



Senior Snapshot: Older Alaskans in 2009



Older Alaskans are a highly diverse group of individuals, living a great variety of lifestyles in communities large and small. Statistics about our senior population do not capture the unique personalities and circumstances of all the seniors we know. The Alaska Commission on Aging has gathered a selection of data on older Alaskans in order to provide a sketch of the older residents of our state and their well-being.

Population

- While senior populations in several regions have grown especially rapidly in the past seven years (for example, the South-central region's seniors have increased by over 60%), all nine regions have witnessed an increase in their senior populations of at least 18% during this time period.
- Older baby boomers are swelling the ranks of the youngest group of seniors, now the fastest-growing age group, second to the 85-and-older group, whose members are the most frail, the most likely to struggle with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ADRD), and the most likely to depend on home- and community-based care as well as institutional long-term support services.

Financial

- While Alaska seniors appear less likely to be living in poverty than the national average among seniors, many of them are struggling to get by financially. Over 20 percent of Alaskans age 65 and older are receiving a modest monthly cash supplement from the Senior Benefits Program, a percentage which varies greatly by location, from 13 percent in the North Slope region to 59 percent in the Bethel/Wade Hampton region. To qualify for this program, seniors must have incomes below 175% of the federal poverty level for Alaska. In 2009, that meant no more than \$23,678 for a single senior, and no more than \$31,868 for a couple.



- Retired seniors as a whole contribute approximately \$1.7 billion annually to Alaska’s economy, including their retirement income and health care spending. While Alaska’s “retirement industry” may not yet be competing with those of Florida or Arizona, this source of cash flow is in fact one of the state’s top industries. And its value is enhanced by the fact that it produces local spending and is environmentally benign, stable, year-round, compatible with other industries, spread throughout the state, and helps create economies of scale (particularly in health care) which benefit the entire population.

Health

- Alaskan seniors are more likely than U.S. seniors as a whole to die of causes linked to behavioral health issues. Older Alaskans have high suicide rates as well as high rates of accidental deaths and alcohol-induced deaths. These figures suggest that behavioral health programs targeted to seniors with depression, other mental illness, and substance abuse problems could have a dramatic impact on our seniors’ quality of life.
- In spite of these areas of unfavorable comparison, Alaska’s seniors are actually healthier than the national average – less likely to die from any of the leading causes of death and less likely to die in a given year from *any* cause of death. Alaskan seniors’ age-adjusted death rates are substantially lower than those of U.S. seniors as a whole. For every 100,000 Alaskans age 65 and older, only 3,818 die in a given one-year period, while for every 100,000 U.S. seniors, 4,722 die during that period. In other words, an Alaskan senior is 19 percent less likely to die (from any cause) during a given year than his or her U.S. counterpart.
- Alaskan seniors report higher levels of self-described disability than do U.S. seniors as a whole. The BRFSS (Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, a Public Health phone survey) asks whether they are “limited in their activities because of physical, mental, or emotional problems.” Alaskan seniors are about 20 percent more likely to answer, “Yes.”

Long-Term Care

- Today’s Pioneer Home residents are more likely than not to require care at Level III, the most advanced level of care, which includes 24-hour nursing care. This presents the Pioneer Homes with a challenge because it is a very different mix of residents from that which the homes were originally designed to serve. However, one reason for this more intensive level of need is that older Alaskans are able to remain in their own homes longer today thanks to more comprehensive home- and community-based services. The average Pioneer Home resident today is more than six years older than the average resident of a decade ago.
- A substantial number of complaints about abuse and neglect involving seniors are being received by agencies such as Adult Protective Services and the Long-Term Care Ombudsman’s Office. Cases of abuse, neglect and exploitation of seniors may involve friends and family members, paid caregivers, telemarketers, and others. Reports to Adult Protective Services have increased by 169% in the last four years alone.



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