

AGING IN PLACE

Health Brief

Introduction

As the percentage of our older population increases, more people need assistance, but there are fewer people to fund it and even fewer care givers to deliver it. At this time there is a noted lack of community agencies coordination of service as well. An alternative to high-cost institutional care, aging in place is one solution where older adults can stay in their home; however, mobility, social and health related changes may influence difficulty in doing so. When asked, most adults state they want to age in place, but that requires a structure of support and coordination from the community. Providing an aging system may be easier in an urban area where resources are in closer proximity and naturally occurring older populations congregate within buildings or communities. The focus on health care when discussing aging in place is not allowing full realization of all that is needed to support this way of life, especially for rural areas like Cerro Gordo County.

Data

In Cerro Gordo County, Iowa, 20.1% of the population is ages 65 and older whereas Iowa's 65 and older population hovers around 16% and the national rate is at 15%ⁱ. Between 2000 and 2010, there was nearly a 5% decrease in population within Cerro Gordo County. A population decrease is due to death or mobility. Most of the decline is associated with younger people moving out of the County. Although Cerro Gordo County's overall disability statistics are higher than state and national rates, those aged 65 and older experience disability at a lower percentage than the Iowa and national averages. Veterans are disproportionately represented in rural areas; in Cerro Gordo more than 11% of the population is Veterans (Iowa's rate is 8.9% and the U.S. is 8.3%). Those ages 65 and older account for 47% of the Veteran populationⁱⁱ.

Poverty is an issue in this County with 31.76% or 13,461 adults living in households with income below 200% of the Federal Poverty Levelⁱⁱⁱ. Poverty creates barriers to access including health services, healthy food, and other necessities that contribute to poor health status and can be associated with institutionalized care for older adults. The median year for housing structure builds is 1956 with almost 56% of County homes built prior to 1960; older homes take more maintenance to keep them safe and secure.

Eighteen percent of the County Medicare fee-for-service population has depression (Iowa's rate is 15.7% and the U.S.'s rate is 16.2%); more than 25% has diabetes and approximately 25% has heart disease (both higher than Iowa's average)^{iv}. Heart disease and diabetes continue to kill Cerro Gordo County residents at a higher rate than Iowans on average^v. These data culminate to show that Cerro Gordo County's aging population is growing while the young adult population is declining. The older population consists of Veterans and mainly of those without disability. Barriers to aging in place include poverty, older homes and serious health conditions.

Survey data gathered by the Cerro Gordo County Department of Public Health shows that the community is recognizing the need to address aging in place. Two similar surveys distributed to the community-at-large asked respondents what they felt were the top three health issues in the County. The top five issues were ranked from both surveys, given five years apart (in 2011 and in 2016). Obesity was the top issue, followed by cancer for both years' responses. Rounding out the top five for 2011 and 2016 were diabetes and access to mental health services; however, in 2011 high blood pressure was in the top five, but was replaced with aging issues in 2016.

A 2015 Cerro Gordo County Aging in Place survey indicated that approximately 14.4% of the respondents were not safe and comfortable in their current home due to fear of falling, fear of not being

able to maintain their home and fear of moving around the home safely. Also noted were neighborhood crime and safety worries. Moreover, nearly 10% of respondents did not have a reliable family member or friend to assist when needed. To stay living in the home as they age, respondents indicated a need for the following top 10 responses in descending order:

1. Help with housekeeping and yard work
2. Help with groceries and errands
3. Financial support to afford rent or home payment
4. Transportation to appointments, running errands, etc.
5. Exercise services to stay mobile
6. Help with personal hygiene
7. Financial support for health services
8. Socialization opportunity
9. Medication and disease treatment service
10. Changes to my home to make it safe to live in^{vi}

Cerro Gordo County residents are concerned with aging issues and in particular how each of them will age in place.

Analysis

Never before has the County population included as many older adults as today. Major factors such as the baby boomer generation and persons living longer with chronic conditions are uniting and changing the way that health is defined and addressed. What does that mean for the overall health of Cerro Gordo County?

Today's aging in place infrastructure is non-existent; therefore, it is unreliable and unstable. Infrastructure, technologies, housing, funding sources and the services available are being patched together to address aging issues as they present per individual. Society as a whole is failing to systematically address the substructure necessary for successful aging in place.

There are three overarching principals emerging from these data including mental and physical functioning, health status and socialization. Within these principals, considerable variability exists. Mental and physical functioning includes housing, transportation, medication and activity level. Health status includes disease treatment services, multiple disease, behavior health, cognitive and other functions, falls and other issues. As expected, socialization may be the foundational layer to the two others. Keeping the mind functioning, interacting with people, attending events and visiting with people are at the basic need level of humans.

Conclusion

Research documented that community-based programs and policies can benefit older adults through interventions to address aforementioned issues; however, new details are emerging that work needs to begin on the policy/infrastructure level and cannot address health care exclusively. The consequences of not addressing aging in place will be dramatic for housing, healthcare and economic sectors. It has the potential to be devastating for the health and social services workforces to meet the demand of the care needs of this population.

If we fail to address aging in place comprehensively, neighborhood by neighborhood, we fail an entire generation of people and sacrifice the health of a community.

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It is public health that is responsible for much of the increase of length of life and now will be responsible for addressing healthy aging in place. Public Health is primed to embrace this issue and address it through a network of collaborators including those considered non-traditional partners. Significant improvement is necessary to today's current uncoordinated approach. Successful aging in place can be achieved in Cerro Gordo County by focusing on the following seven pillars:

- Data & Community Assessment,
- Community Environment & Public Policy
- Housing
- Aging Care
- Social Access
- Professional Development
- Sustainability

Through these pillars lie several categories to include transportation initiatives (walking, parking, street crossing, paratransit, larger signage, wider lanes), suitable housing stock, mixed use zoning, mixed generation neighborhoods, family caregiver supports, policy change to housing tax, financial assistance for home repair, legal protection, safe environments, neighborhood skill sharing service, fall prevention, chore service, home safety, coordinated in-home/institution medical care (primary, specialist, nursing, diabetes prevention, telehealth), social engagement, community education and sustainable funding.

The Cerro Gordo County Department of Public Health is committed to developing the evolution and integration of aging in place to a responsive, effective system that involves the care recipient, community and neighborhood services, higher education, policy makers, service providers, businesses and so many more.

ⁱ United States Census Bureau. (2017). Quick Facts: Cerro Gordo County Iowa.

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045216/19033,00>

ⁱⁱ United States Census Bureau. (n.d.). American Community Survey 2011-2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ United States Census Bureau. (n.d.). American Community Survey 2011-2015.

^{iv} Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. (2014).

^v Iowa Department of Public Health. (2016). Vital Statistics of Iowa. <https://idph.iowa.gov/health-statistics/data>

^{vi} K. Huinker. (2015). Aging in Place Survey: Cerro Gordo County Iowa Residents.