

Sussex County's Growing Senior Population: Community Voices

Introduction

The University of Delaware's (UD) Institute for Public Administration (IPA), working with UD's Sustainable Coastal Communities Initiative (SCCI), sought to conduct research regarding seniors living in Sussex County, Delaware. Research conducted in 2015 included in-depth interviews with senior-service providers and Sussex County officials. To read the full report summarizing the 2015 work, please visit: www.ipa.udel.edu/publications/healthpolicy.html. This work was expanded in 2016 to include direct feedback from seniors. As the county's 65+ population continues to grow over the next decade, it is critical to hear about quality of life issues directly from seniors.

Focus Group Meetings

Between May and August 2016, IPA, in partnership with the Sussex County Advisory Committee on Aging and Adults with Physical Disabilities (Advisory Committee), conducted focus groups throughout the area. More than 90 senior citizens participated in focus groups in ten locations across Sussex County. The focus groups lasted approximately one hour and were conducted at senior centers, community

centers, and public libraries. Each focus group was facilitated by an IPA moderator and recorder, and most included representation from the Advisory Committee, so that pertinent resources and information could be shared.

Focus Group Participants

To assist in understanding the composition of the facilitated focus groups, participants were asked to answer several demographic questions on notecards, which were kept anonymous. Seniors could opt out of providing notecard information, which did not preclude them from participating in the focus group.

Among the participants who completed the demographic notecards, the average age was 73 years old, with 89% identifying as "non-native" Sussex Countians.

Feedback from Seniors

Traffic

Traffic congestion was raised as a primary concern by many participants—even before the moderator introduced issues of roads or transportation. Increased traffic volume, particularly during the summer months, was also

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a frequent concern mentioned among participants. One participant shared that, “Wednesday is the new Thursday,” meaning that during summer months, heavier traffic bouts are beginning earlier in the week, and thus requiring local appointments and errands to be scheduled accordingly.

Transportation and Planning

Transportation was a major topic discussed during the focus groups conducted. In addition to traffic concerns, many seniors noted that they are not sure what they will do when they are unable to drive. This topic transitioned into conversations about broader long-term aging plans. For example, some participants shared concerns about not having a specific course of action in place, in the event of a major illness or injury. These concerns seemed heightened for seniors whose children and families live outside the area.

Medical Care

Health-related services and appointments was a common theme, particularly among non-native seniors. Among those from neighboring states of Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, some indicated that they often schedule medical appointments with their previous doctors located in these areas. This issue was common among seniors who required specific care from a specialized medical professional. Other seniors, whose original home was too far to regularly commute, expressed frustration with the availability of appointments for dermatological, cardiology, and psychiatric services.

Focus Group Locations

- Selbyville Library, Selbyville
- Bridgeville Public Library, Bridgeville
- Laurel Senior Center, Laurel
- Lewes Senior Center, Lewes
- Cape Henlopen Senior Center, Rehoboth Beach
- Ocean View CHEER, Ocean View
- Milton CHEER, Milton
- Long Neck CHEER, Millsboro
- Heritage Shores, Bridgeville
- Georgetown Library, Georgetown

Culture

Since the majority of focus group participants were not originally from Sussex County, there was rich discussion around the amenities and services they miss from their previous areas of residence. Cultural activities and events were specifically mentioned as opportunities missed from other locations in which they had lived. While cultural activities and events were reported as more common on the eastern side of the county, these offerings are often limited to summer months that encompass the area’s primary tourism season. In addition to cultural activities and events, several individuals expressed a deficiency in educational enrichment opportunities outside of leisure or sports-related activities.

Limitations

There were two noteworthy limitations in conducting focus groups among seniors in Sussex County. The first was the ability to reach specific sub-populations of older adults, namely homebound and Hispanic seniors. These are populations that might be unintentionally excluded from the public participation process due to outreach restrictions (e.g., language, residential, and mobility constraints). The second limitation involved the inherent nature of focus group research, which is not intended to be representative of any population. It was understood in planning for this work that this method was used to gather general themes and feedback from participants.

Next Steps

Supporting the Advisory Committee in sharing this feedback and information with Sussex County stakeholders and elected officials is a critical next step. To accommodate the needs of the county’s growing senior population, greater coordination and planning is needed among all sectors playing a role in the overall growth of the area. A long-term and synchronized measurement system would benefit planning efforts and provide data to inform decision making and develop policy at the county and state levels. Incorporating seniors’ opinions and feedback into a measurement system would help ensure that such a system reflects long-term quality of life issues, while helping ensure that Sussex County remains a destination of choice among regional vacationers and retirees.