



Posted on Sat, Apr. 16, 2011

Living out your years at home can be challenging

By DIANE STAFFORD
 The Kansas City Star

A treasured collection of china doll heads watches over Winnifred Whited from shelves in her cozy living room in the Kansas City house where she has lived since 1942. "I'm plugging along by myself," said Whited, 98, who worked in a bag factory for 30 years. "I pray every night to be able to stay in my own home."

Whited is doing what most old people want to do: to "age in place" — with a little bit of help when needed.

She has Snowball, her cat, and nightly phone calls from a niece. These keep her company between Meals on Wheels deliveries, visits from an aide who gives her a bath, and outings with relatives or friends who take her to the grocery or the doctors.

"I'm happy here," said Whited, whose husband and son have died. "I crochet big afghans. I work my word puzzles. I sit out on the porch when it's nice."

Whited is among the fortunate. It isn't easy to age in place.

In the coming decades, more of us are going to find that out.

For the next 20 years, as 79 million baby boomers age, 10,000 people a day will turn 65, an average of one every 13 seconds.

And here's another wrinkle: At least a third of Americans who reach age 65 are likely to reach age 90, perhaps frail and needing lots of help.

Kansas City will be in the bull's-eye of this unprecedented demographic shift. Just under 200,000 people aged 65 and older live here now. In our five-county metropolitan area, that will almost double by 2030. Johnson County will be hardest hit, with the number of seniors growing from about 60,000 to 130,000.

This surge of elderly residents will provide a difficult test for Kansas City. More than in many cities, we live in sprawling suburbs dominated by two-story, single-family homes and rely on cars to get around.

When the elderly can no longer climb their stairs or drive their cars, we'll pay dearly for decades of building a spread-out, car-centric culture.

And consider another factor particular to the Kansas City area: We smoke more and are fatter than the average metropolitan area, raising the likelihood that more people will age with physical problems.

Beginning today, The Kansas City Star examines the transportation and in-home care issues at the heart of aging in place.

The challenges will be enormous. Among the needs:

- An affordable, on-demand and door-to-door system to transport frail seniors across city and county lines. The patchwork of transportation services that exists now often depends on volunteers and can't take someone from, say, Raytown to a doctor in Leawood.
- Retrofitted houses to accommodate those who no longer can climb stairs, turn door handles or use their bathrooms.
- New and affordable technology and devices that assist the elderly with daily living and remote monitoring of their health.
- More well-trained and affordable in-home care aides, both around-the-clock and short-term.

•More trained volunteers and family members to work with the elderly.

"We need to keep people in their homes, but we need builders to renovate them and care givers to come to their homes," said Eugene Wilson, a volunteer concerned with aging issues. "We need the medical community to think more about delivery of care at the home level and use hospitals only as the last option. We need to revisit the now-radical view of doctors making house calls."

Beyond the desire of the elderly to age in place, there's a practical matter to consider: Because of money, their options may be limited. They won't be able to afford to retrofit their houses and add technology to assist them, or pay for help with transportation.

Most also won't be able to afford costly residential centers that specialize in "active senior living" and a progression of life-care services. Many centers have a buy-in price of a quarter million dollars or more. Note, too, that the midpoint cost of a nursing home room in 2010 was \$75,190 a year — \$15,000 higher than five years ago.

So there's at least one more huge challenge for the area. For those who decide to give up the dream of aging in place, we'll need more affordable senior living communities.

Fred Bentley, director of the affordable-housing tax-credit program for the state of Kansas, sees firsthand the growing demand for lower-cost senior apartments. This year, for the first time in his 20-year career, applications for senior housing outpaced those for family units.

"This need goes up and up, and it won't abate in our lifetime," Bentley said.

A phalanx of service providers is working on solutions for the coming elderly surge and the desire to age in place if they can. But so far there's no widespread public will or money to tackle senior housing, transportation and care needs. As the needs continue to soar, governments and major philanthropies must dedicate more of their resources to those purposes.

"Home is where the heart is," said David Baxter, senior vice president of AgeWave, a national think tank on aging. "Moving away from memories is a challenge. But aging at home is not always the ideal solution."

Reluctant to seek help

Today there are about five people under age 65 for every older person. By 2030 there are expected to be only three for each over-65 person.

Throughout history, the younger generation has been called on to help their elders. But what happens when there aren't as many young people to help support — physically and financially — the needs of the elderly?

Families have been getting smaller. And many young professionals have followed jobs to other cities, reducing the number of adult children available to help with Mom and Pop.

It was the desire not to be a burden to her two sons that dominated Gloria Schlossenberg's thinking.

"My children have been wonderful, but they have their own lives," said the 87-year-old Overland Park resident. "I don't want them to feel guilty if they don't call or can't rush over."

Schlossenberg's husband, Irving, died in February. After that she couldn't see continuing to live in their longtime home.

As a couple, they had adapted to using a network of help from family, friends, taxis and agency bus services to shop for groceries, visit their doctors' offices or keep up with the community activities they had long valued in Overland Park.

But "it was very difficult," she said. "I can't stress what it does to you to ask for so much help."

Schlossenberg, just one among thousands whose wishes about staying in their homes will play out daily across the metropolitan landscape, had the desire and money to move into a complex that specializes in older adults.

"Fortunately, I can afford it," she said. "But, oh, I do worry about those who can't."

Staying in their homes

Nine in 10 elders will never be in an elder-care campus setting, said Bill Bergosh, who is affiliated with John Knox Village in Lee's Summit. "They are going to have to stay in their own homes ... with assistance."

