



Grass Roots Organization for the Well-being of Seniors, Inc.

Senior Needs Study 2000

GROWS is an all volunteer not-for-profit membership organization of service providers, agencies, businesses, organizations, and individuals concerned about the well-being of older adults, especially the frail elderly, living in Montgomery County, Maryland.

GROWS' goal is to create a community where all residents can age with dignity. **GROWS** serves as an educator, advocate and catalyst on behalf of older adults and caring families.

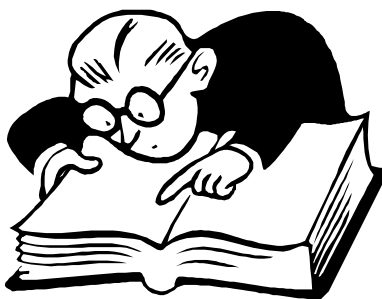


GROWS would like to thank Mark Richman for planning

and conducting this survey. His donation of time and skill
is greatly appreciated.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Between February and June 2000 the Grass Roots Organization for the Well-being of Seniors, Inc. (GROWS) conducted a survey of service providers to document the issues and unmet needs of Montgomery County older adults. This telephone survey expanded GROWS predominantly regional planning and grass roots action. **Senior Needs 2000** kicks off a multiyear GROWS initiative to identify the greatest needs of seniors and areas with the greatest potential for successful collaboration and action. The survey taps the knowledge and commitment of the many agencies, business individuals and organizations that have a stake in making Montgomery County a place where all citizens can age with dignity. GROWS seeks to build momentum and commitment from the community in addressing the issues of importance to seniors.

GROWS is using *Senior Needs 2000* for community education and advocacy as well as for internal strategic planning. The survey was timed and structured to complement other County planning initiatives for seniors. In specific, GROWS' survey complements two County efforts - a survey of seniors that will be conducted in 2000/2001 and a Vital Aging conference to be held in fall 2000. GROWS is working closely with the Montgomery County's Commission on Aging and the Department of Health and Human Services to maximize the impact of these planning activities.

GROWS chose to survey service providers because of the unique position they are in to see the unmet needs of seniors and caregivers. On a daily basis providers witness the struggles that seniors and families experience and that many would not acknowledge if they were surveyed directly. In addition, providers know what barriers they, as public and private stakeholders, face in providing the quality and level of service that the community needs.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

While most stated that there are excellent senior services in Montgomery County, respondents identified some consistent unmet needs and problems. The three most frequently cited problems for older adults and caregivers involved (1) transportation, (2) service affordability and (3) difficulty in understanding and accessing services.

Transportation

Almost all stated that this is the greatest unmet need despite the existence of some good transportation programs for the elderly and disabled. In order to stay independent in a suburban community such as Montgomery County the ability to drive and/or ready access to public transportation is very important. Loss of ability to get around is a tremendous fear of older adults. The need for better transportation exists throughout the County although it is perhaps more of a problem in the upcounty area.

Assisted transportation was cited as a critical need for those who are frailer. Respondents stated that many older adults with physical or mental frailty need help walking from their door to a vehicle. Services that pick riders up at the curb or street were not considered sufficient. It should be noted that the inability to get around can result in social isolation, which was also identified as a problem.

Affordable /Subsidized Services

Respondents frequently cited the need for services that are affordable or funds to underwrite the cost of services. This need for affordable/subsidized services pertained to the many in-home services (especially non-skilled aides and home repairs) that are necessary for older adults to maintain their independence at home, but also included assisted living and congregate housing (including housing for those with mental illnesses).

Awareness and Access to Senior Services

In order to get the services they need it is critical that program information and service access is understandable, convenient and accurate. Survey respondents stated that users find the delivery system fragmented, confusing, and scary especially if they are worried about having adequate disposable income. The need to improve awareness and access to senior services was cited even by eldercare professionals. The elderly and their families are unaware of many types of senior services and find them difficult to access. Elders and caregivers need help understanding what is available, what they can afford, and how to choose the appropriate service. Payment mechanisms such as those for Medicare, Medicaid, long-term care insurance and other payment sources and benefits programs are unclear and complicated.

Other Needs/Problems

Social isolation, and recruitment and retention of volunteer and paid staff came up less frequently but were still noteworthy themes. While rarely cited as a distinct problem, many respondents noted that the County is growing more diverse in culture and race. Survey respondents indicated that certain needs, such as transportation, service access, staffing and isolation, are even more of a problem for elders who have difficulties speaking English (e.g., Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islanders, others).

A number of recommendations on how to improve awareness and access services were suggested but there were no recurring solutions recommended by the interviewees. (See page 12 for summary of solutions.) Respondents largely agreed that Montgomery County's strengths are that it offers excellent professional networking opportunities, that the providers are caring and generally offer good service and that the relatively high financial and educational levels of County older residents enhance service delivery. Respondents expressed an interest in expanding their services to meet the needs of the growing aging population, however, most stated that services will not change in the near future.

METHODOLOGY

Under the direction of President Robert Morin, GROWS began planning the needs assessment study in mid-1999. Mark Richman, former Director of Planning for the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging from 1989-1999, was retained as a volunteer consultant to design and implement the survey. The project was announced to the GROWS membership at its Annual Meeting in December 1999, and in the GROWS **Grapevine** newsletter.

Mr. Richman prepared a draft survey in January 2000. A planning group of representatives from County Government and service providers was convened to pretest the survey instrument and provide technical assistance.

Interviewees were contacted by phone to set up interview appointments and received the questions for review prior to the scheduled interview. One hundred interviews were conducted from February 24 to June 15, 2000. In addition, the survey was included in a mailing to the GROWS membership and a limited number of written responses were received.

Organizations Interviewed

Montgomery County has a wide variety of providers serving older adults and caregivers. A conscious effort was made to include all types in the sample. One hundred telephone interviews were conducted. Over 30 different types of senior services (see list below) were included in the sample representing cumulative service to well over 25,000 well and frail seniors.

The agencies and businesses surveyed included facility-based (nursing homes, assisted living, congregate housing) and home and community-based (home health, day care, case management, and many others). Many respondents had experience in a number of services in addition to the service they were currently providing.

Types of Senior Services Included in Survey

Activity Therapy	Health Insurance Counseling
Adult Day Care	Home Care (non-medical)
Advocacy/Support for Illness	Home Health Care
Assisted Living	Home Repairs
Case Management	Hospice
Companion/Friendly Visitation	Hospital
Congregate Housing	Information & Referral
County (varied services)	Meals on Wheels
Eldercare Attorney	Mental Health Counseling
Durable Medical Equipment	Minority Day Program/Organization
Emergency Response System	Money Management
Employment Assistance	Nursing Home
Exercise	Physical Plant Accessibility
Financial Services	Respite Residential Care
Form Completion	Senior Center
Grocery and Other Shopping	Social (non-medical) Day Care
	Transportation

Survey Questions

The survey sought to elicit: (1) senior needs, (2) potential solutions to these needs, (3) strengths of the service system and (4) ways that current policies may be affecting service delivery. The first three questions originated from slightly different perspectives and identified unmet needs or problems facing older adults. The first asked generally about our community's **greatest** senior need, the second focused on the barriers to providing the **interviewee's service** and the third addressed the barriers faced in obtaining services delivered by **others** in the service system. Most of those interviewed cited more than one "greatest" need. All answers were accepted and factored into the analysis.

The fourth through sixth questions sought solutions, strengths of Montgomery County's service network and ways in which the interviewee's services have or are expected to change.

ANALYSIS BY QUESTION

First Question

“In your involvement with seniors in Montgomery County, what is the older residents’ greatest problem or need?”

The 219 items mentioned by interviewees fell into the following five broad issues:

1. Transportation
2. Service affordability
3. Understanding and accessing services
4. Wellness/socialization/activity
5. Service provider concerns.

Transportation was by far the number one need of seniors. Respondents stated that seniors need transportation and often they need assisted or escorted transportation. While a few thought getting around was more of a problem in the upcounty area, most felt transportation is an unmet need throughout the entire county. It was mentioned that current efforts of Connect-A-Ride, and Metro Access are good but need to be improved. A few cited anecdotes of older people waiting for hours to be transported home from appointments. Others mentioned that seniors who are frail often need assistance to get from their door to the vehicle. Door to door service is not provided by the public transportation alternatives even those funded under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Transportation is a link to social activities and other services. It was noted that lack of transportation can lead to social isolation, another reported problem.

Service Affordability and overcoming financial barriers to services were cited as the number two problem. Older people prefer to stay in their own private home or, if they need more assistance, to live in a home-like setting (assisted living, congregate housing with services). Interviewees commented that many seniors and families find it prohibitively expensive to pay out-of-pocket for services that support living at home, such as home aides, adult day services, escort, home modification and repair, meal preparation and case management. In addition, there are inadequate free or sliding scale programs for these services. Most respondents also stated that

there is a need for more subsidies and affordable models for assisted living and housing. For both supportive home services, including case management, and assisted living/housing it was felt that there is some help for the “poor” but very little for those with lower and middle incomes. A number of respondents mentioned that the lack of reimbursement for prescription drugs often makes seniors hesitant to spend their money on services.

Understanding and Accessing Services was the third most prevalent response category. Many stated that the elderly, their families and even professionals do not know about many of the types of services that exist. Others cited the very confusing payment system of Medicare, Medicaid, and other financial programs. Montgomery County has an abundance of services, but this too leads to confusion. Respondents cited the need for more case management, a service that assists seniors in assessing needs, linking with services and managing the services over time. This is particularly important for frail seniors who want to remain in their homes and for caregivers that may themselves have care issues.

Wellness/Socialization/Activity was another broad category, with social isolation as the main element. Seventy three percent of the responses in this category related to isolation. It was cited as a problem especially for the frail and for those who do not speak English. The three prior issues-lack of transportation, understanding of services and service affordability clearly increase the potential for older residents to become isolated. Even when these problems are not factors, seniors can experience a shrinking social network or can lack the social confidence to become engaged in new activities. Responses in this category also included the need for exercise and activities.

Service Provider Concerns emphasized the need for sufficient, high quality staff especially; caregivers for home care and work in nursing homes.

Second Question

“What is the greatest obstacle or barrier in providing your service to seniors? What should be improved in the senior services delivery system to help improve their organization or service?”

This question generated 135 different responses that covered a greater variety of issues than the first question. However, five themes still emerged with the first three comprising over 60 percent of the responses. These themes are: 1) affordability of services, 2) increasing awareness and access to services, 3) transportation, 4) issues relating to consumer behavior and the service system itself, and 5) agency operations-related issues.

Thirty-two percent of the responses dealt with funding and service affordability as a barrier that providers face in delivering their service. Lack of adequate funding and subsidies for services that supports aging in place were again reflected in many responses, as was the lack of sufficient funding for assisted living. Inadequate third party reimbursement of services such as hearing aids, mental health services, and home aids was also cited.

Another thirty-five percent of the responses dealt either with transportation or the failure of consumers to know about the services offered by the respondent. As before, transportation included both the needs for escorted/assisted service and general availability. Both non-profit and for-profit providers reported lack of service awareness as a service delivery issue. All felt it was difficult to get the consumer's attention in a competitive and large aging network.

Another area of responses dealt with consumer attitudes and the service system. Providers were concerned that older adults fail to plan adequately for their later years and that many are reluctant to even discuss aging issues. This reluctance was in relation not only to financial planning and legal issues but also to housing decisions, retirement activities and caregiving plans. Service system issues included such things as lack of coordination between providers and across jurisdictions, regulatory complexity and the impact of managed care on service delivery.

Finally, recruiting and training staff and volunteers were the main concerns of those who

mentioned issues related to agency operations. The nation's booming economy has strongly impacted the ability of agencies and businesses to recruit and retain both paid staff and volunteers. The volunteer pool is reduced because more individuals, including older adults, are working. Entry level aide positions are difficult to fill because salaries are low and the work is often less desirable with less advancement potential than work in other fields.

Third Question

“What are some other problems with senior services not necessarily connected to your service or organization?”

This question resulted in 156 responses. Transportation (27%) and the need for better service access and understanding (29%) remained the primary issues that respondents cited as problems that were not connected with their own service organization. Most of the remaining responses were unique but many dealt with service affordability, system issues (like those cited previously) or the need to increase community sensitivity to seniors.

Making the system “user friendly” was a main theme in these responses. Many respondents felt the system was uncoordinated, fragmented and confusing. Consumers, they felt, are frustrated by having to make multiple calls to get information, wading through cumbersome and confusing paperwork, and repeating themselves because of lack of coordination among services.

Fourth Question

“What are solutions to issues, problems, or needs identified?”

Five suggestions addressing the difficulty of understanding the service system were proposed, however there were no repetitive ideas presented as solutions to the issues, problems or needs of seniors.

Solutions Addressing Service Access and Awareness

Create a more integrated system - A systems approach to service delivery would establish purchasing clout through economies of scale, improve recruitment and retention of volunteers and paid staff (e.g., benefits), reduce administrative overhead, and create a less confusing and more coordinated “system” for seniors and family.

Cross-market services - Often, especially with in-home services, providers observe other needs. All senior service providers should become trained in the existence and benefits of other senior services. In the long run, the health of the seniors would be better maintained and improved. Cross marketing and referrals should be encouraged.

Create a single point of entry for senior services - One clear place to turn to for services and information.

Create focal points in local communities where citizens can obtain accurate information on services and programs are offered. This can be a place for assistance, screenings, and information. These community centers could not just be for the elderly. Perhaps, kiosks in malls could include a telephone directly hooked to the senior information line.

Provide information and education seminars at assisted living, retirement communities, and other areas, “natural occurring retirement centers”, senior centers, etc. on legal issues, finances, services (the system).

Create a public relations campaign to build awareness of the various types of services for seniors available in Montgomery County. - Create a funding source to mail information like the ***Guide to Retirement Living*** to every senior in the County. Seniors obtain

this worthwhile publication when they go to senior centers but often it is the socially isolated senior who needs this information the most.

Solutions Addressing Service Costs

Identify naturally occurring retirement centers and provide negotiated or group services to residents - Many home care services require a minimum amount of hours. This criterion can be eliminated, for those who need a few hours of help, if enough housing unit residents purchased services together.

Provide subsidies for home services - Seniors want to stay home. Better and more affordable home services, like grocery delivery, meals on wheels, and home repairs are needed.

Other Suggested Problem Solutions

Involve religious congregations - Encourage congregations to become more directly involved with care for seniors. If each could take care of members of their own congregation, a significant impact could be made. Many have social concern committees but some are not always that active, action-oriented, or “walk the talk”.

Communicate practical information at senior services network (e.g., funding, grants, and subsidies). - Create a computer link to inform all parties of grants and other opportunities.

Create an advocate/ombudsman program for seniors across the continuum.

Hold Barwood cab more accountable to its contract - They are not providing reliable, dependable services. There are incidences in which they have kept the elderly waiting for hours and provided more stress than benefits.

Fifth Question

“What are some good aspects of operating a senior service in Montgomery County?”

Almost all of the respondents stated that there are very good networking opportunities for senior service providers, who regularly meet and work towards improving the life of seniors. The providers are generally caring and offer good service. Many also complimented the County on its senior centers and services (e.g. Ride-on, subsidies). Respondents also noted that from the service provider perspective Montgomery County has “good demographics”. Many County seniors have financial resources and are well educated.

Sixth Question:

“Has your service recently changed or do you see it changing in the future?”

Most responded that service would not change but continue as is. Many expressed a desire to expand volume of services as population ages, but were concerned about funding. A few nursing homes stated that their admission criteria have changed since the prospective payment system was implemented.