

AGING GRACEFULLY

SUMMARY

Sonoma County has a population of more than 483,000 residents of which 21% or over 100,000 are 60 years of age or older. This number is estimated to increase to 24% of the population by 2020.

The Grand Jury researched existing low-cost and no-cost County services available to seniors to help them live well as they age. Assistance is not limited to the disabled, homeless, those with low income, or veterans. Many services exist for seniors regardless of their income levels. Services can include those that help an individual remain active, mentally stimulated, and productive.

The Grand Jury discovered that written information on services for seniors is plentiful and readily available at numerous locations including the Internet. This allows seniors, family members, and friends to research services. Translations of some frequently viewed topics are available in more than 50 languages through the Sonoma County Network of Care website. Publications are well organized and easy to read, and information is grouped by categories. The Senior Resource Guide which is published by the Sonoma County Area Agency on Aging (Agency on Aging) is available in English and Spanish. Information is available by calling the Agency on Aging and TTY access is available for the hearing impaired.

We all age; there is no escaping it, so why not do it gracefully?

BACKGROUND

The Grand Jury's historical records indicated that it had been 15 years since the Agency on Aging, a division of the Sonoma County Human Services Department, had been reviewed.

APPROACH

The Grand Jury interviewed staff from the Agency on Aging. Senior centers, care facilities, hospitals, and various other locations throughout the County were visited to ascertain the availability of Agency on Aging printed materials.

DISCUSSION

The Agency on Aging is a division of the Sonoma County Human Services Department. Its focus is promoting independence, dignity, and quality of life for seniors. Many residents may not be aware of these services or know whether they qualify.

The Agency on Aging, with input from its 21-member Advisory Council and community members, coordinates, plans, and allocates Federal, State, and County funds for services for persons 60 and older. The growth of the senior population will have major implications for both individual and community life. It will challenge families and community organizations to provide the support seniors need to stay engaged, independent, healthy, and safe.

Examples of services and benefits offered to seniors 60 years or older include:

Health Insurance Counseling and Advocacy Program (HICAP)

This program is staffed by trained volunteers who assist seniors through the complex and often confusing maze of Medicare. Volunteers explain how the Medicare program works with other insurance programs such as Medicare supplemental policies, HMOs, and long-term care insurance.

In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS)

For seniors requiring full or part-time personal or domestic care, IHSS social workers take an application over the phone to assess the need. The application is followed up with a home visit. Services can include assistance with bathing, dressing, cooking, and cleaning. The Public Authority section of the IHSS serves as the employer of record for negotiating wages and benefits. The Public Authority maintains a registry of screened caregivers for referral to IHSS consumers. Participation in the program requires that the senior in need must be low-income and must meet at least one of the following criteria: minimum age 65, blind, or permanently disabled as certified by a medical provider.

Adult Protective Services (APS)

Any person can report suspected elder and dependent adult abuse through the APS 24/7 hotline. The report is anonymous and remains confidential. The APS investigates physical, sexual, psychological, and financial abuse, abandonment, abduction, isolation, and neglect. Crisis intervention and voluntary short-term case management can be provided. The APS works closely with law enforcement and other community agencies to help resolve the abuse or neglect and provides the client with information on local resources.

Fall Prevention Classes

To help prevent and educate seniors on falls, the Agency on Aging has implemented an eight-week course called "A Matter of Balance: Managing Concerns about Falls." The program teaches strategies to lessen the fear of falling and to reduce the risk of falling. Topics include problem solving and safety-promoting lifestyle strategies and exercises to improve strength, coordination, and balance. A home safety evaluation can also be performed. The ongoing courses are held in various locations in the County. Class size is limited. A \$20 donation is suggested, but no one is turned away for lack of funds.

Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender Population (GLBT)

According to the U.S. Gay/Lesbian Index, Sonoma County ranks ninth in the nation in concentration of gay/lesbian couples. Some GLBT seniors do not seek help or public assistance and may not have traditional family support. They can be isolated from the GLBT community and may avoid accessing the available services due to fear of discrimination, real or perceived. The Agency on Aging advocates for comprehensive health and social services for the GLBT community and continually promotes education of service providers around issues facing the GLBT population.

Volunteer Opportunities

Many seniors volunteer in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and places of worship on an informal basis. Through the Volunteer Center of Sonoma County, seniors can also volunteer their time and expertise in a multitude of other ways, including providing transportation, participation at food banks, community gardens, school breakfast programs, and literacy and tutoring programs. In 2011, the Volunteer Center's Retired Senior Volunteer Program had 825 active volunteers and reported an increase in the number of people seeking volunteer work.

COMMENDATION

During the Grand Jury's investigation, we found the staff at Agency on Aging to be knowledgeable, enthusiastic in their support of seniors, accommodating, and responsive to our inquiries and requests for documents.

FINDINGS

- F1. There is a variety of services and support resources available for seniors by phone, in person, in printed materials, and on the Internet.
- F2. There are a number of County-run, non-profit, and private senior centers throughout the County.

RECOMMENDATIONS

None.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2010 Federal Census
- Aging and Living Well in Sonoma County - May 2012
- Network of Care website - www.sonoma.networkofcare.org
- Senior Resource Guide - January 2013
- Sonoma County Area Agency on Aging website - www.socoaaa.org
- Sonoma County Area Agency on Aging - Annual Report 2011-2012
- Sonoma County Area Agency on Aging - Area Plan 2009-2012
- Sonoma County Volunteer Center - www.volunteernow.org

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