

**“The Future of Aging in Alaska”
Fireweed Place (Juneau) Community Forum
Tuesday, March 29th, 2005**

Seniors Only

A number of Juneau seniors expressed the desire for a seniors-only forum after the Feb. 25th Juneau Community Forum jointly sponsored by the Alaska Commission on Aging and the Juneau Commission on Aging. They felt that the presence of a large number of care providers at the earlier event inhibited their ability to express their views as openly and completely as they might have wished. The Juneau Commission on Aging responded by scheduling a seniors-only event at the Fireweed Place senior apartments. Lorilyn Swanson, chair of the JCOA and manager of Fireweed Place, coordinated the event and provided plentiful refreshments. 23 seniors attended the Fireweed Place event to share their perspective on the same four overall topics discussed at the earlier forum (Community Resources, Financial Security, Social Well-Being, and Health and Long-Term Care).

Joe Sonneman of the Juneau Commission on Aging facilitated the discussion. Without the presence of government officials, caregivers, and others with a personal agenda, the relaxed atmosphere lent itself to a very frank, open discussion among those present. Participants discussed each topic for 10 minutes with those seated at their table, and then reported their observations and recommendations back to the larger group, where additional discussion took place. MaryAnn VandeCastle, a planner from the Alaska Commission on Aging, was present as an observer.

Recommendations are listed by topic below. Those mentioned by more than one small group are listed more than once.

Community Resources: “Inform Us of Available Services”

The primary focus of participants was the need for seniors to have a well-known, easily available source of information about available services when they need them. They agreed that most seniors who are healthy and active pay little attention to community resources and other support systems – until they have a personal crisis and need help immediately. At that point, they are often confused about where to turn, and may have difficulty locating the assistance they need

within the patchwork of different programs, eligibility requirements, and application processes.

They emphasized that they do not all have computers, nor do they *want* to learn to use a computer to locate information about local services. They would like to be able to speak to someone on the phone (not an answering machine) and/or have access to reliable printed material about the services available in the community.

Other concerns included the worker shortage in senior services (it was suggested that volunteers may be able to perform some of the needed duties), and the need to make contact with isolated seniors who may be unable to reach out for the care and resources they need.

All Community Resources Recommendations:

- There is a shortage of paid workers for elderly services. Volunteers may be a solution – there are lots of different activities available.
- People are often not familiar with available services, if they have had not had occasion to use them before. They need to know where to go for information.
- There is an acute need for a Juneau directory or resource booklet to answer questions about what help is available here. (Lorilyn mentioned that she is working on a newcomers' booklet for seniors.)
- Agencies need to remember that not everyone is on the internet! Provide information in more senior-friendly formats – booklets, phone hotlines (staffed by real people!), etc.
- Isolation is a problem for some seniors. They have no daily contacts. We need to recognize that they need more help. They can be depressed and even need mental health care. They may not recognize it and may not know where to go for help or for a diagnosis.
- Have knowledgeable people on phone information lines – not a recorded message.

Other Community Resources Comments:

- Juneau is a great place to retire – a closely knit community where people are helpful to one another. One can become isolated in their own home in a larger community. Juneau is a good spot for active, healthy seniors who are able to care for themselves.

Financial Security: “Help Us Preserve Our Hard-Earned Assets”

On this topic, participants identified health care costs as the greatest drain on seniors’ finances, and suggested that something be done to address this source of anxiety and hardship even before addressing the stresses on the Social Security system (which they want to keep intact). Seniors would like access to a financial advisor who can show them how to preserve their assets for the future. They would like to be able to qualify for Medicaid without spending down all of their life savings; in fact, they believe a universal, single-payer health care system would be the most equitable means of providing for everyone’s health care needs.

Other suggestions included beginning financial education in the elementary schools, educating seniors about financial scams and identity theft, paying a living wage to all workers, offering higher interest rates for savings, and having senior job programs for all who are interested in working (not just those with very low income).

All Financial Security Recommendations:

- Protect seniors’ financial assets. Have a senior financial advisor to contact with questions. Many seniors face decisions about what to do with assets from the sale of a home, how to set up trusts for children and grandchildren, or need help with a will. Attorneys can advise them, but are very expensive.
- Provide an advocate for elderly people who want to sell their home or have work done on their home. Seniors often have trouble locating reliable workers able to perform repairs and other home services.
- The government should put out a list of do’s and don’ts regarding the common types of fraud that seniors are subjected to: how to handle their personal information to protect it from theft, etc. (Someone suggested that Fireweed Place buy a shredder; Lorilyn responded that she has one available!)
- More and more money goes for medical and caregiving services as we age. Seniors want to see Medicaid protect some of seniors’ resources so they have something left and are not paupers. (It was suggested that Medicaid regulations be checked – they do allow you to keep some assets. Ditto for the Pioneer Home regulations – they also allow seniors to keep some things.)
- The government should have a single-payer health care system that would include seniors, middle-class people, everyone.

- “Watch the pennies, and the dollars will take care of themselves.” Financial education should start with children. Make it a part of the school curriculum. Start children saving when they’re young.
- Educate people about financial scams, ID theft, etc. (It was noted that AARP has a program that does this.)
- Medicare and Medicaid need more urgent help right now than Social Security does. We need to find a way to preserve these programs.
- Schools should encourage saving, starting in kindergarten.
- Pay a living wage to all workers and provide tax incentives to save for retirement. So many make minimum wage, which is not enough to begin saving money.
- Leave Social Security alone until there is a valid fiscal plan for changing it.
- Current interest rates on savings don’t encourage people to save!
- Senior job programs are only for those at poverty level; apparently they’ve decided to “leave the jobs to the people who have no money.”

Social Well-Being: “Acknowledge That We’ve Got a Lot to Offer”

Participants felt that volunteer work *by* seniors and *for* seniors is key to keeping seniors integrated into the community. In addition to helping other seniors, they have a lot to offer younger people, and are open to learning what young people have to teach them as well. Seniors have a strong need for intergenerational involvement. They also would like recognition for all the service and enrichment they provide to the community.

It was suggested that seniors make the effort to remain active, that they turn off their TVs, that they take a driving course, and that organizations or events with senior participants hold their meetings during the day to make it easier for seniors to attend.

All Social Well-Being Recommendations:

- Hold all senior meetings during the day instead of at night, all year round. It’s hard for seniors to drive at night, and they get tired early.
- It would be helpful to have a list of all local groups that volunteer, such as the National Senior Service Corps. (Joe noted that there is a Juneau resource directory of local organizations, but it’s only available online; seniors can ask a librarian to find information they need on local programs.)
- Provide an incentive for younger people to help older people. Currently it’s mostly seniors volunteering to help seniors. “Youth act like those over

- 60 have a social disease.” It would be good to have a volunteer corps of younger folks to help older folks.
- People should remain active all their lives. Turn off the TV! Challenge yourself, physically and mentally.
 - Get the younger generation to mentor the elderly and vice versa. We can educate each other, and listen to each other’s problems.
 - Hold meetings on weekend afternoons. We don’t want to drive at night. Pay attention to these kinds of practical details when dealing with seniors.
 - Give more recognition that seniors play a vital role in their communities.
 - Make volunteering easier. The paperwork can be discouraging. Document seniors’ volunteer work and use this information to get other things we want to see accomplished.
 - Accept the inevitable (aging), but don’t give in to it.
 - Seniors should take the AARP driving course.
 - Get younger people involved in mentoring and volunteering.
 - A lot of volunteer hours are given to Alaska by seniors. Pick one day when ALL senior volunteers stay home, to make the point that our services are substantial.
 - Offer more intergenerational mixing, such as tutoring kids (the nation should have a program for this). Juneau has a strong senior volunteer corps – they don’t get enough credit.
 - Keep in mind practical details such as the fact that some seniors are not computer literate. Provide information about events, activities, programs, and other social opportunities in a senior-friendly format.
 - It’s very helpful to have meetings such as this one to get issues out of the closet and talked about. It helps alleviate the sense of isolation.
 - Seniors would like more winter activities – a game night, an organized walk, play-readings, or going to the pool for exercise.

Other Social Well-Being Comments:

- “I wish I’d known more about the ‘culture of aging’.”

Health and Long-Term Care: “Provide Care for All”

Many seniors believe that the health care system could be vastly improved by providing universal Canadian-style coverage for all citizens. They feel the current system is ultimately unsustainable, given the inflation of medical costs, and discriminates against middle class people, who can’t afford to pay for all the services they may need. Seniors use alternative health care and would like to see it covered by Medicare and Medicaid. They would like encouragement and

education about adopting healthier lifestyles. Support systems such as respite care, support groups, increased outpatient care, etc. would be appreciated by seniors and caregivers. They would also like more information about end-of-life issues.

All Health and Long-Term Care Recommendations:

- We need more healthy lifestyle, disease prevention, and disease management education.
- We'd like to have exercise buddies – we need the encouragement to climb stairs, go for a walk, etc.
- Alternative and integrative medicine is very good for seniors. However, the products needed can be very expensive. Medicare and Medicaid should pay for these items.
- Consider providing universal health care.
- We need more respite for family caregivers.
- More outpatient care should be available – such as hospice, etc.
- The community should offer support groups for various purposes – dealing with specific diseases, etc.
- Provide healthier snacks at meetings.
- Take a look at licensing requirements, training requirements, better pay, all the components of providing any kind of health care, to help allay the worker shortage.
- It's scary to see people with no health coverage whatsoever. Have a Canadian-style health care system. Put in place a 1% tax increase so that all would be covered.
- Medicaid is in trouble. More cuts in services are coming. We are *afraid* of the slashing of Medicare and Medicaid.
- Medicine can keep us alive longer, but we can't afford it!
- Income levels strongly influence what seniors can receive in health care services; the middle class can't afford what doctors say they need.
- Seniors should sign up on the Pioneer Home's waiting list as soon as they turn 65, in case they need it later.
- Send information to individual seniors about advance directives and other end-of-life paperwork such as living wills, power of attorney, etc. (Lorilyn said she has copies of advance directives available.)

Other Issues: Comments on Senior Transportation in Juneau

- Transit is a big issue in Juneau. Someone has to help with senior transportation. Juneau claims they can't afford half-hour bus service.

- Juneau is very fortunate to have Care-A-Van. Also SAIL sells taxi tokens which let seniors ride taxis at a cut rate. Juneau Taxi is the company that provides the service. [Note: People age 60 or older and those who with a disability can purchase the tokens for 30 cents on the dollar, e.g., \$15 for \$50 worth, \$30 for \$100 worth, etc. They need to fill out a short application at the SAIL office and provide proof of their age or disability at the time of their first purchase.]

In Closing: Thanks for Listening

Participants in the Fireweed Place forum said they enjoyed the process and appreciated the opportunity to air their views on some of the issues that affect their lives. They expressed the fervent hope that their suggestions will have an impact on planning for services at the federal, state, and local levels.