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News

## Lake, Geauga counties prepare for growth in senior populations

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As Ohio continues to age, officials are examining ways to keep senior citizens connected to services they need.

Projections completed by Miami University's Scripps Gerontology Center indicate that several counties across the state will see one-third of the population reach the age of 60 or older by 2050.

Both Lake and Geauga counties are projected to see approximately 35 percent of their total population reach that age by then, and Geauga anticipates around 28 percent to already be there by 2025.

As this demographic grows, certain services are expected to have higher demand.

Sally Bell, director of Geauga's Department on Aging, said she anticipates the need for transportation to increase for those 60 and older.

"I honestly expect that as we age, a community needs to be ready to transport. An elderly person can have a comfort level within their own 2-, 3- (or) 5-mile radius, but once they need to get outside of that it becomes a problem and in a rural community, it can be a real problem," Bell said.

The increase in general traffic that Geauga has seen also complicates things for seniors who need to get around, she added.

While Bell knows there will be an increased need for some services, she also said she hopes that society as a whole will age in a healthier fashion going forward.

Higher awareness of healthy eating habits, exercise requirements and social activities will keep seniors independently active until they're closer to 75, she said.

"If we continue to promote healthy aging in this country and if people choose to participate by eating healthy and walking and staying socially connected with each other and finding a purpose in their life ... I don't think that the demand on our department is really going to be a lot different than it is today," Bell said. "But if we choose to ignore all the information that is out there, obviously there's no way that we can be prepared for a society that chooses not to help itself."

She already has seen an increase in the demand for health-related programs and classes, and said she hopes that it will continue.

Lake County also is working toward a gray population that is more independent.

Lake County Council on Aging CEO Joseph Tomsick explained that most seniors he has worked with want to continue to live at home instead of moving into assisted living or a nursing home setting.

Many of the programs that the council provides focus on keeping seniors in their own homes longer, he said.

Lake County's 60 and older population has already grown by 23 percent since 2000 and Tomsick said he feels the county is prepared for more.

"We're always working with our partners for ideas on how we can continue to focus on the next 10 to 20 years," he said.

The West End YMCA in Willoughby has 1,300 senior members of the Silver Sneakers program.

The program is part of a health insurance partnership that provides YMCA membership to those 60 and older.

Enrollment has grown for the program and Wellness Director Margaret Warner said that trend continues to other branches.

"The first batch of people who came in here were those that never came through our doors, and now they're diehards and they love it," she said.

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