

# Alaskan Seniors Living Longer Growing Stronger

from the Alaska Commission on Aging

April 2001

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** is a monthly publication of the Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA)

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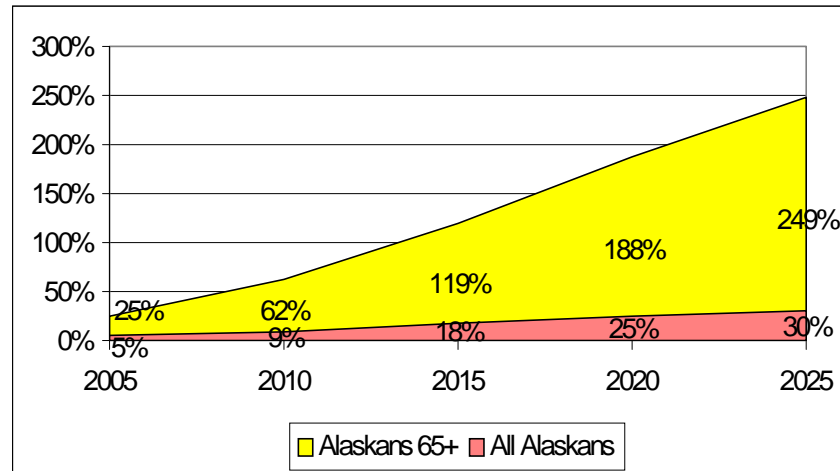
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The U.S. Census estimates that Alaska's senior population (65+) increased 13% between 1990 and 2000, and will grow by almost 250% in the next 25 years. The total population (all ages) is expected to grow only 30% in that same period. Whether we are baby-boomers or present seniors, we all want to remain as productive and independent as we can in our later years. *Now* is the time for Alaska as a state to recognize the growing statewide senior community. *Now* is the time for Alaska to commit to supportive home and community-based services that enable us to stay in our homes and home communities as we age.

## The Opportunities and Challenges That Come With Aging

As we age we experience new opportunities and may experience new freedoms. We also experience new types of physical, social and mental change. The challenge is to develop balanced public policy that responds to the realities of Alaska's rapidly growing statewide senior community. The hallmarks of balanced policy are that it:

1. supports citizens to achieve to their fullest ability;
2. expects citizens to exercise personal responsibility to the extent they can;
3. provides a helping hand to those who can remain self-sufficient with a limited amount of assistance;
4. steps in to assist those unable to care for themselves.

All of us have opportunities to discuss and highlight the opportunities associated with aging in Alaska. We can publicize and recognize examples of how older Alaskans enrich their communities and their state, economically, socially, and culturally. We can recognize and acknowledge the individuals, organizations, communities, businesses and governments that support and likewise benefit from the contributions of older members of their community.

In this and the next issue of *Alaskan Seniors: Living Longer, Growing Stronger*, we'll focus on the current work of the Alaska Commission on Aging, and our many partners. We'll look at the data on which this work is based. As we prepare for and observe **Older Americans Month** with the rest of the nation, and **Older Alaskans Month** at home, we'll highlight the progress Alaskans are achieving *together*; and the challenges before us.

# Dynamics of Aging in Alaska

## Background:

Proportionately, the Alaskan senior population is growing more rapidly than in any other state except Nevada. This may be due to a variety of factors, including:

- Improved health, which leads to greater survival into later years
- Fewer people leaving the state to retire
- Impact of “baby boomers” staying in Alaska at retirement
- Some middle-aged children now bring their parents to Alaska rather than leave the state

## Markers Of a High Quality Of Life As We Age:

Aging is a time of change. Aging, and release from the full-time work of our younger years, can free us for new exploration and involvement. We also experience physical changes in our bodies. At some point we may move to a new setting that better fits our needs. With age comes the eventual and natural loss of family and friends, and the opportunity for new relationships. The great challenge for all of us is to open ourselves to the new possibilities that come with aging, while accommodating major life change.

What are the markers of a high quality of life as we age? The senior Alaskans who attended the Common Ground II conference we hosted in partnership with the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation in 2000 defined these markers:

- Being connected socially (the opposite of feeling isolated)
- Continuing to exercise personal independence
- Maintaining financial self-sufficiency
- Continuing to live in the settings of our choice—our homes or our home communities
- Sustaining optimal health as we age—this includes physical, mental, spiritual and emotional health
- Continuing to be respected in our families and communities
- Being safe in our homes and home communities

These, then, become the baseline results the Commission seeks to achieve.

## Benefits Worth 6,300 Full-Time Caregiving Jobs and More:

Alaska’s growing statewide senior community is an asset. Alaska stands to benefit from our presence in many ways. As lifelong residents our retirement, savings, and investments bolster the Alaskan economy. A larger senior population boosts the volunteer community, supplements the workforce, fills gaps in the social support structure of our communities and families, and sustains caregiving across the generations.

According to the recent study, *Issues Affecting the Economic Well-Being of Alaska Seniors*, conducted by the McDowell Group, 13% of older Alaskans engaged in unpaid caregiving on a regular basis, with an average time of 20 days per month. The report suggests that at least 132,000 person/days are spent in unpaid caregiving by seniors each month, equivalent to 6,300 full-time jobs. The team that conducted the study believes this does *not* include personal care such as one spouse provides for another.

The study also indicates that Alaska’s senior volunteers in all areas provide approximately \$60 million each year in the equivalent of donated wages, using The National Senior Services Corp estimate that the average hourly value of these volunteer services is \$12.85.

**This article will conclude in next month’s issue.**

## Alaska Commission on Aging Resolutions Advocate Well-being for Alaskans

The Alaska Commission on Aging speaks out on issues affecting Alaskan seniors and their families.

### **The Commission Supports:**

**An Increased Alcohol Excise Tax (Resolution 2001-01)** The Commission wholeheartedly supports SB 8 and HB 225, which significantly increase the excise tax on alcoholic beverages in Alaska, for the following reasons:

- Alcohol addiction and excessive use is Alaska's number one social and health problem.
- The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration estimates the rate of alcohol abuse and dependency at up to 17% for older adults.
- In 1999 the costs associated with substance abuse in Alaska totaled at least \$245,800,000, the majority of which was borne by non-substance-abusing Alaskans including those who were victims of crime and other alcohol related impacts. Only \$13,500,000 was generated in 1998 by alcohol tax license fees, permit fees and application fees
- These costs were absorbed in increased public safety and criminal justice services, private health and life insurance costs, and medical and property expenses.
- With a reasonable increase in such fees those who drink can more equitably pay to meet the social costs associated with alcohol dependency and abuse.

**A Legislative Long Term Care Task Force (Resolution 2001-02)** The Commission vigorously encourages the 22<sup>nd</sup> Alaska Legislature to institute a new Long Term Care Task Force to serve as a Legislative forum for study and leadership concerning the challenges and opportunities associated with Alaska's rapidly growing senior citizen community, and the long-term care needs any of us may experience at any times in our lives.

**The Alaska Housing Finance Corporation Fiscal Year 2002 Senior and Special Needs Capital Budget (Resolution 2001-03)** The Commission supports the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation's efforts to develop, renovate and weatherize senior and other special needs housing throughout Alaska. Secure housing is fundamental to well-being.

**HB 65, SB 38: Medical Assistance: Breast and Cervical Cancer (Resolution 2001-04)** This funds treatment for limited income Alaskans diagnosed with breast and cervical cancer through the screening program now in place with Centers for Disease Control funding. With federal assistance from Medicaid and modest state funding, this bill significantly improves the chances of survival for Alaskan women identified with these cancers who qualify for treatment assistance

**Maintaining designated grants for the delivery of health and social services by regional Native nonprofit corporations (Resolution 01-05)** The Commission urges maintaining the current structure of designated grants to the Native nonprofit organizations in the Fiscal Year 2002 budget of the Department of Health and Social Services. The Commission notes the following:

- The designated grants to regional Native nonprofits for the delivery of health and social services have been in existence for nearly 20 years to provide such basic services as direct public health services, substance abuse

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## Juneau Holds Independent Living Workshop Next Month

The Juneau Aging Network and the Juneau Commission on Aging will present a free community workshop on independent living in Juneau. *Connections For Independent Living: A Public Forum on Juneau's Home and Community-Based Services*, will be held Saturday May 12 from 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM at the Tlingit-Haida Community Council, 3235 Hospital Drive, Juneau.

The workshop will provide information on independent living including what is available, who to call, what do I do, and how to pay for it. For more information, call (907) 463-6164.

## **Commission Resolutions** (Continued from Page 3.)

treatment, mental health services, social services and/or child protection services.

- The partnership between the state and the nonprofits has benefited both parties in the delivery of services to rural Alaska through a combination of state employees and grantees in other parts of the state.
- The use of non-profits in the delivery of such services to rural Alaska has provided greater coverage, and more culturally relevant approaches to the delivery of such services than can be provided directly through the sole use of state employees.
- The high suicide rate in rural Alaska, and the disproportionate number of Native Alaskans incarcerated relative to the overall population of the State reflects an urgent need that the State of Alaska strengthen its commitment to the Native nonprofits that are working diligently to address the physical, spiritual, social and mental well-being of their people.
- The proposal that the Native nonprofits compete for these grants will increase the administrative overhead for both the state and the Native nonprofits, and there are no alternate providers in most of the regions served by the designated Native nonprofit organizations.

**HB 88, SB 55 Pioneers' and Veterans' Homes (Resolution 2001-06)** The Commission endorses passage of these bills, noting the following:

- Alaska's Pioneers' Homes are a remarkable long-term care resource for Alaskans age 65+ and their families.
- Many present residents of the Homes are veterans, as are many of those Alaskans now on Pioneers' Home waiting lists
- This legislation provides a framework in which Alaskan veterans can participate in a pilot program with the Veterans Administration through which they could receive financial assistance from the VA to assist them in paying for their long-term care at the Pioneers' Homes. Through this approach the Pioneers' Homes would receive increased revenues, which would not have to come out of the pockets of eligible veterans.
- This legislative provides for increased state funding. As a result of this funding, in combination with anticipated receipts from the Veterans Administration pilot program, more of the unused physical capacity of the Homes could be used, enabling more older Alaskans to receive the long-term care they need. This would benefit all older Alaskans.

**HB 197 An Act relating to directives for personal health care services and for medical treatment (Resolution 2001-07)** This bill:

- Assists Alaskans to thoughtfully state their intent regarding the kind of medical, personal, emotional, and spiritual care they wish to receive in the last stages of their lives if they are no longer able to express their wishes.
- Provides a clear and helpful format to guide an individual in defining their wishes in this regard, and sharing that information with their loved ones.
- Draws upon the experience of thirty-six other states that have adopted this format, nationally referred to as "The Five Wishes."

### **The Commission Opposes:**

**SB 182 Prorata Reductions to Benefit Programs (Resolution 2001-08)** The Commission supports continuing Alaska's basic benefits, and opposes efforts to prorata these essential programs for the following reasons:

- Basic support through financial and medical assistance to Alaskans who apply for and meet specific qualifying criteria include programs such as Medicaid, Alaska Temporary Assistance Program (ATAP), Adult Public Assistance (APA), Chronic and Acute Medical Assistance (CAMA), Guardianship, and General Relief.
- The primary role of basic benefits for many Alaskans is to provide a consistent means to meet fundamental living expenses such as food, shelter, clothing, medical care and transportation, whether long term or transitional in nature.
- Basic benefits allow Alaskans to live as independently as possible and with dignity in the communities of their choice.
- Basic benefits also serve our communities by helping many Alaskans avert problems such as homelessness and also minimize higher costs and needs for more restrictive settings, including hospitalization, nursing home placement and incarceration.