Older Americans Want Better Transportation Options

Hundreds of thousands contact the Eldercare Locator for assistance

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Next Avenue Blogger

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Transportation was the No. 1 reason adults 60 and older sought help from a national referral center last year, according to a new report.

That’s not surprising, said the Eldercare Locator Data Report, published and administered by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (also known as n4a) and funded by the U.S. Administration on Aging.

“For older adults who can no longer drive and who live in suburban or rural communities without adequate public transit, a lack of transportation options can have a profound effect on overall quality of life,” the report said. “Many callers express frustration because they can’t do simple things like visit the doctor, buy food or socialize with peers because the options for getting from Point A to Point B are limited.”

More and More Seeking Help
The Eldercare Locator is the only national referral resource for older adults looking for help for a variety of needs. Started in 1991, its numbers increased to an all-time record high last year of 271,234 requests for assistance — or about 1,000 per weekday. Nearly 73 percent were new visitors. The requests came in through phone, online chat and email. The data report summarizes information gathered from those contacts in 2014. (Individual identities were kept confidential.)

**A Need for Rides, Repairs, Other Services**

Transportation was the main reason for 19 percent of the calls. More than three-quarters of those callers were in search of rides for medical appointments; astonishingly, 64 percent had an *immediate* need, either for a medical ride, a non-medical ride or other transportation service.

That’s often not possible, said Sandy Markwood, CEO of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, the nonprofit representing Area Agencies on Aging across the country. Most transportation services require 24- to 48-hour advance notice, but some communities have set aside transportation funding to meet emergency needs.

Other issues, in order of number of calls, were:

**Home and community-based services: 18 percent.** More than half of the calls in this category were from people needing home repairs. Forty-two percent wanted home modifications, like grab bars and ramps. Another 7 percent called in search of financial help for home improvements.

“We with these types of services and supports, what we find is that people can successfully age at home and/or in their community,” Markwood said.

**Housing: 15 percent.** Older adults worried about finding affordable or accessible housing made up the third-largest category of callers to Eldercare Locator.

The gap between demand for appropriate housing and the supply is widening, the report said, and “the number of inquiries on this topic is expected to grow.”

Seeing the importance of those top three categories — transportation, home and community-based services and housing — gives “an indication of how critical where you live is to making sure you age successfully,” Markwood said.

**Medical services and supplies: 11 percent.** Older adults called and went online with questions on how to pay for prescriptions, hearing aids, dental care, diabetes and incontinence supplies and other needs. Some of those are not covered by insurance.

**Health insurance: 9 percent.** Anyone who has dealt with health insurance questions — regardless of their age — knows this area can be incredibly confusing and difficult to sort out. Many older adults came to the Eldercare Locator for individualized help. The greatest call volume came during the Medicare open enrollment period from November to January.

**Where They Come From**

Perhaps not surprisingly, the highest numbers of calls come from some of the largest states.

California (which is No. 1 in population) ranked first, with nearly 30,000 calls. Florida (third in total population), came in second. Texas was third, followed by New York and Georgia.

**But Does It Work?**
In an age when so many services are automated (think of the infernal phone trees with no live human option), Eldercare Locator is different because it gives person-to-person help, Markwood said.

Ninety-eight percent of callers said they were “highly satisfied” with their experience, according to the report.

Not only are the staffers knowledgeable about resources, they are also trained to delve into what may be more fundamental issues for the callers, Markwood said. “They may be asking for one service, but if you probe a little deeper you find out that something else is more critical,” she said. “An example of that is if somebody calls in looking for a nursing home or some type of institutional setting for their loved one, you dig deeper in the call and you find out Mom just needs a ride to the doctor or home-delivered meals.”

*Older adults can request help from the Eldercare Locator by calling 800-677-1116 or going online at www.eldercare.gov.*