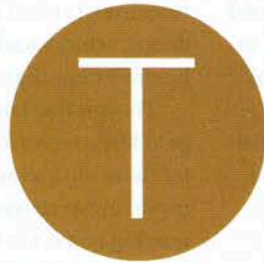




# ALL ABOARD THE AGE WAVE

AN AMBITIOUS PLAN IS ROLLING OUT TO HELP AREA SENIORS PREPARE FOR THEIR GOLDEN YEARS

By Garry Kranz • Illustration by Jon Krause



here's no avoiding it: The Richmond region is getting older. And it won't be long before the number of gray-ing residents reaches critical mass.

By 2030, the number of people 65 and older here will more than double, according to a 2012 report by the United Way of Greater Richmond and Petersburg. At that time, Richmond will be home to more than 232,000 senior citizens — a whopping 144 percent increase from 95,000 in 2000.

Seeking to forestall the looming demographic crunch, area businesses, nonprofits, governments and citizens' groups have joined forces to identify and prioritize the region's assets and deficits. Known as the Age Wave Readiness Plan, the effort addresses seven broad areas that affect the region's senior population: volunteerism, caregiving, workforce issues, buying power, physical health, civic engagement and age-related happiness. It marks the culmination of region-wide planning efforts that began about six years ago.

Spearheading the work is Senior Connections, also known as the Capital Area Agency on Aging, in conjunction with AgeWell Va., part of the VCU Department of Gerontology. The readiness plan encompasses 11 localities, including the city of Richmond, towns of Ashland and Charles City, Chesterfield, Goochland, Hanover, Henrico, New Kent and Powhatan counties.

The ultimate aim: coordinate regional resources around a strategy that enables Richmond communities to achieve age-wave readiness, says Sara A. Link, director of the Richmond Age Wave Readiness Coalition. "We want to build public awareness of the demographic shift and the demands it's going to place on our infrastructure throughout the Richmond region. That includes housing, transportation, health care and the need for caregivers," Link says.

Link's group is developing a toolkit designed to educate businesses, policymakers, physicians, faith-based groups and seniors groups about the age wave and its potential impact. Among the tools is information for seniors about home safety, tips on remaining independently in their homes as they get older (known as "aging in place"), nutrition and medication safety. VCU's gerontology department will develop a scorecard that localities can use to measure their progress against regional benchmarks. ►

The next phase is to help localities embrace the abstract concepts behind the plan, drilling down to adapt it to the particular needs of their seniors. “The local level is where this program will take shape,” says Jackie Stewart, director of planning and information systems for the Richmond Regional Planning District Commission, which is advising nearby communities on how to perform their own analyses.

Powhatan County demonstrates the dramatic increase in Richmond’s number of seniors. Those aged 65 to 74 comprised 12 percent of Powhatan’s population (3,407 residents) in 2010, according to the Virginia Employment Commission. By 2030, 17 percent of Powhatan’s residents will be of retirement age.

“We are a magnet for retirees, and most of them have good disposable income. There is real opportunity for business to tap into this market,” says Carson Tucker, vice chairman of the Powhatan County Board of Supervisors.

Tucker says he presented information about the age wave to the Powhatan Chamber of Commerce, pointing out some relatively simple steps businesses can take to turn seniors into loyal customers, including the provision of adequate seating or offering a drink of water during hot days — touches that seniors will appreciate.

With seniors comprising a growing proportion of Powhatan’s overall population, it makes sense for businesses to take notice, Tucker says. “Older folks are going to visit businesses where they feel safe and welcome. If they don’t feel welcome, they’ll go elsewhere.”

## Seniors Need a Lift

Richmond’s pending age imbalance is not unique. Nearly 2 million Virginians will be 65 or older by 2030 — 20 percent of its total population, according to Older Dominion Partnership, a nonprofit launched in 2007. Virginia is a microcosm of America: A 2011 report by the Pew Research Center projects 10 million baby boomers — people born between 1946 and 1964 — will turn 65 each day through 2030.

A top concern will be the need for expanded transportation and ambulatory services, particularly for homebound seniors to visit their doctors, shop for groceries and perform other tasks most take for granted. “It’s really critical that they have accessible, affordable transportation,” says Thelma Watson, executive director of Senior Connections.

Some seniors may be unable to afford transportation services, while

others may have the financial ability but be overwhelmed with the available resources. Still others may have never used public transportation and may be reluctant to hop aboard a GRTC bus. Watson’s organization is reaching out to seniors to make them aware of the region’s transportation resources and guide people through the process of scheduling, sometimes even finding caregivers to accompany them to appointments. “We’re trying to help providers make their services more accessible and affordable for seniors,” including limousine and taxi services, Watson says.

## More Housing, Caregivers Wanted

In addition to transportation, affordable housing for seniors remains a critical issue. Seeking to retain their independence, seniors understandably prefer to remain in their homes rather than move into assisted living.


Though this isn’t a problem for seniors whose homes are paid for or who are relatively healthy, it’s often a different story for those with a low income, who may not be able to afford to move into a retirement community yet resist the stigma of a nursing home. On this issue, Senior Connections is partnering with the Better Housing Coalition, a Richmond-based nonprofit that provides affordable housing for aging in place.

In Powhatan, officials are putting together a zoning plan that could enable high-density clusters of affordable housing. At present, Powhatan does not have assisted-living facilities, despite its surging senior population. “We have part of Powhatan County that might be ideal for developers to build housing for seniors on fixed incomes,” Tucker says.

Link says another area of interest is persuading home- →



Rose Martin, a resident of Better Housing Coalition’s Somanath Seniors apartment community in Church Hill, with her son Harold



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age wave cont'd

builders to embrace universal design: the construction of senior-friendly homes with wider doorways, grab bars in showers, cutaways on sidewalks and similar features. Such approaches would make it easier to make modifications for people as they age, enabling them to remain in their homes longer.

### Slowing the Brain Drain

As baby boomers head to retirement, organizations are already scratching their collective head on how to deal with the exodus of talent and institutional knowledge. Sixty-five percent of Virginia's business leaders say the aging workforce poses serious challenges to the U.S. economy, with two in five expecting that it will have a direct impact on their organizations.

One solution is for companies to consider ways to enable older workers to serve as mentors, helping transfer institutional knowledge to younger workers, Link says. Job training or education courses also need to be developed to help older adults change jobs or reenter the workforce.

Richmond already faces a shortage of people capable of delivering geriatric care, says Link. The problem will only intensify as time goes by, underscoring the significance of age-wave planning now rather than later. "Not only do we need an experienced workforce trained in caring for seniors, but as a region, we need to prepare people who are taking care of their loved ones."

Regional officials want to develop a coordinated health care system that includes preparing a workforce specialized in geriatric care. One of the first steps is to raise awareness of the need throughout Richmond, involving businesses, nonprofits, the medical community, churches and policymakers.

The ideas are still taking shape, but one example is figuring out how to enable state-funded colleges and universities to boost enrollment of students in geriatric care programs, possibly by helping repay student loans or providing tuition tax credits. "We need to get more people educated about what it means to take care of an older adult," says Link, emphasizing that this should include programs for professional caregivers as well as those caring for elderly family members. ■

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