National survey shines light on needs of aging populations

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A national survey, with a focus on Cincinnati, will help organizations serving elderly people and the community at large to prepare for an increasingly aging population.

The fourth annual United States of Aging Survey — conducted in collaboration by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, UnitedHealthcare and National Council on Aging — includes 1,650 telephone interviews of those over the age of 60 and health care providers.

"In looking at the survey, it really focused in on the issues of health care, finance and what kind of community supports people need," said Sandy Markwood, chief executive officer, National Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

About 80 people gathered Wednesday in Sharonville to hear the survey results and engage in a discussion on individual and community preparedness for the region's growing aging population. Every day, 10,000 baby boomers turn age 65 — a daily trend that will continue until 2030, according to Pew Research Center.

Markwood said Cincinnati served as a "special community" in this year's survey and was one of only two cities selected for an over-sampling, along with Denver, Colo.

"One of the reasons we came and did that here is because you've got a great system, not only because of your (elderly services) levy but because you've always been innovators in aging services and supports," Markwood said. "You are models for the rest of the country."

Suzanne Burke, president and chief executive officer, Council on Aging of Southwestern Ohio, said her agency will use results from the survey to guide its setting of new priorities in the fall.

“Our experience has been (older adults) don't think they're going to need services in the future, and they don't do a lot of planning for it, and that's financially as well. And I think the same holds true for our community," Burke said.

The survey focused on six areas: attitude and purpose; cost of aging; aging infrastructure; community connections; health management; and staying mentally sharp. For full survey results, visit online at www.ncoa.org/unitedstatesofaging.

Attitude and Purpose
While most older adults surveyed believe their quality of life won’t change in the next 10 years, more Cincinnati older adults (32 percent) expect their overall quality of life to decline in the next decade. Their top concerns were becoming a burden to others and losing their memory.

Kyle Riplinger, senior analyst, Penn Schoen Berland, said the results show the health care professionals are actually more concerned for their future than the older adults themselves. Only 12 percent of the older adults were concerned with the affordability of housing while the rate was 38 percent among health care professionals.

**Staying Mentally Sharp**

Older adults in Cincinnati reported their top barriers to staying mentally sharp are depression or isolation (58 percent); inactivity (57 percent); and loss of important relationships (51 percent). To help combat that, nearly 50 percent of older adults in Cincinnati say they participate in learning opportunities at churches, online or at community centers.

**Cost of Aging**

Riplinger said a discrepancy between the older adults and health care professionals surveyed was on the cost of aging. The majority (73 percent) of older adults feel it’s not a challenge to meet monthly expenses, while 71 percent of health care professionals said it’s very or somewhat difficult for them.

Riplinger said despite their confidence in paying monthly bills, about 60 percent of older adults are somewhat or very concerned about having enough money to last them for the rest of their life.

He said the health care professionals took a “more practical, real-world approach” when asked about the best way to help with financial management. They said to work beyond retirement age, while the older adults said they’d take advantage of senior discounts.

Ann Munafo, executive director of the Middletown Area Senior Center, said information from the survey results will also be used to help her center as it transitions to find more ways to attract baby boomers and younger senior citizens.

Munafo said despite having public transportation in Middletown, it still remains a barrier for those even unable to walk to the curb to catch the bus or to make it to the door of their doctor’s office upon arrival. She said the availability of meals and fresh produce is also an issue.

“For Middletown it’s a real issue because there’s a food desert downtown and many seniors are living there,” Munafo said, adding the only option for food is United Dairy Farmers and Family Dollar.