Dallas conference bringing together experts, advocates on aging

By Pamela Yip

This week Dallas is hosting a major conference of almost 1,000 experts on aging who are on the front lines of meeting the needs of older adults in the U.S.

The n4a Answers on Aging Annual Conference and Trade Show is the largest gathering of professionals who serve seniors. The conference runs through Wednesday at the Hyatt Regency Dallas.

N4a stands for the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, which represents more than 600 members.

Area Agencies on Aging were established by the federal government nearly five decades ago. They serve as the go-to source for older adults and caregivers seeking community resources for a variety of needs.

With funding from the agencies, older adults across America receive about 237 million meals, 28 million rides, 17 million hours of personal care, 14 million hours of homemaker services and 9 million hours of respite care annually.
Money issues are a major focus of the conference.

“When we’re looking at people hitting their 60s, they’re in a different financial spot than even their parents’ generation,” said Sandy Markwood, chief executive of the association. “Most people haven’t planned to the degree they need to.”

Some of that is because people had children later in life, she said. Or they put their kids through school instead of putting money into their retirement accounts.

The conference agenda includes programs on elder abuse and financial exploitation, and helping financial caregivers protect a senior’s money and family assets.

Other major issues the conference is covering are:

**Health care** — With the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, area agencies on aging are forming partnerships with hospitals and managed care organizations that are changing the landscape of the long-term and health care marketplaces.

In Texas, agencies are on the forefront of this movement.

**Helping older adults stay healthy** — “If there is a silver bullet on aging, it’s remaining healthy,” Markwood said. “So a lot of our conference will be focused in on a range of health promotion and disease prevention programs that area agencies provide.

**Livable communities** — Research shows that 90 percent of people age 65 and older want to “age in place” in their homes and communities. But the research also shows that the physical, social and support infrastructure needed to make that dream a reality is lacking in much of the U.S.

“You can have the best services in the world, but ultimately, people live in a community. So if you don’t have adequate housing and transportation and service delivery, then it really is compromising somebody’s ability to be able to live with quality of life in the community,” Markwood said.

“Many people will have to age in place in the home they raised their family in, in which case what we’re talking about there is modification of that home,” she said. “How can you add in grab bars? How do you modify an existing home to be able to make it a place where someone can age successfully?”

Part of aging in place involves being able to afford basic necessities such as food, medicine and utilities.

In Dallas County, the greatest needs among seniors on fixed incomes are nutrition and help to remain in their homes, said Millie DeAnda, director of the Area Agency on Aging of Dallas County.
“Seniors are wanting to pay the utilities, but it ebbs and flows,” she said.

Her agency provides financial assistance to seniors to pay utility bills.

“If they are on a fixed income, if there is extra medical care or prescriptions, they’re going to get their prescriptions and then they worry about the electrical bill next month,” DeAnda said.

“It’s really hard to budget on a fixed income if the variables are electricity and medical, and in some cases transportation,” she said. “If they’re not able to drive, they can’t get to the doctor.”