

## Counties to face challenges of changing demographics

Over the next 25 years, the U.S. population is expected to undergo a dramatic demographic shift. The population is aging and the percentage of older adults nationwide is increasing. Between 2000 and 2030, the number of older Americans will grow from about 12 percent of the population to 20 percent. This demographic change is due to two main reasons. First, baby boomers—those born between 1946 and 1964—are rapidly approaching retirement age. Second, older seniors are living longer than ever before. In fact, the group of seniors 85 and older is the fastest growing segment of the population.

Counties will face challenges as the population ages, but will also benefit from a more experienced workforce and from the wisdom of its older citizens. As the population ages, counties may need to direct more resources toward issues that affect seniors including: health and wellness, housing choices, financial security, work and retirement, transportation, civic engagement, caregivers, and education.

### **Increased Need for Health Care Services**

In 2010, the first baby boomers will become eligible for Medicare. As the baby boomers age, health care professionals anticipate an increased demand for their services. Not surprisingly, older people require more health care services than younger people. For example, in 1999, older adults had four times as many days in the hospital as those under 65. Seniors also suffer from more chronic conditions, such as heart disease and arthritis.

### **Increased Need for Public Transportation**

Most people prefer to live in their own homes as they grow older and, as they age, many older adults lose the ability to drive. Many seniors live in suburban or rural settings which lack public transportation options. Isolation becomes an increasing problem because of the lack of transportation access and mobility.

### **An Older Workforce**

The number of workers above age 55 is expected to grow by more than 10.2 million by 2012, making this group the fastest growing of any age group in the work force. An American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) study reports that nearly 70% of workers between age 50 and 70 plan to work well into their retirement years or never retire at all. Consequently, employers will need to design benefit plans and workplace options that appeal to older workers.

### **Increased Civic Involvement**

Because of their lifelong experiences, older people are a valuable resource for local communities. About 40% of adults age 50 to 70 volunteer actively and nearly 30% of seniors age 70 and older volunteer. Volunteering provides seniors with an increased sense of self esteem while helping them to feel useful and productive. Also, voter turnout is highest among those aged 65-74 and they are often the best informed voters.

### **What Can Counties Do?**

Counties can start preparing for the upcoming demographic changes. For example, counties can begin updating courthouses and other public buildings to make them more accessible to individuals who have impaired vision, hearing or mobility. Counties can also develop senior-friendly workplace policies.

Counties should work with the community to find creative solutions to satisfy the needs of older citizens. Also, counties should take advantage of the wisdom of their older citizens and treat them as valued members of the community.

For more information, contact CTSI at 303-861-0507.

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