Plan advocates services for Marin's growing population of older adults
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MARIN COUNTY'S latest plan for its rapidly expanding population of older adults seeks to improve services, boost community programs to handle needs and make sure people know how to find help.

Similar to past plans, the program outlines key goals and strategies for serving the elderly population and calls for a community-based care system, improvements in access to information and services, collaboration among service providers and accommodation of those with special needs. The plan calls for transit improvements, affordable preventive health care, congregate meal and home-delivered food programs, strengthening volunteer programs and other efforts to get seniors involved in community life, and advocacy, public information and related efforts.

"A lot of seniors don't know how to navigate the system," said Ana Bagtas, a county health department program manager. "We need to help them."

Bagtas outlined the plan's goals and findings in a presentation this week that county supervisors agreed was illuminating as well as a handy reference to life that beckons just around the corner. Supervisor Kate Sears, 59, noted that it is critical to "take care of a population that some of us will be joining soon."

"We will have a lot of people that fit into this category," noted Supervisor Steve Kinsey, joining colleagues in approving the document.

"We see demand (for services) reaching unprecedented levels" at a time grant and local funds are shrinking, said county health chief Larry Meredith. Limited available funding, he added, may be shifted "to meet some of this expanding and emerging need" as officials sort out priorities.

The plan recites the striking demographics that mark the county, noting that 61,454 residents, or a quarter of the county, were 60 or older in 2010, a 38 percent increase since 2000 — a period when the county population grew just 2 percent. The swelling older adult population is growing fastest in rural communities including Muir Beach, Bolinas, Lagunitas, Forest Knolls, San Geronimo and Woodacre as well as Dillon Beach, Marin's "oldest" community, where the median age is 57.4 years.

The plan adds that at 44.5 years, Marin's population is the oldest in the the Bay Area, and notes that a forecast by the Association of Bay Area Governments indicates 40 percent of the county's population will be 60 years and older by 2020.

It points out that opportunities exist for providers who offer affordable services to the growing, increasingly diverse senior population; such services include transportation, home care, recreation and technology vendors. In addition, "demand for retirement planning services and financial instruments, such as reverse mortgages, will likely increase."

More than half of the county's 42,192 residents age 65 and older live in owner-occupied homes. Seniors 65 and older reside in more than half of 15,904 homes in Marin owned by someone living alone. Aging in place is a goal, the plan notes, "but in rural areas this could become difficult, with inadequate transit services contributing to the isolation of older residents."

The plan, based in part on a survey returned by 891 Marin seniors, found most are generally healthy, although 61 percent complained about arthritis and 45 percent cited high blood pressure, while 18 percent reported an injury from falling, 16 percent suffered from diabetes, and 16 percent from long periods of depression. "Prevention is imperative in supporting Marin County's aging population," according to the report. "Affordable routine preventive care ... should be made available."

About 70 percent said watching television was a key pastime. More than a quarter reported problems with abuse, employment, health, insurance or legal matters in the past year.

Access to services was cited as a key issue, with many expressing need for a "hub," such as a post office, where they could get information. The survey indicated 38 percent of seniors get information from family and friends, 32 percent from the Independent Journal, and 23 percent from the Internet.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information on the county's four-year "Area Plan for Aging," visit: www.co.marin.ca.us/aging