

Alaskan Seniors Living Longer Growing Stronger

from the Alaska Commission on Aging

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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.



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Living Longer,
Growing Stronger**
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Fairbanks Pioneers' Home R.N. Trish Neubert shares a "precious moment" with resident Evelyn Deitz. The "precious moment" bundle is a newborn baby (unidentified). Photo by Fairbanks Pioneers' Home Staff.

Alaskans Find Careers in Aging Challenging, Rewarding

By Peggy Frank Freeland

Two high-profile associations based in Washington DC have launched an April workforce development campaign called "Careers In Aging" that has come home to Alaska. The groups, the Gerontological Society of America and the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) combined forces to increase interest in aging-related employment opportunities. They created an informational Website (www.careersinaging.com) as a resource for people interested in gerontology and geriatric programs. They also dubbed April 8-12 "Careers in Aging Week," and gave \$200 grants to thirty groups around the country to organize local activities promoting the careers campaign.

AGHE Director Derek Stepp said, "The purpose of this week is to increase awareness and
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Careers in Aging (continued)

visibility of the wide-ranging career opportunities that exist in aging and aging research. If you're looking for a job in an area that is growing rapidly, needs people with a broad range of skills and promises to be challenging and rewarding, consider careers in aging."

Fairbanks gerontologist Karen Wood used one of the grants to organize a brown bag lunch and discussion forum for the Careers in Aging Campaign. Open to the public, the event is set for April 11 at noon at the Noel Wein Public Library auditorium in Fairbanks. She encourages all Interior senior providers, healthcare and education professionals, and anyone else interested in exploring career options to attend.

"There are many multidisciplinary opportunities in aging-related endeavors. As a service provider, you may be coordinating information from housing agencies, lawyers, transportation providers, nurses, family members and counselors. As a health professional, you may be part of a health care team providing hospital care, day care, or home care to older people," said Wood.

The nursing field is especially in need, but Fairbanks Pioneers' Home R.N. Trish Neubert said serving in gerontology is extremely satisfying.

"Certainly from the nursing standpoint, there's a critical shortage. It's in all areas of nursing, not just gerontology, but gerontology is one of the most rewarding," Neubert said.

Nurse Neubert noted that not all nurses think of seniors when they start out.

"It's not something that, as a young nurse, especially appealed to me," she said, "Then about six years ago somebody talked to me about it and I thought, what the heck, I'd give it a try, and I absolutely love it. I'm just sorry I didn't get into it years earlier. I mean, I come to work and people hug me and I think, wow, I'm actually getting paid for this."

Fairbanks Pioneers' Home administrator Vickie Wilson agreed.

"I love what I do. I didn't think in my head that this is what I wanted to do with my life. I found out I had a passion for it," Wilson said, "I'm not saying my job is always easy but personally, the satisfaction I get from making someone's life better, making a difference, makes it all worthwhile."

Mike Powers, Administrator of Fairbanks Memorial Hospital, said employment opportunities abound in numerous fields including home medical equipment, physical therapy, respite care, nursing care, long term care, sub acute care, day care, assisted living, and soon in the hospital's new radiation center.

"Pure demographics indicate that choosing a career in aging is a sure win. There are going to be many opportunities," Powers said.

Education is critical as well, and area experts said Alaska is ratcheting up for the responsibility. Certified nursing assistant training is offered at several locations around the state including nursing homes, senior provider agencies and the Older Persons Action Group. The University of Alaska offers several certificate programs in medical and dental reception and laboratory assisting, associate of applied science degrees in medical and dental assisting and two-year nursing degrees. A gerontology institute is also available at the Anchorage campus.

University of Alaska Vice President for Statewide Health Programs, Karen Perdue (former Commissioner of the
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Congress and Alaska Legislature Consider Bills Benefiting Gerontology

The American Geriatrics Society warned Congress in February that the rapidly growing 85-and-over population threatens to overwhelm the nation's Medicare program. "We are simply not prepared for the burden this group will place on our health care and financing system," stated Dr. Charles A. Cefalu, Professor and Associate Chairman for Geriatric Program Development at Louisiana State University.

Testifying before the Senate Special Committee on Aging, Cefalu called on Congress and the Administration to take immediate action to help ease the growing shortage of geriatricians, physicians who are specially trained to prevent and manage the unique and often multiple health problems of older adults. The field of geriatrics is shrinking, he said, just as the numbers of patients who require this specialized care grows. Cefalu provided the Committee with several options for increasing the supply of geriatricians and other health professionals trained to meet the special needs of the elderly. In particular, he recommended that lawmakers improve Medicare payment rates, noting that low reimbursement was a major barrier to physicians entering and remaining in the field of geriatrics.

Cefalu called for passage of the Geriatric Care Act, legislation introduced by Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV) and Sen. Blanche Lincoln (D-AR), which would authorize Medicare to reimburse physicians for care coordination and assessment services, the hallmark of geriatric care. The Act would help increase the number of residents in geriatric training programs as well. Cefalu also pushed for passage of the Advancement in Geriatric Education Act, introduced by Sen. Tim Hutchinson (R-AR) and Larry Craig (R-ID), which would improve GME payment policy for geriatricians.

Further, Cefalu urged Congress to halt the 5.4% across-the-board cut in Medicare payments that went into effect on January 1. "This fee cut hurts geriatricians' practices the most," he said, "because our patient base is comprised predominantly of Medicare patients. It is impossible to remain in business when we do not receive adequate payment for the services we provide."

American Geriatrics Society Executive Vice President Linda Hiddemen Barondess, commenting on the testimony, called the proposals "critical to providing the best care to the growing numbers of older people in the United States while restraining the growing costs of that care."

Alaskan legislation might encourage more people to enter the field of gerontology and other health care disciplines. The Alaska Legislature is considering HB 449 introduced by Rep. Peggy Wilson (R-Wrangell). The bill would forgive up to half of a person's Alaska student loans used to become a health practitioner if they work in that field in Alaska.

If passed, the loan forgiveness would apply to a person licensed as a registered nurse or a licensed practical nurse, licensed as a pharmacist, or employed to provide medical services to an individual as a radiology or laboratory technician. Loans would be forgiven at 10 percent a year up to five years.

Direct Support Worker Conference

There will be a conference for direct support workers held in Anchorage April 25-26, 2002. *Full Lives: Making It Happen* is an opportunity for Assisted Living Providers, Care Coordinators, Case Managers, Certified Nursing Assistants, Classroom Paraeducators, Clinical Associates, Counselors, Job Coaches, Mental Health Specialists, Personal Care Attendants, Respite Workers, Substance Abuse Counselors, and individuals or families who are receiving these services to come together for networking, education and more.

Details are available on the conference Website: www.alaskachd.org/fullives/.

