



Crucial Issues Facing Aging Services in the City of Philadelphia

Philadelphia's next mayor will take office at a crucial time in the life of the city, as the population of older Philadelphians is on the rise. Among the primary issues facing the elderly and those who care for them are: housing; transportation; availability of home and community-based care and services; and mental health services. These issues, and decision-making throughout all departments of government, should be addressed with a view towards making Philadelphia a "senior-friendly" city, which in turn will improve the quality of life for all Philadelphians.

Population Changes

Nationally, the coming wave of aging "Baby Boomers" has received a great deal of media attention. However, the image of the "Boomer" generation as a well-educated, affluent group does not reflect the realities of the bulk of Philadelphia's seniors, now and over the years to come.

Philadelphia is the nation's seventh poorest city, and older Philadelphians are disproportionately poor. In 2002, an estimated 19 % of Philadelphia's seniors were living in poverty, as compared with 11% in the state of Pennsylvania as a whole. Those numbers will increase, as the population of elderly citizens increases. Today, Philadelphia is home to more than 254,000 people over the age of 60, comprising 17 percent of the population. Over the next decade, the population of those over 60 is projected to increase by 4.1 percent. The numbers of those 85 and older – the most vulnerable elderly – is expected to grow by 10 percent by the year 2015. Preparing for these population shifts, and adjusting to changing needs will be key to the city's health over the coming decades.

Housing

The number one challenge that Philadelphia's next mayor will face in meeting the needs of older Philadelphians is the lack of affordable, accessible housing. The problem is complex, and solutions are needed on many levels. The crisis of affordable, accessible housing for Philadelphia's seniors which exists today will be exacerbated as the older population increases.

The Philadelphia Housing Authority reports 730 families age 62 or older on the Public Housing waiting list, and another 957 "near elderly" in the age group of 55 to 61. For each existing unit of Subsidized Housing in Philadelphia, there is approximately one person waiting.

Inadequate resources are being allocated on both the Federal and State levels for housing. Some 78 percent of Philadelphia seniors own their homes; however many are not equipped, physically or financially, to properly maintain their homes. Roof replacement and other major repairs needed to maintain structural integrity are out of reach for those on fixed incomes. Residents' health and welfare are at stake, along with the fabric of the city, which cannot afford to have a significant segment of its housing stock deteriorate beyond redemption.

Accessibility becomes a problem as home owners age. Exterior steps, interior stairs, bathrooms inaccessible to wheelchairs and other barriers all pose challenges. Often, basic modifications could enable a resident to remain in the home, but the resources available do not even begin to match the needs. A person placed on a waiting list will wait several years for vital home modifications, which can mean the difference between staying in the home and entering a nursing home. PCA's Housing department serves approximately 1,500 people each year, making home repairs and modifications. The funding available does not enable us to even begin to address either the scope of the needs or

the number of people who are waiting for service. Through the Senior Housing Assistance Program (SHARP), PCA is able to fund repairs for only up to \$1400 of repairs and \$700 in modifications. At present there is a waiting list of 900 people for those minor services. People have to wait years for more major repairs such as new roofs, electrical and plumbing, which are done through Philadelphia Housing Development Corporation's Basic Systems Repair Program.

Home and Community Based Care

Hand-in-hand with the need for adequate housing goes the need for care to enable older Philadelphians to remain in their own homes, when they are able and wish to do so. Pennsylvania ranks third in the nation on spending on nursing home care and 25th in spending on home-based care. There is a pressing need to rebalance spending, to better provide for seniors who wish to remain in their own homes. Over the past two years, the state legislature has increased funding to PCA for these services by only one percent annually, despite a surplus of some \$222 million in the lottery fund which is the designated funding stream for senior services. As a result, PCA now has 1250 people on a waiting list, (up from 400 in June) with little prospect of ever receiving services.

Home-based care is cost-effective, and enables people to remain in their communities, where they are surrounded by their family and support systems. Home care programs provide meals, personal care, home health services and adult day care for consumers who are unable to accomplish these tasks themselves. In many situations, they serve as a vital supplement to family members who are acting as caregivers and help stabilize people who, without this support, would be at risk of further deterioration.

While state funding is beyond the scope of the mayor's office, influence can and should be brought to bear on the legislature to recognize this pressing need. At the same time, neighborhoods can be encouraged and educated to develop self-help networks and strategies to support older residents in their choice to remain in their homes.

Transportation

There must be an adequate and reliable funding source for public transit. The possible elimination of fixed routes to balance budgets jeopardizes older adults' ability to remain independent. Fare increases in the fixed route and paratransit systems also have a detrimental impact on older riders.

As Philadelphia's population of the oldest-old grows, demand will grow for the Shared Ride (paratransit) system; plans must be made for capacity to grow with the increased demand.

The Medical Assistance Transportation Program (MATP) is unable to provide transportation for those who require door-through-door service for medical rides. As a result, some of the most frail and medically needy older individuals have **no** transportation for getting to medical appointments.

Pedestrian safety is of concern for older adults. Traffic lights must provide adequate crossing time for slower walkers and crosswalks must be clearly designated to assure safe passage.

Mental Health

PCA has collaborated with the city of Philadelphia's behavioral health services, which benefits senior citizens by providing necessary services. However, no additional funds have been allocated by either the city or the state for this increased level of service. Again, as the population of older Philadelphians grows, this is an area which will require additional resources to serve their needs.

Conclusion

Philadelphia's next mayor must make assuring the dignity and welfare of the city's senior population a top priority. The mayor's commitment to addressing their needs will greatly impact their quality of life, their ability to age with dignity, and the fabric of the whole community.