

More Older People Want to Age in Their Own Home

By Linda M. Tetor, Director, Steuben County Office for Aging

The face of America is changing. Increasingly we are becoming a nation of elders. As many as 77 million baby boomers will begin to “come of age” in 2010—a virtual tidal wave of older persons. In New York State and in each of the 62 counties in NY the impact on individuals, families, taxpayers, and the entire health care system will be staggering, but at the same time there will be surprising opportunities for change and progress.

Consider these statistics: in New York State, the most rapid growth in the last nearly 10 years has occurred among the oldest and the frailest population groups. The rate of growth for those over 85 has been 28.2 percent while the rate of growth for impaired individuals has been over 16 percent.

In Steuben County, the population growth projections are even more dramatic. The percentage of people over age 85 is expected to increase by 54 percent between the years 2000 and 2015, with almost 60 percent needing assistance with the tasks of daily living and over 50 percent suffering from Alzheimer’s Disease and other related dementias.

Steuben County has long been preparing for this phenomenon. In 2000 the Director and Advisory Council of the Office for the Aging created a private fund to address aging in place issues and to prepare the county for the coming tidal wave of older persons that would challenge families and the traditional methods of providing care. The Steuben Senior Services Fund, Inc. (SSSF) was begun as a way of promoting a long-term partnership of public, private and voluntary community resources in order to position Steuben County to better respond to the needs of its older citizens.

Aging in Place is receiving a great deal of press lately, but it is really an old concept with a new twist. Before the advent of nursing homes and other elder-care facilities, most people aged at home surrounded by their family members who lived nearby and who provided much of the support needed for them to age in place. As family structures changed, more women began to work outside the home, and our society became more mobile, various long-term care facilities were built to meet the needs for which families could no longer provide.

Recent AARP surveys have found that the desire of our elders has changed little through the years. Over 85 percent of older people want to age in their own home—to age in place, and as baby boomers reach retirement age, they are calling for more and more of their future long-term care needs to be met in their own homes as well. Since families are now more widely dispersed, single parent families abound, and most women work full-time, the challenge to communities and to counties to provide support and care for our elders in their own homes is now more pressing than ever.

Since 2000, the Board of Directors of SSSF has been diligently pursuing funding from various businesses, foundations and individuals in an effort to build a fund to augment the programs and services of our Office for the Aging that assist people in remaining safely in their own homes. Recently SSSF received a grant from the Keuka Area Fund, to initiate an aging in place feasibility study in the Town of Pulteney. This township is located in a remote, rural area of Steuben County, far from the services and supports that older people need to age in place.

The study clearly defined the top needs of older Pulteney residents and also developed a plan to address these needs. Among the most pressing needs were transportation (in general, to medical services, for grocery shopping and for social activities), handyman and special services such as plumbers and electricians, health assistance, home delivered meals, personal care, and medical alert services. SSSF has now applied for continued funding to put the Pulteney plan into action. For a complete copy of the report, please go to www.steubencony.org and click on the Office for the Aging button. The report is located under the Aging in Place tab.

In the meantime, our Office for the Aging has received a grant from the NY State Office for the Aging that will be subcontracted to SSSF to continue the work begun in Pulteney on a county-wide basis. By the end of next summer, we will have a blueprint that will address the priority needs of our older residents, that will help our county meet the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities that the changing demographics have given us, and will serve as a road map to making our communities and our county more livable for all generations.