

Understanding the “Age Wave”

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One of the most important social phenomena which we will experience in the United States is the coming “Age Wave” which will challenge virtually every aspect of our society and dramatically impact community services. It is extremely important to understand this phenomenon. This article is presented for public information and for community strategic planning purposes.

The US population over age 65 will grow from its 1999 level of 34.6 million persons to approximately 82 million in 2050, a 137% increase. The most rapid surge in our senior population will take place between 2011 and 2030. During that 19 year interval, seniors will expand from 13% of our population to 22% of our population. (Source: US Census Bureau).

There really are three converging factors which produce the Age Wave:

1. The Senior Boom
2. The Birth Dearth
3. The Aging of Baby Boomers

Until recently, the US senior population has really been quite small, smaller than many developed nations, but that is changing rapidly. Medical advancements, new technologies and improved public health information have all contributed to this growth in our aging population. The good news is that Americans are not only living longer but staying well longer. Aging no longer means that an individual will necessarily be unproductive and unhealthy. It does mean, however, that he or she will utilize significantly more healthcare resources than in younger years. The utilization of medical services increases predictably with age, and likely always will. The “Birth Dearth” reflects the dramatic drop in present birth rates as compared to the Baby Boom years between

1946 and 1964. Experts feel that there is not likely to be a repeat of the Baby Boom, ever.

Women today are having fewer children for several reasons:

1. Readily Available Birth Control
2. Advanced Careers for Women
3. The Transition from an Agricultural Society
4. The Cost of Having Children (insurance, education, daycare, housing)

The aging of the Baby Boom generation dominates our society and has for decades. The Boomers impact every economic and political foundation of our culture. It is interesting to note the health, literature, media, television, and civic impacts of the Boomers as they move through life. Lobby groups among older adults have increased in number, size and effectiveness, and senior citizens are represented on more community boards and committees than ever before. Their access to legislators and political party organizations has never been better.

Senior groups have a considerable amount of poll power, and they use it. With retirement comes unscheduled time, allowing for a greater participation level in voting and lobbying.

National priorities such as health care delivery, long-term care, Social Security, Medicare, assisted living, and prescription coverage will need to change dramatically to serve our senior population over the decades to come. Financially, the only winners in the Age Wave scenario are the savers, those who have invested wisely in private retirement plans such as IRA's and deferred compensation plans. The current design for Social Security simply will not float in the decades ahead. Either taxes on those working will increase, or benefits will decline, or very likely both. The only way to win in this scenario is private investing.

The Age Wave has also brought about a new concept, the "Sandwich Generation". Some readers may recognize themselves immediately as part of this group. This generation is caught between

raising their children and caring for their aging parents. These are busy, busy folks, and they perhaps feel that they have no lives of their own.

In short, the Age Wave will challenge and shake every aspect of our community, our personal, social and political dynamics. How we respond to this challenge in our own communities will clearly affect the quality of life for our citizens. We will need excellent senior facilities to care for these folks, including nursing homes, hospitals, assisted living centers, senior centers, transportation, and senior activity programs. I listened to an interesting presentation at last year's Kansas Hospital Association convention. The speaker was basically saying, "Resist any temptation to decrease the size of your hospital. You may not be as busy as you want right now, but just wait, the Boomers are coming!" Good advice for all senior-oriented services in our communities. Healthcare providers must take a leadership role in ensuring that quality services are available, now and in the future when demand peaks.

An excellent book on this topic is Age Wave by Dychtwald and Flower. New York: Bantam.

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