

Alaskan Seniors Living Longer Growing Stronger



Frank H. Murkowski
Governor

from the Alaska Commission on Aging

January 2005



Joel Gilbertson
Commissioner

Seniors, Advocates Convey Concerns to Commission on Aging at Nome and Anchorage Meetings



Lunch guests at the XYZ Senior Center in Nome took time out to chat with ACoA commissioners and staff. Left: Shirley Nicholaski. Right: Mamie Maloney. (ACoA Staff photo.)

The Alaska Commission on Aging held its annual rural outreach meeting in Nome in October, and met again in Anchorage in December. Both occasions provided them with significant input from local seniors, senior advocates and program staff on issues ranging from workforce development to the need for subsistence foods.

October 5th through the 7th, seven Commissioners, two Commission staff, and the rural long-term care coordinator with the Division of Senior and

Disabilities Services traveled to Nome and Unalakleet to hold a quarterly business meeting and to meet with elders and providers at area elder programs.

Commissioners and staff met with program staff at Norton Sound Health Corporation, Nome Community Center, Manaqrsi Senior Services, XYZ Senior Center and Bering Straits Housing Authority. They dined on caribou stew at the senior center and visited with elders and members of the public after lunch.

Though many home and community service systems are in place to support Nome's elders, a top concern is the difficulty of finding qualified people to fill personal care attendant (PCA) and other positions. Workforce development is critically needed to increase skills in this area. More assisted living and in-home assistance with chores for elders who wish to remain as independent as possible was another need frequently identified.

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on Aging (ACoA).

The mission of the Alaska Commission on Aging is to advocate for policies, programs, and services that promote the dignity and independence of Alaska's seniors and help them maintain a meaningful quality of life.

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Commission on Aging Begins Preparations for 2005 White House Conference on Aging

The Alaska Commission on Aging will sponsor regional forums in several Alaska communities during the first half of 2005 to gather information, input, and recommendations in preparation for the October 2005 White House Conference on Aging in Washington, D.C. Surveys, local gatherings and other efforts will capture the views of those who are unable to attend the regional events. The Commission wants to

hear from seniors, caregivers, providers of senior services and the business community on a number of broad topics and specific issues that will be addressed at the national conference.

The theme of the 2005 White House Conference on Aging is "The Booming Dynamics of Aging: From Awareness to Action." This event will plan for the next decade of

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Governor Proposes SeniorCare Program Enhancements: Cash, Drug Benefits to Continue Beyond 2005

Cash benefits of Alaska's SeniorCare program for low-income seniors (\$120 per month for seniors with incomes below 135 percent of the federal poverty level) will continue beyond January 1, 2006, Gov. Frank Murkowski announced on December 13th in a press conference at the Anchorage Senior Center.

Alaska will also extend the SeniorCare prescription drug benefit available to cover Medicare Part D or comparable insurance prescription drug premiums and deductibles for Alaska seniors with incomes up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level. SeniorCare would cover up to about \$670 per person for prescription drug premiums and

deductible costs when the new Medicare prescription drug coverage begins on January 1, 2006.

"Alaska's seniors testified to the Legislature that ending the SeniorCare program in 2006 would create a hardship," said Murkowski. "We listened and we're responding. With these changes to SeniorCare, and the federal changes to Medicare, all Alaska seniors will have access to a prescription drug plan of one kind or another."

Under the governor's proposal, an individual would have to be enrolled in Medicare Part D, Medigap or some comparable
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Commissioners' Commission Chair Lal Honored with Andrus Award Corner



Banarsi Lal, chair of the Alaska Commission on Aging, was selected in September as the winner of the AARP Andrus Award for Community Service for Alaska. Mr. Lal is a champion of senior rights in numerous other venues, including his roles as vice president of the Fairbanks AARP chapter, chair for the strategic planning

committee for the North Star Council on Aging, and board member of the Alaska Geriatric Education Center, Northern Region (AKGEC).

The Andrus Award is AARP's most prestigious volunteer award, given to recognize outstanding AARP volunteers and members in every state who are making a powerful difference in their communities in ways consistent with AARP's mission, vision, and strategic direction, and that inspire others to service. Only one such award is given in each state annually.

The award was presented to Lal at a special ceremony on October 27 in Fairbanks. In a letter Edgar Rivas, State Director for AARP, and Liz Lucas, State AARP President, stated, "Your record of achievement, service and commitment in your multiple volunteer roles provide extraordinary examples of the difference that volunteerism can make in the lives of individuals and in the well-being and vitality of a community."

Arrivals, Departures Mark Commission's Fall Season

The Alaska Commission on Aging experienced a number of membership changes this fall. Ella Craig's term as member and chair of the Alaska Pioneer Homes Advisory Board expired, which also precipitated her departure from the Commission on Aging, where she held the seat reserved for the Pioneer Home Board chair. Ella's wisdom and experience as a long time Commission member will be greatly missed.

The terms of two other Commission members came to an end as well: Jesse Gardner of Anchorage and Doris Bacus of Kodiak held public seats which had been scheduled to expire in the late summer or early

fall. The contributions of Jesse and Doris to the Commission's work have been much appreciated.

By the time the December Commission meeting in Anchorage, the Governor appointed several new members to fill vacant seats. Ed Zastrow of Ketchikan, the new chair of the Alaska Pioneer Homes Advisory Board, joined the Commission and Sharon Howerton-Clark of Homer was appointed to one of the public seats. Both Ed and Sharon have "hit the ground running," as both have extensive experience with senior issues.

Michael Black, Director of the Division of Community Advocacy in the Department

of Commerce, Community and Economic Development, also joined the Commission on Aging as a non-voting member representing the commissioner of that department. Michael has extensive expertise in community development and rural issues that will be of great value to the ACOA.

Anyone interested in filling future vacancies on the Commission may submit a letter of interest to Laraine Derr, Director of Boards & Commissions, at the Governor's Office, P.O. Box 110001, Juneau, AK 99811-0001.

Consumer News Drug Company Campaigns to Stop Deadly Confusion between Alzheimer's and Diabetes Drugs



Janssen Pharmaceutica Products has learned of several errors in prescribing and dispensing its medication Reminyl (galantamine hydrobromide) for mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease. These errors were due to confusion between Reminyl and

Amaryl (glimepiride), which is marketed by Aventis Pharmaceuticals.

The administration of Amaryl to patients with Alzheimer's disease and without diabetes mellitus has resulted in serious adverse events, including severe hypoglycemia and death.

The products both have a 4-mg strength dose, and both are available in tablet form. Janssen has launched a comprehensive public information campaign to

raise awareness and help prevent future mistakes. The campaign has included letters to 120,000 physicians and 96,000 pharmacists as well as outreach to patients and caregivers.

Anyone with questions, concerns, or reports of medication errors should contact Janssen Pharmaceutica directly at 1-800-JANSSEN (1-800-526-7736).

Patients with Alzheimer's and their caregivers can follow these suggestions to avoid harmful mistakes:

- Ask your physician to repeat the name of any medication he or she prescribes
- Ask your physician or nurse to clearly write down the name of the medication so that you have it when you go to the pharmacy
- Request a product brochure for the medication from your physician
- Ask your pharmacist to double-check that you have received the right medication
- Read the package

Federal Notes Administration on Aging Promotes Osteoporosis Awareness and Fall Prevention



In October 2004, U.S. Surgeon General Richard H. Carmona released the first-ever report on bone health. The report found that by 2020, half of all American citizens older than 50 will be at risk for fractures

from osteoporosis and low bone mass if no immediate action is taken by individuals at risk, doctors, health systems, and policy-makers.

This new report says that 10 million Americans over the age of 50 have osteoporosis, the most common bone disease, while another 34 million are at risk for developing osteoporosis. And

each year, roughly 1.5 million people suffer a bone fracture related to osteoporosis.

Even though the majority of women aged 45 and older have at least two risk factors for the disease, only 15 percent of those women not diagnosed by a doctor believe they are

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Info Bytes and Websites



A new Website contains information on hundreds of technology products

Website Highlights Long-Term Care Technologies

to improve quality of life and care in long-term care residential settings. Technology for Long-Term Care, www.TechForLTC.org, is the result of a research project initiative by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS).

The site describes low-tech

and high-tech options in four areas: fall detection and prevention, wander management, calling for assistance, and incontinence. An extensive database lists specific products. The Website is intended to inform purchasing decisions; products cannot be purchased through the site.

Tips for Selecting an Interim Medicare Discount Drug Card

The Medicare prescription drug benefit is scheduled to begin in January, 2006. As an interim measure, beneficiaries may purchase prescription drug cards, estimated to provide discounts between 10 and 15 percent depending on the card. Enrollment in the discount card program is optional and is open to all beneficiaries who do not have prescription drug coverage under Medicaid.

The card can cost no more than \$30 a year. Low-income beneficiaries, those with incomes up to 135% of the federal poverty level, are eligible for an additional \$600 annual subsidy during the interim period.

The discount card program is complex, with 77 separate cards being offered by 28 private sponsors. Beneficiaries can choose only one card per year, and sponsors can add or drop coverage of any drug at any time.

The National Association of Areas on Aging and the National Association of State Units on Aging suggests the following sites for information on choosing the appropriate discount card:

The government's official Medicare website (www.Medicare.gov) provides numerous fact sheets, including information on how to choose a discount card and how to enroll in a card program. A comparative database lets individuals determine the best discount card available to them based on their geographic location and the prescriptions they have.

For a Medicare-Approved Drug Discount Card Tip Sheet, see www.medicare.gov/Publications/Pubs/pdf/11071.pdf.

For a 36-page Guide to Choosing a Medicare-Approved Drug

Discount Card, go to www.medicare.gov/Publications/Pubs/pdf/11062.pdf.

For a Drug Discount Card Enrollment Tip Sheet, visit www.medicare.gov/Publications/Pubs/pdf/11076.pdf.

The Access to Benefits Coalition, a national public/private partnership targeting outreach to low-income Medicare beneficiaries, offers a website at www.accesstobenefits.org, providing resources for low-income seniors and the organizations who serve them.

Alaskan seniors with questions about the discount drug cards or the \$600 interim prescription subsidy may call the toll-free SeniorCare/ Alaska Medicare Information Line at 1-800-478-6065 (or dial 269-3680 in Anchorage).

Commission Meetings (continued from page 1)

The Commission and staff also visited the Yukon River community of Unalakleet, where they toured the Norton Sound Health Corporation's new health center and met with program staff at the Unalakleet Senior Center as well as meeting with about a dozen elders and a number of other members of the community. Frequently-mentioned needs included PCA services, assisted living facility, nutrition screening, help with high heating and fuel costs, and subsistence foods for elders (since young people in the community are not gathering and preparing subsistence foods as much as in the past).

At the Commission on Aging's business meeting in Anchorage in early December, Commission members heard reports from representatives of a number of government programs, advocacy organizations, and private provider agencies.

Needs for more support for chore assistance and in-home help for frail elders, restoration of funding for adult day care and care coordination, mental health services for seniors, more balance and consistency and less fragmentation in services provided, an end to the confusion regarding Medicaid waiver eligibility determinations, provision of services for people before they become Medicaid-eligible, and a replacement for the Longevity Bonus for those in need were among the concerns brought before the Commission.

Staff presented a new member orientation and information on the upcoming White House Conference on Aging activities, the structure of the Commission on Aging's funding sources and relationships with other agencies and partners, and proposed legislative advocacy plan.

Other topics discussed included the grants undertaken by the Systems Change Consumer Task Force, recent changes in regulations pertaining to Medicaid waiver services, problems with payments to providers of Medicaid waiver services, increased need for PCA assessments, an upcoming long-term care study which will help the State of Alaska determine how best to structure services and reimbursements in the future, the necessity for regulation change to base waiver eligibility on functional disability as opposed to the current required need for nursing home level of medical care, the need for a change in the allocation of beds in the Pioneers Homes to provide more beds at higher levels of care and potential changes to the Social Security system.

Conference on Aging (continued from page 2)

senior policy in the U.S. In addition to addressing the issues of today's elders, the Conference will have a mandated focus on the 76 million baby boomers whose aging will change the face of America. Alaska's forums will also encourage input on state policy issues. Each state will submit its own list of recommendations

and send a number of delegates to the conference. The number of delegates allocated to Alaska is currently unknown. Members of Congress will each select one delegate, governors will select between two and four delegates based on their senior population, and additional delegates will be chosen through an as-yet-

undetermined process.

Watch future issues of *Alaskan Seniors: Living Longer, Growing Stronger* for more information on the locations and dates of the regional forums and the topics to be discussed in Alaska.

Director's *Living Longer, Growing Stronger Returns!*

Voice

By Linda Gohl



On behalf of the Commission, we're very glad that we're able to start publishing a monthly newsletter again. As you can see we've changed the format considerably so that we may provide more information as well as have monthly feature articles. Please let us know if you'd like to see other information or resources listed in the newsletter.

The ACOA is a planning and advocacy agency for programs, policy and services benefiting older Alaskans and their caregivers. As you may be aware, effective July 1, 2003, the ACOA moved from the Department of Administration to the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) by Governor Murkowski's Executive Order No. 108. The Governor also changed some of the roles and responsibilities of the Commission. The Commission no longer has the authority to issue Requests for Grant Proposals (RFP) or make recommendations for awarding grants for senior services. RFP development is now the responsibility of the Division of Senior and Disabilities Services

(DSDS) in conjunction with the department's centralized Grants and Contracts Unit. The Grants and Contracts unit is responsible for releasing the RFPs, organizing and holding a Proposal Evaluation Committee meeting, and forwarding recommendations for award to Joel Gilbertson, Commissioner of the DHSS. Commissioner Gilbertson or his designee approves grant awards. The Grants and Contracts unit also issues the grant agreements and is responsible for all administrative functions, including receiving quarterly reports from grantees, and issuing grant payments.

Under requirements of the Older Americans Act and for states to receive federal funds for senior programs, every state must have a "state unit on aging." In November 2003, the Governor informed the U. S. Administration on Aging, that he designated DHSS as Alaska's "state unit on aging." In the past, the ACOA was the designated state agency. This change has facilitated improved coordination of all grant administrative functions, and reporting to the legislature and federal agencies on behalf of the department and those we serve.

The ACOA staff and planning committee, however, works very closely with DSDS staff in planning for pilot projects, the development of ongoing services, and to ensure the

requirements under the Older Americans Act are adhered to by the State. Per Alaska Statute 47.45, ACOA is also responsible to approve a comprehensive statewide plan that identifies the concerns and needs of older Alaskans, and to make recommendations to the governor and the legislature with respect to legislation, regulations and funding for programs or services that benefit older Alaskans. We are also responsible for representing the needs of individuals with Alzheimer's disease or related disorders, or their caregivers, through the terms of the Alaska Mental Health Trust Settlement, and for making recommendations to the AMHTA regarding the state's mental health program budget.

If you would like more information about the ACOA, or if you would like to let us know what you think the ACOA should be doing on behalf of older Alaskans or their caregivers, please write to the ACOA office, send an email, or call us. Our website is www.alaskaaging.org. The Commission would like to hear from you or your organization.

SeniorCare Enhancements (continued from page 2)

prescription drug coverage that has separate premiums or deductibles for prescription drugs in order to qualify for the SeniorCare program. Indian Health Service beneficiaries would be eligible for the SeniorCare drug program if they are enrolled in one of those programs.

Over 40 percent of Alaska's seniors, about 17,000 out of 41,000, are estimated to be eligible

in 2006 for SeniorCare under the new proposal. Since its inception in 2004 after the end of the Longevity Bonus, SeniorCare has offered Alaska seniors with incomes up to 135 percent of the poverty level an option to receive \$120 per month cash assistance (\$1,440 annually) or a \$1,600 annual prescription drug subsidy. Seniors between 135 and 150 percent of poverty receive a prescription drug benefit of \$1,000 per year.

Currently, 6,829 seniors are enrolled in SeniorCare, half of whom had never received the Longevity Bonus. More than 99 percent of SeniorCare recipients currently choose the cash benefit rather than the prescription drug subsidy.

The legislature must approve the governor's proposed changes and provide funding for this program.

Osteoporosis and Fall Prevention (continued from page 4)

at risk for osteoporosis. AOA has launched new grants and public/private partnerships to develop an osteoporosis awareness campaign aimed at post-menopausal women and to increase older people's access to effective injury reduction programs. Two of the grant projects focus on falls prevention.

Strategies include:

- promoting the view of falls and fear of falling as controllable
- setting realistic goals for increasing activity
- changing the environment to reduce fall risk factors
- promoting exercise to increase strength and balance

In addition to increasing fall prevention-related knowledge, the prevention program will target the following risk factors:

- balance, gait and vision impairments
- postural hypotension
- multiple medication use
- home hazards

Events Calendar



ACOA Legislative Teleconferences will be held every other Thursday beginning on January 20, 2005 and continuing through May 12. More information will be available on the ACOA website in mid-January, or you may contact Lillian Bradley, ACOA Administrative Assistant, at (907) 465-3250.

ACOA Quarterly Business Meeting will be held in Juneau on February 22 and 24, 2005 with February 23 set aside for Commissioners to visit legislators.

"The Future of Aging in Alaska," a 2005 White House Conference on Aging forum, will be held in Juneau at the Juneau Senior Center on Friday, February 25, from 1 to 4 pm.

"Full Lives Conference 2005 – Paths to Belonging" will be held at the Sheraton Anchorage Hotel on April 21-22, 2005. Full Lives is a statewide education, training and networking opportunity for senior services, mental health, developmental disabilities, and substance abuse direct service professionals (the hands-on, front line staff), those who supervise them, and individuals and families receiving services.