

# 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.*



**Alaskan Seniors: Living Longer, Growing Stronger** is a monthly publication of the Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA)

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Lt. Governor Fran Ulmer joins State Legislators for a teleconferenced discussion on senior issues. Ella Craig, Commissioner on Aging and *Common Ground* Steering Committee Chair, is on the left.

## Alaskan Seniors Meet Once Again to Seek Common Ground

The Alaska Commission on Aging, with support from the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, The Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, AARP and Providence Health System, held *Finding The Common Ground 3* at the Hilton Hotel in Anchorage, January 29-31. This was the third meeting of its kind, the first of which was held in 1998. As the name implies, *Common Ground* conferences bring together Alaskan seniors and their advocates to discuss issues common to all. Caregiving was a major focus of this year's event.

*Common Ground 3* was attended by about 135 people from throughout Alaska, including seniors, professional and private caregivers, and advocates. Guest speakers included Lynn Friss Feinberg, Deputy Director of the Family Caregivers Alliance National Center on Caregiving, Dr. Rhonda Montgomery, Professor of Sociology and Director of the Gerontology Center at the University of Kansas, Dave Baldrige, Executive Director of the National Indian Council on Aging, and Gail Hunt, Executive Director of the National Alliance for Caregiving. Panel discussions of interest to Alaskans as we age were led by State of Alaska Division of Senior Service staff, experts in transportation, health and nutrition, and Alaskan senior advocates. Several Legislators participated in a panel discussion via teleconference from Juneau.

This issue of *Alaskan Seniors: Living Longer, Growing Stronger* offers highlights from some of the presentations at *Common Ground 3*.

## Lynn Friss Feinberg, Deputy Director, Family Caregivers Alliance National Center on Caregiving

Lynn Friss Feinberg provided the opening keynote address of *Common Ground 3* and moderated the panel: *Caregivers Discussion: What's Needed and Accessing Services*.

Ms. Feinberg pointed out that since 80% of caregiving is currently provided at-home by family members, the entire longterm care system would be jeopardized without them. Therefore, families need practical, emotional, and financial support to continue their caregiving responsibilities. Caregiving is a community responsibility, requiring government, families, churches, non-profit agencies, businesses, and volunteer groups to work together. Government has been slow to respond to the growing need for in-home, longterm care for the elderly. Ms. Feinberg recommends a grassroots-level effort to create a network of services, such as California's Caregiver Resource Centers (CRC), which started in the San Francisco Bay area, and has grown since 1977 to serve communities throughout California. Ms. Feinberg outlined the history of the CRC, and suggested ways its success could be adapted to Alaska. Ms. Feinberg warned that the issue of caregivers' mental health is getting ready to explode. She said that services need to focus on the family, not bureaucracy.

## Dr. Rhonda Montgomery, Director of the Gerontology Center, University of Kansas

Rhonda Montgomery, Ph.D. is Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas. She has conducted studies on public policy and the role of family in providing long-term care, and is the principle investigator for the evaluation of the Alzheimer's Disease Demonstration Grant to States program. At *Common Ground 3*, Dr. Montgomery presented *Trends in Caregiving*.

Dr. Montgomery pointed out that caregiving starts with young women and is an on-going process. Most women will spend more time caring for an adult loved one than they did for their children. While more men are becoming involved with family caregiving, it is still an overwhelmingly female "profession."

The popular perception, particularly among legislators, is that family caregiving is "warm and fuzzy." However, it's primarily about performing private, often unpleasant tasks such as toileting. When caregiving reaches this stage family caregivers, primarily spouses or adult children, seek alternatives such as nursing homes, because that is when the relationship between family members changes radically.

The burden of caregiving is great. Dr. Montgomery said that the physical exertion alone is considerable. Often two professional caregivers are needed to do the work performed by one family caregiver to stay within OSHA guidelines. On top of this, caregivers can experience isolation, excessive financial burden, a loss of privacy, confusion over changing roles, and guilt. All of these can lead caregivers to seek placement of their loved ones in a nursing home, or even lead to abuse. Relief is needed, but it must be more than just generic "help." Relief must be tailored to the needs of the individual caregiver, and they must be cost effective enough for the caregiver to take advantage of it. Relief can be maximized through education, counseling, care management, support groups, and in-home, daycare, and residential respite.

Dr. Montgomery's advice to those offering aid to caregivers is to know your target population, and avoid arbitrary limitations on services. She recommends maximizing quality, marketing services appropriately, and allocating resources efficiently. She says the most critical element for client satisfaction is to be clear up front with the types of services provided. With this in mind, she says the person who answers the phones is the most important public contact, and should be trained and treated accordingly.

## David Baldrige, Executive Director of the National Indian Council on Aging

David Baldrige returned to Alaska for his second *Common Ground* conference. At *Common Ground 3* he presented *Caregiving and Learning from a Traditional Perspective*, and participated in the panel, *Rising to the Challenge of Diversity: Cultural and Rural/Urban Issues*.

Mr. Baldrige noted that his organization and *Common Ground* attendees shared the common goal of bringing love into the systems that care for elders. He explained that the term “elder” has a slightly different meaning in Native American cultures. Native American elders are spiritual leaders, connected, selfless, traditional cultural guardians, embodying the history of the people, protecting the values and carrying knowledge. A Native elder is a role model who teaches by example. This is important to remember when we become their caregivers.

Mr. Baldrige outlined Native values: family support for home care, importance of the caregiver role, and recognition of the importance of elders in community life. He then asked, if this is so, why is there no effective long term care on the reservations? Why is there so much abuse and neglect of elders? He says that self abuse is preventing the young from becoming affective caregivers. He identified self abuse as drug, alcohol and other substance abuse, overeating (a major factor in the rising rate of diabetes among Native people) and despair. He advocates listening to the elders for ways to counteract this, and to work for positive change one case at a time rather than trying to change the whole system.

### Members of the 22nd Alaska Legislature

*Reaching Your Legislator*, a plenary session moderated by John Havelock, included Representatives Ethan Berkowitz (House Minority Leader, D-Anchorage), Andrew Halcro (R-Anchorage), Bill Hudson (R-Juneau), Ken Lancaster (R-Soldotna) and Senators Johnny Ellis (D-Anchorage), and Gary Wilkin (R-Fairbanks) by teleconference from Juneau. Lt. Governor Fran Ulmer joined the group in Anchorage for the discussion.

The Legislators identified a new fiscal plan for Alaska as the main priority for this session. This will make it difficult to find new funding for some of the issues that concern us as we age, but needn't reduce funding for existing programs. They warned that we must not lose our vision of Alaska in the effort to balance the budget. Fiscal responsibility doesn't necessarily mean cutting essential services, many of which directly benefit Alaska's seniors. They acknowledged the need for adult day care, improvements to the Pioneers' Homes, and support for assisted living. Many of the recommendations of the Legislative Long Term Care Taskforce are being addressed this session, but advocates must continue to push for continued progress. The Legislators said that the best way to cut waste in State programs is to let your elected officials know when and where you find it. They also thanked attendees for making a significant difference in the lives of Alaska's seniors.

### Common Ground 3 Breakout Sessions

*Common Ground 3* included breakout sessions on a variety of topics of interest to seniors and their caregivers. Most of these took the form of panel discussions with audience participation. Panel members were mostly Alaskans with expertise in the topic. Breakout sessions included:

- Questions and answers on Medicaid Waivers
- Caregivers' discussion on accessing services
- Coordination of care by various communities
- Identifying and implementing senior services in one's community
- Community approaches to transportation issues
- End of life issues
- Wills, fraud, and Adult Protective Services
- Discussion on cultural heritage as it relates to elder care
- Caring for the Caregiver

## Gail Hunt, Executive Director of the National Alliance for Caregiving

Gail Hunt presented *Empowering Caregivers at Common Ground 3*. Her organization, the National Alliance for Caregiving (NAC), conducts research and develops national programs for family caregivers and their professional support structure.

NAC studies report a significant impact on caregiver's finances over the course of their activities. The loss averages more than \$659,000 in social security, pension benefits and savings. This is on top of the emotional and physical toll caregiving can have on a person.

Ms. Hunt found that there's real difficulty in getting help to caregivers because they generally don't call themselves caregivers, or don't respond to the term because using it changes their relationship with the family member being cared for. Her organization has found it more effective to offer information in terms of "here's how to take better care" rather than "you need help." They are also focusing on outreach to other parts of the family and society to create a support system for the caregiver.

The NAC held Caregiver Empowerment Summit at which were outlined three action steps:

1. Strengthening caregiver advocacy organizations
2. Launching a national public awareness campaign
3. Creating a grassroots movement to connect caregivers

The organization is also working on training caregivers to become affective advocates in the healthcare system, rather than being brushed aside by health professionals.

There is a National Respite Coalition that advocates a lifespan respite movement. They support legislation specifying that caregivers have a right to respite. So far, five states have such legislation, and five more have legislation pending. The United Kingdom has the Caregiver Recognition Act, which codifies a caregiver's right to services.

Ms. Hunt recommends forming a caregiver commission for each state to advocate for caregiver rights and hopefully serve as a conduit for federal funds.

In closing, Ms. Hunt urged attendees to tune into a four-part PBS series on caregiving this autumn, probably in September, called *And Thou Shalt Honor*.

### **Senior Advocacy Coalition Holds Monthly Teleconferences**

The Senior Advocacy Coalition meets by teleconference from 9:30 to 11:30 AM on the second Friday of every month to address issues affecting Alaska's seniors. The teleconference originates at the Anchorage Senior Center.

For more information on joining a meeting, contact Sue Samet, 261-4140, Lila Berry, 261-4848, or Brenda Brown, 338-6492 in Anchorage; Fred Lau 235-7355 in Homer; or Jill Sandleben 463-6153 in Juneau.

You can read *Alaskan Seniors: Living Longer, Growing Stronger* on line at [www.AlaskaAging.org](http://www.AlaskaAging.org). **To receive email notification when a new issue is on line, contact:**

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