing residents 60 and older in your community” and “opportunities to enroll in skill-building and personal enrichment classes.” Those categories were not broken down by counties.

Seniors already living in the NWCCOG administrative region classified the most positive traits of their community as “opportunities to volunteer,” “overall feeling of safety in your community,” “ease of travel by car in your community” and “availability of preventative health services.”

Those looking to retire in the region listed “opportunities to attend social events or activities” as one of the key drivers in their decision-making process. Cost of living and a lack of variety in the housing market were ranked lowest for those considering retiring to the area.

Both groups gave a thumbs down to the cost of health insurance in the high country.

“When we did our report in 2011, one of the lowest-ranked items for both senior residents and those considering retiring to the area was transportation,” Fisher said. “Because of that, we implemented the Regional Transportation Coordinating Council, which now coordinates, manages, promotes and facilitates transportation for seniors across the region. Since its inception, the RTCC has processed over 14,000 one-way trips through its call center and coordinates with 46 different transportation entities.”

As a result, the negative ranking of transportation among surveyed seniors in the region has dropped six percentage points in the past five years.

Fisher, who has a master's degree in geriatric studies from Georgia State University, feels that, given the increase in senior population, the entire perception toward older people in the country needs to change.

“In this field, we hear the term ‘silver tsunami,’ which, of course, has negative connotations,” she said. “After all, we look at tsunamis as natural disasters. But we are looking at it incorrectly. People 50 years and older account for 45 percent of the gross domestic product in Colorado. Seniors are a positive resource in a community. The huge influx of seniors into Colorado is a benefit.”

Fisher said that seniors bring accumulated wisdom and energy to a community.

“They volunteer at a much higher rate than their younger counterparts,” she said. “They participate in local government at a higher rate. They provide cultural continuity. Every community benefits when seniors are able to age in place, when they don't have to move away from the place they have lived for many years because of a lack of senior-specific services or amenities or a high cost of living.”

Fisher said the main thing she took away from the 2016 report is that it's worth the time, effort and cost for communities to invest in their seniors.

“A lot of the things seniors want and need, such as the availability of quality health care, are things people of every age want and need,” she said. “Besides, most of us are going to become seniors, and it would be nice if, when that time comes, we have the option of aging in the place we have come to love. This report helps provide us with the information we need to make that possible in the long term.”

Fisher said the age-gap analysis has been dispersed to its member entities.

mjf@aspdailynews.com

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