

Growing old: A look at Rhode Island

The series of lectures and discussions on "Growing Old in America" recently held at Brown University brought together authorities from across the country to examine some of the issues confronting our aging society.

Ranging from health care to business opportunities to life after 60, the aged in America represent a growing number of citizens who must be considered from many different perspectives: this the speakers did on a national level. But what of Rhode Island?

As a state that ranks fourth in the nation in the percentage of elderly and whose numbers of elderly continue to increase faster than the general population, the issues here portend what the likely course of action might be in the rest of the nation. The numbers are worth examining.

In 1900, the life expectancy for a man was 46 and for a woman 48 years. By 1910, when the state's population was just over one-half million, there were 25,000 persons 65 and older, representing just four percent of the population. At one million population today, double the 1910 figure, the number of elderly stands more than 150,000, a sixfold increase, now comprising 15 percent of the population.

The numbers of elderly in the state will continue to increase. By 2020, the population 65 and older is projected to be over 230,000, an increase of 80,000 or 53 percent. Planners have projected population in that year 75,000 greater than 1990 to 1,078,000, an increase of only seven percent. If these projections are accurate, Rhode Island's elderly population will make up 21 percent of the state's population just 26 years from today.

These numbers could change, for example, if larger numbers of immigrants come to the state or if more jobs are generated, both of which tend to attract a younger population with children. This is not likely to change in the short term, based upon present economic conditions.

With increased longevity comes different issues, among which are housing, income and health care. In the housing area the elderly have received much of the assistance for subsidized housing. Of the more than 28,000 government-assisted housing units throughout the state, two-thirds, approximately 19,000, are for the elderly and the handicapped.

Since they live longer than men, women 65 and older become widowed at higher rates than men. For women, nearly one-half are widows while only 16 percent of men are widowers.

The elderly own their homes at higher rates than the general population. Some 60 percent of the population own their own homes, while among the aged the rate is 62 percent. Although high, the elderly rate of home ownership is still well below the national average of 76 percent.

With all the interest and concern for nursing homes and long-term health care, it is surprising to note that only seven percent of Rhode Island's elderly are institutionalized. The problems come with advanced age, with 32 percent of the 85 and older group residing in such places.

One of five men and one of ten women in Rhode Island 65 and older are still working, rates that are slightly higher than the national average. This higher rate may result because the

elderly have the highest level of poverty among adults, close to 12 percent.

The overriding issue today among the elderly is health care. More often than not, with age comes sickness. With medical technology able to prolong life, we are now seeing a variety of life-extending measures that are used.

With aging also comes an increase in chronic disease, disability, hospital stays, physician visits, use of medications and costs of medical attention. In Rhode Island 38 percent of all health care expenditures and 59 percent of all public health care dollars are spent on the elderly.

The issues regarding the ever-increasing number of elderly in this country are no different from those found in Rhode Island. Rhode Island is not unique, but because of the larger

and increasing number of elderly, the issues need to be addressed sooner.

Given our small size and increasing need, we have the opportunity to develop innovative ideas that could serve as a model for the rest of the nation. But we need to begin because neither time nor the aged can wait.

For those who need a more detailed account of characteristics of the state's elderly population, the Department of Elderly Affairs has compiled a *Rhode Island Aging Profiles* publication that is extremely useful.

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