Rural Elderly: Needs, Problems, Satisfactions

Many years ago, someone said that the years of old age were the happiest and that everyone should hurry to get there. Since then, advances in medical knowledge and technology have increased the lifespan of men and women. But various economic and social changes have created new problems for many who strive to maintain their quality of life in old age.

In the modern era, improving the quality of life for the elderly often requires more and better community services and facilities. Three recent reports provide important insights into the problems, needs, and satisfactions of the rural elderly in Powell County, Kentucky, and in the Northeastern States.

HEALTH STATUS AND NEEDS

Physical ailments and impairments generally are more prevalent among elderly people. The unfortunate result is higher health costs during retirement years when incomes are reduced.

The most common ailments among the elderly in the Powell County study were arthritis and rheumatism, abnormal blood pressure, breathing difficulties, and heart trouble. Hearing problems were the most frequent physical impairment. Such ailments and impairments imposed only modest restrictions on physical mobility; four-fifths could move about as much as desired or necessary.

Information obtained on health needs provides clues useful in designing health programs and services for the elderly. Their most common needs were getting to a doctor or hospital and obtaining needed health care in the home. Men faced such needs more often than women.

The elderly in Powell County indicated considerable interest in having a community center that focused on meeting their needs. Four out of five expressed a willingness to contribute financially to such a center. In addition to catering to their health care needs, such a center could also provide them with social and recreation activities, educational programs, nutritional hot meals, counseling, and legal aid.

Many of the health needs of the elderly require the services of physicians. However, other needs could be met by paraprofessionals and laypersons, particularly if affiliated with special centers organized to meet the needs of the elderly. Such a center might effectively solicit volunteer help from a wide assortment of persons of all ages, including the elderly themselves.

TRANSPORTATION

Few elderly persons in Powell County, Kentucky, reported having serious transportation problems. Most needs were met by friends, neighbors, and relatives, largely because of limited access to public transportation. Transportation problems were most severe among elderly women living alone. Because many such women reportedly had never learned to drive, they were particularly dependent on the good will of others for transportation.

Although transportation was not a common problem among the elderly in Powell County, many indicated special transportation would be needed if they were to participate in a senior center and/or special health facility.

Because of the high cost of developing and operating public transportation systems, particularly in less densely populated areas, expanding existing arrangements may be the most feasible means of improving transportation for the elderly. Such efforts would be more effective if a communitywide information and referral system were available to coordinate the efforts of volunteers.

SATISFACTION WITH SERVICES AND HOUSING

In the Northeast, the elderly reported a high degree of satisfaction with community services. These included fire departments, ambulance services, police departments, and medical facilities. Many indicated little difficulty in visiting friends and family in the community. Their homes were conveniently located near shops, hospitals, doctors’ offices, places of worship, and banking facilities. Few
expressed interest in moving from their present location.

Although the elderly expressed general satisfaction with their homes, many indicated a need for home repairs. More information is needed, however, about maintenance patterns and preferences, the nature of the repairs required, and the elderly’s interest in making needed improvements. Home repairs are both expensive and demanding as to skills needed. Because of the health and financial situations of many elderly, special financial and labor assistance will thus be required.

FINANCIAL SITUATION

The elderly living alone in both Kentucky and the Northeast, especially women, are particularly disadvantaged.

Many have limited incomes and low financial assets. Dependence on relatively fixed sources of income and limited potential for employment keeps them in a tenuous financial situation. Improvement in their ability to obtain necessary goods and services depends on increased transfer payments and the provision of publicly supported services and facilities. Moreover, improvement in job opportunities for the elderly would minimize the need for welfare assistance and permit them to make a meaningful contribution within their community.

REFERENCES


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CONCLUSION

The elderly in rural America have much to offer toward the development of their communities. Many possess needed skills, training, and experience. All too often, these abilities are overlooked or little used.

Retirement in this work-oriented society should lead to new opportunities for self development and service rather than the neglect, despair, and deprivation so often associated with old age. Full development of a community’s potential cannot be realized without active participation by all its members—the old as well as the young. The elderly represent an untapped natural resource of vast potential to the development of most communities. Realization of this potential is an issue deserving increased attention.