

Will Problems Loom as Virginia's Population Ages?

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RICHMOND — More than 15 percent of Virginians are 60 or older, and that percentage is growing. Experts say this trend may strain health care and other services -- and ultimately the state budget.

So Delegate John S. Reid, R-Henrico, has proposed that the state study the impact of Virginia's aging population on the demand for government services.

By the year 2030, about a quarter of Virginia residents will be over 60, said the delegate's wife, Judi Reid, who chairs the Commonwealth Council on Aging. At a recent joint hearing by House and Senate budget-writing committees, she said the demographic shift could have profound implications.

Ed Ansello, director of the Virginia Center on Aging at Virginia Commonwealth University, said the overall economic effect of the state's graying population is unknown.

"Virginia is becoming a very attractive retirement location," he said. Ansello said many seniors from other states may move to Virginia temporarily, pay taxes here but move back to live with their families when they need a greater level of care. Those retirees aren't a drain on the state, he said.

Ansello said he liked Reid's idea to have the Joint Legislative and Audit Review Commission study the issue -- "as long as the study is not just, 'How much are these older Virginians going to cost us?'"

But cost is certainly a concern.

Reid's resolution notes: "This growing older population, increasing dramatically in numbers as well as longevity, will experience ever greater needs of services ... including increasingly complex and expensive health care, more frequent

and intensive social services, expanded and more elaborate state facility and community geriatric mental health services, and enhanced advocacy and legal services."

Reid, a 61-year-old school administrator, said the study would be important as the baby-boom generation reaches retirement age.

"I hope to provide legislators an opportunity to do some planning," he said.

The Commonwealth Council on Aging, a state-appointed advisory group, already has made recommendations for the current legislative session. The council has called on the General Assembly to provide:

- * An additional \$1.25 million for transportation services for older residents. Many elderly Virginians do not have cars or driver's licenses.

- * An extra \$1.5 million for the state's "long-term care ombudsman" program. The ombudsmen serve as local advocates for nursing home residents and others needing long-term assistance; they provide information, handle complaints and help resolve problems.

Virginia has roughly one ombudsman for every 4,000 long-term care beds. The Institute of Medicine says the state should have one ombudsman for every 2,000 beds.

The council also urged lawmakers not to cut the budget of the Virginia Department for the Aging, which works with local agencies and other groups to help older residents find the services and information they need.

In fact, the council wants the state to restore \$75,000 it slashed last year from the budget of the Virginia Center on Aging, located on Virginia Commonwealth University's medical campus. "That followed the \$37,500 cut the year before," Ansello said.

The center does research in the field of gerontology and collects data on the characteristics and conditions of older Virginians.



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