

Alaskan Seniors Living Longer Growing Stronger

from the Alaska Commission on Aging

May 2003

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)

**Commissioners
Chair**

**Marjorie Hays
Soldotna**

**Doris E. Bacus
Kodiak**

**Peggy Burgin
Anchorage**

**Ella Craig
Anchorage**

**Jesse L. Gardner
Anchorage**

**Bob Gregovich, Jr.
Juneau**

**Gene Kane
Anchorage**

**Dan Karmun, Sr.
Nome**

**Banarsi Lal
Fairbanks**

**Ray Matiasowski
Juneau**

**Jonathan Sherwood
Juneau**

**Acting Executive
Director**

**Bob Taylor, Ph.D.
P O Box 110209
Juneau, AK 99811-0209
(907) 465-3250
Bob_Taylor
@admin.state.ak.us**



The Older Americans Month theme for 2003, "What we do makes a difference," highlights the critical roles each of us play in our own older years and those of others.

May is Older Americans Month

For the 40th year, May is Older Americans Month in the U.S. by presidential proclamation. By governor's proclamation, it is also Older Americans Month in Alaska.

Here is the text of Governor Murkowski's proclamation:

"Today, one in six Americans, or 44 million people, is age 60 years or older. To meet the diverse needs of the growing numbers of older persons in the United States, the Older Americans Act, first enacted in 1965, created the primary vehicle for organizing, coordinating, and providing community based services and opportunities for older Americans and their families. The older Americans Act established the U.S. Administration on Aging (AOA) within the Department of Health and Human Services.

As we honor the contributions older Americans make to our everyday life, in this state and our nation, it is imperative that we recognize they play a large role in our communities. Through volunteering their time, and sharing their wisdom, they provide a positive outlook on life to those of all ages.

In May 2003 we will celebrate "Older Americans Month." The theme for this year is "What We do Makes a Difference."

(Continued on Page 2.)

Older Americans Month (continued)

Now, therefore, I Frank H. Murkowski, Governor of the State of Alaska, do hereby proclaim May 2003 as *Older Americans Month* in Alaska, and encourage all Alaskans to recognize the wisdom that is passed from generation to generation is vital to our culture, state, and nation.”

The Governor’s proclamation was issued May 1, 2003.

Nutrition and Exercise: Steps to Healthy Aging

Contrary to popular opinion, growing old doesn’t mean growing infirm. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Aging (AoA), recommends that, by following some common sense guidelines for diet and exercise, older people can add years to their lives—and improve the quality of their lives. It all begins regular medical care, including checkups. Many doctors recommend routine checkups and an annual flu shot for basic preventive health maintenance.

Steps to Eating Better

Healthful eating can help protect against many diseases that affect older people, such as diabetes, obesity, osteoporosis, heart disease, high blood pressure, and more. The AoA through *its USA on the Move* program recommends eight ways to eat better to prevent disease and promote healthful lifestyles:

- Aim for a healthy weight. (Ask your doctor what weight is healthy for *you*.)
- Eat a wide variety of foods.
- Eat more high-fiber foods made from whole grains, beans, and nuts.
- Eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables daily.
- Choose a diet that is low in saturated fat and cholesterol.
- Choose and prepare foods with less salt.
- Eat calcium-rich foods like low-fat milk and cheese for strong bones.
- Drink plenty of beverages and stay hydrated.

Be Physically Active Every Day

It may sound corny, but it’s true: it’s never too late to start. As part of the Healthier US initiative, the president of the United States recommends that Americans young and old incorporate regular physical activity into their everyday routines. Build up gradually from where you are today to a total of 30 minutes or more of physical activity a day. Do activities you enjoy such as biking, dancing, or walking. If you can get exercise doing something that interests you anyway, it will be much easier to keep at it. Your next goal is to keep using your muscles. People can lose as much as 20 to 40 percent of their muscle power as they age, but by continuing to use your muscles, you can remain healthy and independent longer. Another goal is to work on your balance. This is important in preventing falls. Some balance exercises include standing on one foot at a time without any support. Or try getting up from a seated position without using your hands or arms. A last goal is to maintain flexibility. This can help with motions as simple as turning your head to see oncoming cars and being able to reach up to a shelf for a box. Talk to your doctor about which stretching exercises are right for you. Warm up first with some endurance or strength exercises, some easy walking or arm pumping. Remember, stretching should never cause pain—especially joint pain. Check with your doctor before becoming more physically active if you are at high risk for chronic diseases such as heart disease or diabetes, or if you smoke or are obese. Naturally, consult your doctor if you experience any new, undiagnosed symptoms, including chest pain; irregular, rapid, or fluttery heartbeat; severe shortness of breath; or ongoing, significant, and undiagnosed weight loss. Remaining healthy and vital in your older years is a gift you alone can give yourself. Almost anyone can do it—you don’t need special equipment or training, and it can actually become a part of your routine you look forward to! But most of all, eating right and getting exercise will allow you to be independent longer and get more enjoyment out of life.

No Such Thing as Old and In the Way: Seniors Volunteer in Their Communities

Advancements in medicine, public health, and technology have made it more common for people to live much longer—even beyond 90. In 2000, 46 million Americans were age 60 or older. Older adults represent a tremendous growing resource. Experience matters, and older adults have a lifetime of knowledge and skills to share. Older Americans, especially retirees, are in an excellent position to volunteer. Volunteering provides an opportunity to contribute to society and to remain socially and intellectually stimulated. Older adults—with the wealth of life experiences they have attained—constitute some of America’s most valued volunteers.

How Many Older Americans Volunteer?

Research reveals that older Americans are involved in their communities: According to a survey sponsored by the Independent Sector, in 1998, a total of 26.4 million older volunteers (aged 55+) gave approximately 5.6 billion hours of their time at a value of \$77.2 billion. A survey conducted in 2002 by Peter D. Hart Research Associates found that 56 percent of the respondents, who ranged in age from 50 to 75, said that community service was or would be an important part of their retirement. The survey also found that more than half (57 percent) of respondents had volunteered in the past three years, and that 25 percent were devoting at least five hours a week to community work. The McDowell Group’s year 2000 study, *Issues Affecting the Economic Well-Being of Alaska Seniors*, estimates that 40% of Alaskans over age 60 volunteer an average of 20 hours a month, the equivalent of 2,400 full time jobs, worth about \$60 million a year.

What Are the Health Benefits of Volunteering?

Increasingly, however, studies indicate that there are real health reasons for older persons to volunteer. Research evidence proves that for older adults in particular, volunteering offers very real personal, physical, and emotional benefits. While researchers agree that additional research is needed, all also agree that volunteering improves the overall quality of life for older persons because it gives meaning and purpose to their lives. It also offers the following specific benefits:

- **Volunteers are healthier** Studies show that older persons who volunteer have fewer medical problems than the senior population in general.
- **Volunteering increases one’s physical health and agility** Volunteer activities help older persons stay physically active. Older adults who engage in regular physical activity, whether moderate or intense, have lower incidences of heart disease and diabetes and are at lower risk for other cardiovascular diseases.
- **Volunteering increases one’s cognitive and mental well-being** This points to the “use it or lose it” theory for cognitive ability. Volunteering helps keep the brain engaged, which helps protect the memory as people age.

Volunteer Opportunities

Older volunteers are impacting virtually every aspect of American society including health, education, social services, youth, culture, the arts, and the environment. The following represents some of the ways older American can get involved:

Each year about seven to nine million older people use Older Americans Act (OAA) services, whose delivery largely depends upon the efforts of half a million volunteers. These volunteers work through a nationwide network of federal, state, and local organizations that offer opportunities and services to active older persons as well as those elderly who need help. Examples of volunteer activities include assisting at group meals sites and delivering meals to the home-bound elderly; escorting frail older persons to health care services, on shopping errands, and to other needed services; counseling older persons in a variety of areas including health promotion, nutrition, legal and financial concerns; assisting in senior center, day care, and other group programs for seniors. Anyone interested in volunteering in Older Americans Act programs should contact their Area Agency on Aging. To locate an Area Agency on Aging near you, contact the Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116 or visit www.eldercare.gov.

(Concluded on Page 4.)

