

Alaskan Seniors Living Longer Growing Stronger

from the Alaska Commission on Aging

February 2000

The mission of the Alaska Commission on Aging is to ensure dignity and independence for Alaska's seniors and to assist them, through programs and services funded by the Commission, to lead useful and meaningful lives.



**Alaskan Seniors:
Living Longer,
Growing Stronger**
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Finding the Common Ground: Panel Discussion (in no order): Mary Weymiller, Alzheimer's Association; Hilke Faber, AARP; Thelma Langdon, OPAG; Rose Feltz, NARFE; Bob Huffman, Pioneers in Alaska; Carl Garber, ASHNSA; Ritchie Sonner, AGENet; Monta Faye Lane, Alaska Caregivers Association; Laddie Shaw, Veterans; Dan Karmun, Sr., AFN Youth and Elders Conference.

Common Ground II Conference Held in Anchorage

Leaders in Alaska's senior community met in Anchorage at the end of January for Common Ground II. This conference was designed to expand participants' knowledge of aging issues, build upon their leadership skills, and nurture a statewide community of informed Alaskan seniors. Common Ground II, as the name implies, builds on the first Common Ground conference, held September 1998. With Alaska's senior population predicted to triple in 20 years, Common Ground conferences seek to outline strategies for reaping the full benefit of this growth and dealing with problems that may arise as a result.

Common Ground II was hosted by the Alaska Commission on Aging and the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC). The Conference Steering Committee membership represented the Commission, AHFC, the Alaska Geriatric Education Network (AGENet) the Title

VI Directors Network, AARP Older Persons Action Group (OPAG) Alaska Alzheimer's Association, and the State Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs. Common Ground II sponsors that assisted the Commission and AHFC to fund the conference include Providence Continuing Care Services (Senior Connection, Horizon House, Home Health Care), Alaska Regional Hospital, AARP, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, Bartlett Regional Hospital, Fairbanks Memorial Hospital, National Bank of Alaska, the Law Firm of Dorsey and Whitney, Governor Walter J. Hickel, and the Division of Senior Services Medicare Counseling, Information and Referral program.

Some 150 people attended Common Ground II. The Steering Committee is completing a final report to be released soon.



Legislative Long-Term Care Task Force Cochair Senator Gary Wilken and Task Force member Representative John Coghill

Legislative Long-Term Care Task Force Update

Senator Gary Wilken briefed Common Ground II participants on the work of the Legislative Long-Term Care Task Force. After the Senator presented his update by teleconference link, Task Force member Representative John Coghill and Task Force Cochair John Hanchett fielded questions and were available for further discussion throughout the conference. As presented by Senator Wilken, the Task Force is focused on spurring development and action on the following priority items:

- Development of a career ladder for health care providers
- Review and revision of current assisted living regulations and establishment of new assisted living standards
- Support of the Work Force Development Summit hosted by the Alaska State Hospital and Nursing Home Association
- Increasing the rate paid to assisted living providers for services to individuals receiving state General Relief support
- Review of Alaska’s guardianship system, and proposals for needed statutory changes
- Review of the problems experienced by Alaskans covered by Medicare when those individuals seek medical care by private physicians
- Continued work to secure inclusion of community-based health care to Native people receiving Medicaid-funded health services as a 100% federally reimbursed item
- Establishing a uniform and comprehensive screening and assessment tool to be used by all programs when an individual enters a nursing home or receives Medicaid-funded home and community-based long term care

Seniors Provide Input on Issues Affecting Them

On the second day of Common Ground II, participants held concurrent sessions to discuss a series of questions. Each group was facilitated, and operated under three rules: Only seniors were allowed to speak; each person speaks once before speaking again; and there are no wrong answers. The questions each group considered:

1. What results do you expect from services for seniors?
2. What has changed in my life as a result of receiving services?
3. If I were setting up services for seniors, what would I offer?
4. If I were setting up services for seniors, what would I not offer?
5. What results do I expect from services for people with Alzheimer’s Disease and Related Disorders?
6. My greatest hope is . . .

Afterward, each group reported back to the general session. This process provided an opportunity for seniors to determine desired results. The results

(Continued on page 4.)



Common Ground II Guest Speakers (l-r): Dr. Fernando Torres-Gil, Arliss Sturgulewski, David Baldrige

Leaders Share Their Insights

Common Ground II Guest Speakers Urge Alaskan Seniors to Become Their Own Best Advocates

Common Ground II presented featured speakers recognized for their leadership in public policy and advocacy in state and national settings. Ranging from a recognized expert in aging policy at the University of California Los Angeles to present and former Alaskan senators, to the current executive director of the National Indian Council on Aging, to a wellness educator and advocate, their messages shared a common theme.

Dr. Fernando Torres-Gil, whose distinguished career includes a stint as Policy Advisor on Aging to the Clinton Administration, discussed national policy issues. He observed that there are more people aged 65 and older alive today than ever reached age 65 in the whole of human history! This, combined with the aging of the “baby boom” generation, has forced the interests of seniors to the attention of our state and national lawmakers. Senior issues are now heard within the Clinton Administration and Congress.

Dr. Torres-Gil warned that greater longevity also poses dilemmas and tensions. We’ll need to decide how we will prepare for longer life and how we expect government to support us as we age. Seniors are effective advocates, but as the senior population increases, its views become more diverse. Common ground on which all agree, and a common voice must be sought. Care giving, including long-term care and home and community based services, is one area of common ground.

Debate continues on the future of Medicare. Dr. Torres-Gil said that there is a move to raise the qualifying age for Medicare to 70 or higher.

Dr. Torres-Gil reminded conference attendees that all generations are connected, because each will need the others at some point in life. He urged listeners to support the needs of all generations, not just seniors. This is precisely the approach taken by the Alaska Commission on Aging.

David Baldrige, Executive Director of the National Indian Council on Aging, spoke on meeting the needs of Native elders. His strategy involves:

- Allowing elders to take the lead in advocating for their needs.
- Collaboration with other agencies. Success requires knowing your mission, and knowing your partnering agencies’ missions.
- Think long-term.
- Put all the cards on the table.

(Continued on page 4.)

Seniors Provide Input (Continued from page 2)

seniors hope for include the ability to do the following:

- Remain in their home and community
- Be safe and healthy
- Stay connected
- Maintain financial well-being and self-sufficiency
- Maintain independence
- Live with dignity

Seniors believe these results can be achieved through a continuum of care that ensures affordable quality care when assistance is needed. This continuum should include services ranging from nutrition, transportation, and supportive services, to home and community based care, to assisted living, to nursing homes for rehabilitation and long-term, higher-need medical care.

Speakers (Continued from page 3)

- Be generous with credit.
- The more diverse the partnership, the better your chance of success.
- Pay attention to what the locals, particularly the elders, say.

Mr. Baldrige warned that not providing long-term care for our elders “breaks the sacred hoop.”

Former State Senator **Arliss Sturgulewski** provided practical approaches to effective advocacy on issues affecting seniors. Ms. Sturgulewski explained that senior advocacy, whatever the specific issue, must have these underlying themes: independence as long as possible, and living full lives as long as possible.

She urged advocates to cultivate relationships with policy makers on all levels, remembering that individuals in local government later often assume statewide positions. Her points for effect advocacy included:

- Make people aware of what your organization does.
- Be clear about what you want.

- Make sure they know who you are, and understand your mission.
- Position your organization to get a favorable response.
- Let legislators know the stories of real people, not just statistics.
- Get the officials to your program, and get them involved in the process.

Ms. Sturgulewski advised that when funding gets scarce, advocates should look for ways to collaborate and cooperate with other organizations and agencies.

Joan Greathouse, a consultant specializing in programs to improve health and well being, presented two sessions: *Find Your Passion! Speak Out!* and *What Makes an Effective Advocate* challenged listeners to commit themselves to become better advocates in their community.



You Have Options!

You can read *Alaskan Seniors: Living Longer, Growing Stronger* on line at www.AlaskaAging.org, or receive it through the mail. Use the contact information in the banner below to add yourself to the email notification list. Every person who reads this publication on line saves State resources. However, if at any time you would like a hard copy of *Alaskan Seniors: Living Longer, Growing Stronger*, please request it, and it will be sent to you free of charge.



How to inform others about senior issues:

- Use stories, figures, and charts from *Alaskan Seniors: Living Longer, Growing Stronger* in your agency newsletter.
- Distribute information in this publication to those who may benefit from it.
- Give issues a more local slant by contacting your local senior center director or your local government.

We're looking for feedback! FAX your thoughts to 1-907-465-4716

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