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What's being done to help elderly Kansas Citians age in place?

Kansas City area organizations are studying how to cope with the coming wave of elderly people who want to age in place.

For now, though, there aren't enough funds, volunteers or programs to meet the needs. Here's a status check:

Experts are blunt: Public and private dollars must be tapped to improve access to high-quality, affordable in-home health care, transportation and housing fit for the "frail elderly."

Twenty years ago, forces came together in the Kansas City area to improve early-childhood education and day care. But the \$50 million directed at early-childhood problems has yet to appear for the aging.

"Back then it was similar to what we're dealing with concerning elder care now," said Gerald Kitzi, director of the Francis Institute for Child and Youth Development. "People weren't concerned about child care until the need hit them personally. It's going to take that kind of mobilization — of leadership and grants — to address aging."

A select group of nonprofit, government and foundation leaders, along with a sprinkling of wealthy donors known to be active givers, last year was invited to a luncheon at the Kauffman Foundation.

After the speeches, Jeannette Nichols, widow of Miller Nichols, whose father founded the Country Club Plaza and shaped many of the fine residential areas for which Kansas City is known, raised her hand.

Her current home at Bishop Spencer Place, a residential center in midtown Kansas City, is "delightful," she said. "But it's expensive. How do we do something for those who can't afford it?"

When adult children have moved out of town or are employed and not readily available, care of aging parents often falls to volunteers. But needs outstrip the supply.

The 39-year-old Shepherd's Center of Kansas City has long relied on seniors helping seniors to deliver Meals on Wheels, provide rides and do light home upkeep. But it and other agencies need more help.

There isn't enough grant money, nor well-funded social service agencies, nor government programs to cope with the growing homebound senior population.

And there's the rub.

Martin Orr, an active volunteer in several organizations, said he has heard all the responses:

"I did my time. ... It's someone else's turn. ... I'm not interested. ... My own health isn't that good. ... I worked for 40 years, and I don't want more responsibility. ... I need the freedom to travel. ... I need to work and can't give away my time."

The Shepherd's Center's new alliance, Coming of Age: Kansas City, hopes to make a difference by addressing unmet needs on both the giving and receiving ends.

"We're not talking about stuffing envelopes," said Sandra Aust, Coming of Age director. "We're talking about meaningful volunteer work."

Information about the program is posted online at www.comingofage.org/kansascity/.

The Kansas City area has some foresighted grants funding mobility and in-home care studies.

The Jewish Heritage Foundation has committed funds to create KC4Aging in Community along with making about \$1 million in older-adult research grants.

The funds helped create a position for Sandra Silva at the Center for Practical Bioethics, who is KC4Aging's coordinator. Information is online at www.kc4aic.org.

KC4Aging brings together people involved in transportation, housing, health care, community centers, technology, in-home care, remodeling, senior employment and volunteer programs. They're assessing the needs and asking who will pay for solutions.

Aging in the community also is being addressed by the Heartland EngAGEment Initiative, a coalition formed under the umbrella of Nonprofit Connect. It's spreading awareness of "The Aging Challenge" through community meetings.

In addition, the Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership, the University of Missouri-Kansas City, the Mr. Goodcents Foundation, the Mid-America Regional Council, and various county and social service agencies in the area also are working on aging studies.

"The dispersion of families, urban sprawl, the heavy reliance on the personal automobile, may seem arcane," said David Renz, director of the UMKC nonprofit leadership center. "But we know that we need to reallocate resources to address those issues, to fit the needs of the future. We're just at the point now where we're working up the curve from awareness to action."

| Diane Stafford

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