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National results mirror local concerns for Northeast Ohio seniors (with video)

[Elizabeth Lundblad](#)

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Surrounded by a group of friends, Dick Taylor is laughing and cracking jokes as a high voltage game of chair volleyball goes

on in the background.

Taylor has been coming to the Middlefield Senior Center, 15820 Ridgewood Drive, Middlefield, for five years after being introduced by a friend.

Unable to walk without assistance from a wheel- or motorized chair, he said coming to the center dragged him out of his house where he felt isolated.

"My wife passed, and I was alone in my house," he said. "A friend told me about the center and took me along. This is a great place. You don't have to be alone or bored. There's always something to do." Socialization is a key part of senior health according to a study conducted by the National Council on Aging, www.noca.org. In its second year, 4,000 people from across the U.S. participated in the United States of Aging Survey 2013.

For the first time, the survey included responses from adults aged 18-59 to get a sense of what areas they are most concerned with as they age.

Nationally, the majority of seniors agreed their community is responsive to their needs, but survey responses from current seniors and future seniors lacked confidence that their community is prepared to meet future needs of a growing senior population.

In Lake and Geauga counties, the aging councils and departments say they're aware of the growing senior population and are working together with organizations to bolster activities and programs geared toward a new generation of seniors.

"New seniors" or those adults starting their retirement are different from previous generations, said Joey Tomsick, chief executive officer for the Lake County Council on Aging.

"As the baby boomers move toward retirement more and more of them will be looking for new ventures at senior centers. As the desires of a population changes, so must senior centers. These seniors want physical activity, exercise," he said. "I can envision the senior centers being local community gyms with physical exercise programs. It can be your local continuing education place with various programs on any subject. That's what the coming senior wants."

This meshes with the national findings that seniors are more focused on taking care of their health and are more optimistic about aging. NOCA's survey found nearly two-thirds, 64 percent, of "optimistic seniors" had set one or more specific goals to manage their health in the past 12 months, compared with 47 percent of the overall senior population.

Sally Bell, executive director of Geauga County's Department on Aging, said each of the county's senior centers tend to specialize in a certain area ranging from art, to theater, to physical activity. The Middlefield Center, she said, is known for its exercise and fitness programs.

"Their chair volleyball team is very competitive," she said. "They like to win."

Chair volleyball involves 12 players, six on each team. Players must remain seated at all times. A beach ball serves for the volleyball. There is no limit to the number of hits a player is allowed to take. Aside from physical activity, Bell said Geauga's department has partnered with University Hospitals the last few years to create health programs geared toward seniors.

"We've become pretty aggressive about doing health screenings and assessments," she said. "Years ago, in the early 2000s, the (Gauga) Departments on Aging and) Jobs and Family Services and the United Way commissioned a study for social service needs. The top three were for housing, transportation and in-home services for seniors. We've updated that study and those still come out on top. It's nice to know the concerns you have are not too different from those at the national level."

In addition to providing nutrition education and healthy meals at each senior center in Lake County, Tomsick said socialization also goes a long way to improving seniors' health. Lake County Council on Aging always is looking for new volunteers to help with home meal delivery or assisted outings.

"Volunteers start at age 18, and we have volunteers in their 90s. As far as an inter-generational approach, that's a fantastic idea," he said. "There is so much information and knowledge that seniors can share with the young folks of this county, and volunteering is the best way."

Another program Bell is excited about is the senior safety program they just completed with the Geauga County Sheriff's Department called "Book 'em, Danno."

"It was a daylong program on personal safety and security and how to keep your property safe," she said. "(With seniors) we know they don't report things (like scams to police) because they feel it was their fault. We thought if we could get seniors to know their police chiefs, then it'd be easier and more comfortable to call up the police."

With a growing senior population in Geauga and Lake counties, both Bell and Tomsick agree there's an element of need in terms of adequate senior housing.

In Geauga County, large lot zoning - typically 3 to 5 acre lots - pose a challenge to senior housing, Bell said. To address that, the department on aging, which runs all Geauga County senior centers through a separate tax levy, has upgraded transportation services for seniors still living in their homes.

"We have wonderful assisted living facilities in the county, and we are really talking about independent living," she said. "As people age they want to continue attending their own churches and grocery store. That continuity and sense of independence is important."

Local government agencies can provide an important role in providing housing, Tomsick said. Housing for seniors can complement services already offered at senior centers.

"As I look to the future, I would love to see Lake County as one of Ohio's top-ranked senior-friendly communities with affordable senior housing," he said. "There exists a myriad of issues and challenges not only in our community but across the nation with a growing senior population. Certainly one is affordable housing. We need to find ways to adapt and respond. Generally a home is considered unaffordable if they are spending more than one-third of their income on it."

In terms of financial security, the NOCA survey found most seniors are comfortable with their current financial situation with 66 percent saying it is easy or somewhat easy to pay monthly living expenses. Long-term financial stability was more of a concern. Fifty-three percent of seniors surveyed said they worried about whether their savings or income would last for the rest of their life, and 31 percent of seniors said they were concerned about being financially able to stay in their homes for as long as they would like.

At the same time, however, older seniors - those older than 80 - were less likely to report financial anxieties, according to the NOCA survey, with 69 percent of older seniors saying they find it easy to pay monthly living expenses.

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