



Gilda Ceppos tries out a recumbent tricycle under the watchful eye of Ken Bradford of Ken's Bike-Ski-Board while other seniors wait their turn at a travel training session last October at the Davis Senior Center. Wayne Tilcock/Enterprise file photo

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

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The long-awaited silver tsunami has arrived.

Baby boomers hitting their senior years are the fastest growing population in Yolo County and have been for a while, increasing demand for everything from health care to respite care, affordable senior housing to basic safety-net services like food assistance.

At the same time, the prolonged recession resulted in funding cuts for many programs targeting seniors, something Assemblywoman Mariko Yamada of Davis saw close up while chairing the Assembly's Committee on Aging.

Of all of the health and welfare programs that saw reductions in funding in recent years, Yamada said, cuts on services to the aging "were overwhelmingly disproportionate."

"It was really shocking how disproportionate," she added.

Those cuts have impacted everything from Meals on Wheels to in-home care to mental health services for the elderly.

And while the economy has begun turning around, and some funding has been restored, many issues remain, Yamada said, particularly when it comes to seniors in poverty.

“We know that children get a lot of attention,” she said. “Child poverty is in the media quite a bit. But elderly poverty, for women in particular, is a big issue.”

Yamada’s remarks came during the 2014 Yolo Healthy Aging Summit in Woodland on Friday, where policymakers, caregivers and senior advocates gathered to identify and begin addressing gaps in services that continue to exist for seniors. Topping the list: affordable housing, transportation, mental health care and services for caregivers.

This was the second such summit held in Yolo County since the creation of a Yolo Health Aging Alliance in 2012.

Taking a page from the successful Yolo County Children’s Alliance — which pulls together a wide assortment of public and nonprofit agencies to address issues of concern to children — county officials created the aging alliance to do much the same for seniors.

Chaired by Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis, the alliance has focused in the past two years on advocacy, collaboration and education, with an emphasis on coordinating community-based services.

Those local efforts have put Yolo County ahead of the curve in many ways, Yamada said, but much work needs to be done.

By the numbers

The numbers help explain why.

Between 2000 and 2010, the number of Yolo County residents between the ages of 55 and 64 increased by 74 percent, from 11,613 residents to 20,159 — the biggest increase for any population group in the county and more than twice that of one of the next fastest growing groups — residents between the ages of 65 and 74, which increased 31 percent, according to county data.

Those over the age of 85, meanwhile, increase by 51 percent, from 1,973 residents to 2,974.

How to help house, feed, transport and care for those residents likely will be an ongoing issue for the county for years to come, advocates say.

Meea Kang, president of Domus Development, said concerns on the housing front involve both affordability and location. Her company is building senior housing in Winters that aims to address both issues: The 63 affordable housing apartments will be located along Grant Avenue, providing easy access to medical care, grocery stores and other services.

But building affordable housing has been made more difficult by the loss of redevelopment funds and lack of funding from the federal government, she said.

“The resources for senior housing are not growing but the needs are,” Kang said.

“We have to seize opportunities in front of us,” she said, “for healthy, walkable communities.”

Elaine Roberts Musser, a longtime advocate for seniors, agreed, saying communities need to focus on infill projects for senior housing so older residents have easy access to needed services.

Failure to do so, Musser said, will only increase the need for transportation services for seniors, and “we already don’t have enough transportation services.”

Getting around

How well seniors who are reliant on public transportation are able to get around in Yolo County depends largely on where they live.

While 85 percent of the county’s residents live within the city limits of Davis, West Sacramento and Woodland and have access — at the very least — to YoloBus, Musser said, the remaining 15 percent live in more rural areas where public transportation can be nonexistent.

When seniors reach a point where they are no longer able to safely drive, she said, “they need to know they have options. But some communities have better options than others.”

Davis comes out on top in terms of options, thanks largely to the city’s relationship with UC Davis and the availability of Unitrans, which seniors ride for free. Davis also has Davis Community Transit, which provides transportation services for the disabled; YoloBus and YoloBus Special, which provides paratransit services; as well as taxis and airport shuttles.

Additionally, the city has implemented travel training for seniors, Musser noted.

Throughout the year, the Davis Senior Center hosts trainings where seniors can try out Unitrans as a group, learning how the schedules work, where stops are, how to get on and get off the bus and any other information that might be needed to reduce fear and anxiety about taking public transportation.

Travel trainings in recent years also have included bicycles, with seniors able to try out different cycling options, from motorized rides to big tricycles.

Musser said she’s even gotten back on the bike after many years.

But outside of Davis, transportation options for seniors rapidly decline.

Woodland and West Sacramento are limited primarily to YoloBus and YoloBus Special, which are not always ideal, noted Provenza, who said it can take two hours to travel by bus just between those two cities.

Seniors in rural areas, on the other hand, are pretty much out of luck when it comes to public transportation, just one of many concerns they face, since everything from mental health services to food assistance may be in short supply, officials said.

Fighting hunger

The Yolo Food Bank has instituted a number of programs in recent years aimed at fighting hunger in the far corners of rural Yolo County, areas where grocery stores are few and far apart and transportation for low-income people of all ages limited.

Just how many of those residents are seniors hasn't been documented, but what has been found is a sizable group of seniors throughout the county rely on free food assistance from the Food Bank to get by.

The report "Hunger in America 2014," released this summer, found that of the 44,400 Yolo County residents who received assistance from the Yolo Food Bank and its partner providers, nearly 40 percent are over the age of 60 — a number that surprised local officials.

The survey also found that 57 percent of clients have to choose between paying for food or paying for medicine or medical care, with 20 percent facing that choice every month; more than 30 percent have to choose between paying for food and paying for utilities; and 29 percent reported choosing between paying for food or paying for transportation in the past year.

Demand also has been growing for the county's Meals on Wheels program, which provides daily hot meals to homebound seniors and community meals for seniors at various locations around the county. The program has had to rely more than ever on private support in the wake of funding cuts for elderly nutrition programs nationwide.

Mental health

Another area of concern is mental health care.

Nancy Edgar, supervisor of the Older Adult Team for Yolo County Mental Health since 2006, said the downturn in the economy meant a lot of cutbacks in her department, with the team only being rebuilt slowly.

The good news, she told those attending the aging summit on Friday, is that two nurses were recently hired for Adult Protective Services and funding has made tele-psychiatry

possible as well, allowing for treatment of seniors even when they have difficulty getting to mental health care professionals.

But the biggest gap in services is for those having symptoms secondary to a medical issue or dementia, and of particular concern is depression.

“We need to prioritize depression,” said Dawn Myers Purkey, program manager of the Yolo Adult Day Health Center.

Many seniors are not being treated for their depression, she said, and elder suicide “is an epidemic.”

“We need to start paying very close attention, especially to men and those with chronic conditions,” she said.

Suicides and attempted suicides were named one of the top local concerns by the Yolo County Health Council in its annual report released earlier this year.

“We have more deaths from suicide than homicide,” Dr. Michael Wilkes, then chair of the Health Council, told county supervisors back in July.

And while adolescents accounted for the most hospital admissions for suicide and self-injury, he said, seniors over the age of 65 accounted for the next most.

Overall, hospital admissions for attempted suicide increased by 130 percent between 2008 and 2012 from 33 to 76, the council reported, and that didn’t include attempts that did not result in hospitalization.

Caregivers, too

Seniors themselves were not the only topic of concern at the aging summit on Friday — their caregivers were as well.

The need for respite care and in-home support is growing along with the aging population, said Peggy Phelps, a longtime social worker with the Yolo Adult Day Health Center.

Respite care is something the center provides on a daily basis — a place for seniors to socialize, exercise, eat and receive medical attention while their caregivers work or catch a breather and by doing so, keeps all of these seniors out of nursing homes.

But the center is packed daily now, with more than 30 people on the waiting list, Phelps said, evidence of the growing population outstripping the availability of services.

Breakout sessions during the aging summit gave those in attendance the opportunity to talk about their top concerns and resulted in what Provenza dubbed a lengthy “to-do” list for county officials.

Topping the list: the need for affordable senior housing that offers a continuum of care; transportation that addresses not only seniors living in more isolated rural areas but also those who struggle to use public transportation because of issues like hearing loss, lack of mobility, lack of access to the Internet and language barriers; and addressing the many families who fall in the no-man’s land of care: who earn too much to qualify for Medi-Cal and in-home support services but who don’t have enough to pay for it themselves.

Noting the lengthy to-do list, Provenza offered the quote, “Problems are only opportunities in work clothes,” and said the next step “is to begin working on these problems.”

Learn more about the Yolo Healthy Aging Alliance by visiting www.yolohealthyaging.org or contacting executive director Sheila Allen at 530-400-3471.

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