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The 2030 problem: Is the Capital Region ready?

By Lydia Kulbida

The year 2030 is when the last of the baby boomers is expected to retire, doubling the number of older Americans to more than 70 million. The Centers for Disease Control says the aging of the U.S. population is one of the major public health challenges we face this century. The question now - is the Capital Region ready?

Capital Region seniors are living longer and better.

Locally, Colonie has the largest population of people over 60. That age group will explode by 2030.

"Colonie, which is our primary concern, is expected to grow a whopping 48%," says Ed Neary of the Colonie Senior Service Center.

The organization's mission is to help seniors stay in their homes as long as possible and it has nearly 400 independent living apartments for when they need a little help, but, he says, eventually many seniors need more help than a family or home care can provide.

"At some point in time skilled care is necessary and we need to be sure we have that plan in place. Even today we need it. We have shortages today," adds Neary.

When the Berger Commission's report came out in late 2006, protests focused on hospital cuts, but Capital Region nursing homes also took a hit.

The Albany County Nursing Home merger with the Ann Lee Home came with an order to downsize by at least 345 beds.

In Schenectady County, the merger of Dutch Manor and The Avenue and downsizing at Glendale meant a loss of 200 beds.

If Capital Region seniors can't afford a private home, where will they go?

"I talk to family members who are nurses. The hospitals have waiting lists, they're sending our residents out of state. Why? They belong here," says June Maniscalco.

Maniscalco cared for her mother at home for seven years. Her mother had Alzheimer's and Maniscalco knows, even with help, it's not an easy alternative.

"I had reached a point where I couldn't stand my mother and I love my mother dearly, but I couldn't do it. I was burnt out," says Maniscalco.

Her mother has since passed.

Now her mother-in-law has Alzheimer's, but was able to get a bed at the County home before admissions were suspended.

As for her own future, this boomer voices the fears many have, but no one wants to talk about.

"The average person in our generation, as I say, no, I don't want to go to a nursing home, what are my odds?," says Maniscalco.

The harsh reality of more elderly boomers is more people with age-related diseases like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, diseases with long term decline that need long term care.

With boomer's smaller families and higher divorce rates, the family safety net is shrinking and the number of elder orphans, those with limited resources who have outlived family and friends, could reach 2.5 million nationally by 2030.

Courtney Burke says providing long term care is one of our biggest challenges.

The Director of the Rockefeller Institute's New York State Health Policy Research Center

says the nursing homes of the future will look very different.

The trend for elder care will take it's cue from the movement for people with disabilities, smaller group homes instead of large institutions.

"Transforming a system takes a long time, so we really need to start now, if we're thinking about the year 2030, we need to start thinking about what we can do tomorrow," says Burke.

There are no quick and easy answers to where we will care for the elderly or who will care for them with projected shortages in home health care aides and nurses and doctors who specialize in elder care.

Courtney Burke says the State needs to invest in the workforce and future facilities but a revenue shortfall and competing political interests make that difficult.