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New Perspectives: Investing in Resilience to Promote Healthy Aging

A Well-Aged Population

Imagine an older population of Californians who remain active and functional into their later years, living in their own homes and engaging with their local communities for as long as reasonably possible. Imagine a future where the public

‘The most important fact about the boomers is that, when asked where they want to live as they age, a full 90% say, “In my home.” They do not want to live with relatives, in a nursing home, or at an assisted care facility.’

—AARP

perception about getting old is not a steady decline into sickness, functional disability, loneliness, and dependence—a future where people do not view the nursing home as the inevitable residence for seniors.

As Baby Boomers age, they are reframing discussions about growing old and redefining what it means to age well. They want support to maintain their physical, mental, and social health, and want to remain independent, a foundation of successful aging. And as the senior population grows—estimated to reach 6.4 million in California in 2010 and double by 2050—their voices will sound a clear and insistent chorus for change.

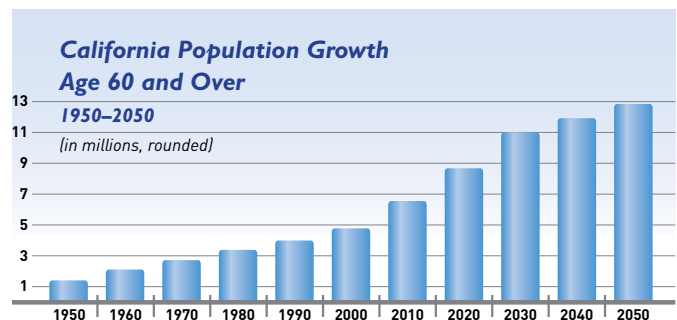
The Advancing ‘Silver Tsunami’

California began to feel the effects of the advancing “Silver Tsunami” as the first wave of Baby Boomers turned 60 a few years ago, adding their numbers to an estimated 36-percent increase in residents age 60 and over between 2000 and 2010. Forecasts show a swelling in the trend, with a 172-percent increase by 2050 in the over-60 group. An even greater increase is expected for those age 85 and older, known as the “oldest-old.” In 2000, only 425,000 were in that group. By 2040, an estimated 1.3 million Californians will be 85 or over—an increase of 205 percent.²

The aging of the American population is expected to add 25 percent to overall annual health care spending by 2030.³ In California, unless more preventive services are provided to help residents actively work to stay healthy, the state’s health care system will likely see greater than expected increases in the nearly \$15,000 per capita spent in 2004 on caring for the health of its seniors.^{4,5}

Aging Well

What does it mean to age successfully? For several decades, the commonly accepted view was that people could be considered to be “aging well” if they were simply free of disease.⁶ In recent years, that definition has broadened as considerable new evidence reveals large segments of the older population reporting they are aging well in spite of illness.^{7,8}



Promote Health Across Generations Through ‘Experience Corps’

Personal resilience may be bolstered through continued meaningful contributions to society and social engagement that are sustained through volunteer or paid work. The Experience Corps provides an opportunity for adults, age 55 and older, to serve as tutors and mentors to students in urban public elementary schools and afterschool programs. In 23 cities across the country, more than 2,000 Experience Corps members have affected the lives of more than 23,000 students.

Research demonstrates that Experience Corps participants—some volunteer their skills, while others receive a much-needed stipend—boost student academic performance and strengthen ties between the schools and their neighborhoods.

The benefits for members of the Experience Corps are important contributors to successful aging, with an overwhelming percentage of participants saying the experience raised their self-esteem, increased their circle of friends, and improved their lives overall.²⁵ The expanded social network, increased physical activity, and other benefits of remaining engaged in meaningful work in the community through Experience Corps “has the potential to increase participants’ physical, mental, and social activity, all of which are linked to better health in later life.”²⁶

Learn more about this program by visiting www.experiencecorps.org

Today, there is agreement that success in aging goes beyond avoidance of disease and disability. Neither can success be determined by longevity alone. Much attention has been focused recently on “successful aging” as a multidimensional concept, with such elements as cognitive health, social connectedness, ability to adapt to changes associated with aging, and general satisfaction with life seen as important predictors of aging well.^{9,10} Health is

not merely the absence of disease and chronic disability. Rather, health should be viewed as a resource for everyday life that enables people to remain vibrant members of the community.¹¹

Looked at this way, “healthy aging” and “successful aging” are no longer oxymorons but attainable goals for much of the graying population. The experience of the Baby Boomers bears this out, and research demonstrates that lifestyle modifications and resilience in coping with the inevitable changes of old age can have a significant impact in preventing illness and functional decline, and in maintaining good health in old age.¹²

The Power of Resilience

Everyone experiences loss of various types as they age, which results in increasing stress. In addition to functional decline, many face pain, weakness, fatigue, sleep problems, depression, anxiety, memory and other cognitive deficits, hearing loss, visual impairment, isolation, marginalization, physical and mental illnesses, and personal or financial loss as they age.

“Resilience” has been identified as a quality that can be fostered or strengthened to help seniors cope with adversity in aging and achieve greater happiness.¹³ Resilience might even be one factor to explain thriving among the oldest-old, as one recent 10-year study found that psychological resources were positively related to “exceptional” aging.¹⁴ Factors that help create, strengthen, and sustain physical and emotional resilience include: proper nutrition, regular physical exercise, emotional support, hope/optimism/agency, high cognitive functioning, close social ties, secure green space and engaging in nature, volunteerism, and satisfying work life.¹⁵ Taken as a whole, this outlines a high quality of life with the recognized dimensions of health: physical, social, emotional, spiritual, cognitive, environmental, and vocational.

As an example, physical activity is a powerful contributor to resilience, yet less than one-third of people 65 and over engage in regular, sustained physical activity. It improves function, relieves stress, decreases depression, and reduces the

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risk of chronic conditions, including coronary heart disease, hypertension, colon cancer, type 2 diabetes, and osteoporosis.¹⁶ Exercise improves strength, conditioning, and endurance, aiding fall prevention and elevating mood.¹⁷ Physically active people also have lower health care costs than inactive people.¹⁸

We present in sidebars two examples of programs that successfully target contributors to resilience. EnhanceFitness—a program developed by researchers at the University of Washington for seniors—has been shown to improve social and physical functioning and decrease depression. Experience Corps—a program that tackles two of society's programs at once by enlisting seniors to mentor and tutor inner-city students—has the co-benefit of increasing participants' social, physical, and mental activity, which contributes to healthy aging.

As California prepares for the full force of the Silver Tsunami's impact in the coming years, it must consider not only how it will care for the health of its aging population through prevention and health care services, but also how it will help seniors manage chronic conditions and adapt to other inevitable consequences of aging.¹⁹

Investing More Heavily in 'Resilient Aging'

Only 2 to 3 percent of total health care spending goes for prevention.²⁰ The remaining health care resources are directed toward financing and delivery of medical care, with substantially less emphasis on other determinants of health, such as behavioral choices, social circumstances, and environmental conditions.²¹

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention concludes that "increased focus on prevention is critical to preserving older individuals' independence and reducing long-term care needs—it is also critical for helping to stem health care costs."²² As discussed above, attention is turning toward "resilience" as a component of prevention where change can be effected to increase the likelihood that seniors will maintain good health, age well, and contribute to the vitality of the community.

'EnhanceFitness' to Age Well

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of a community-based group exercise program, called EnhanceFitness, in improving function and self-reported health in older adults.²⁷ In hourlong classes, up to 25 people practice aerobic, strength, flexibility, and balance exercises that have been shown to increase strength, boost activity, and elevate mood. All are factors that contribute to building and sustaining resilience and enhancing health. Evaluation of the program showed that participants realized:

- 13 percent improvement in social function
- 52 percent improvement in depression
- 35 percent improvement in physical functioning

Classes are taught by certified fitness instructors trained in the EnhanceFitness program. Participants' progress is tracked through a series of standardized tests.

EnhanceFitness, which began in Washington, has been used in more than 100 sites around the country and currently operates in 28 states. Through March 2008, more than 7,500 seniors had participated in the program.

Studies are currently underway to test the effectiveness of the EnhanceFitness program for seniors with arthritis in West Virginia and Washington, elderly Latinos in the Greater Los Angeles area, and people with dementia in Washington.

Learn more at www.projectenhance.org

As California analyzes how best to invest in ensuring a healthy future for its aging population, planners should take note of the mounting evidence demonstrating the positive effects of physical and emotional resilience²³ and greatly expand on the state's current vision for optimizing wellness of the aging population by 2020.²⁴ Presently, prevention and health promotion efforts receive only a tiny fraction of health

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28 Project Enhance website, www.projectenhance.org/admin_ef_explorations.htm, accessed on May 20, 2009.

funding and are frequently threatened by the pressure of budget cuts. The aging of the Boomer Generation creates an urgent demand to find ways to lessen the resulting impact on the state's health care system. Failure to invest in programs directed at promoting resilience among this generation would be a missed opportunity for California to enhance its older citizens' quality of life and reduce the burden they could place on the health care system and the state's coffers.

Policy Recommendations

Given the current budget crisis, it is imperative that the state invest in proven programs that make efficient use of limited financial resources. The following policy recommendations represent important long-term investments California can make in healthy aging that would enhance the quality of life of its aging Baby Boomers and increase their contributions to family, community, and society, while ultimately reducing their dependence on and use of the health care system.

- **Invest in Evidence-based Resilience Programs:** Significant state resources should be directed toward supporting development and dissemination of evidence-based programs targeted at fostering, strengthening, and sustaining physical and psychosocial resilience. Important contributors ripe for promotion include: proper nutrition, regular physical activity, emotional support, high cognitive functioning, close social ties, green space and engaging in nature, volunteerism, and a satisfying work life. Two such evidence-based programs are highlighted in sidebars in this report: Experience Corps and EnhanceFitness. This would result in the availability of a wide

variety of evidence-based programs that foster resilience to a wide swath of the aging population, increasing the ability of older Californians to prevent disease, stem functional decline, manage disease, and maintain good health as they age.

- **Support Resilience Programs in Communities:** State resources should support communities in offering opportunities to seniors that foster, strengthen, and sustain physical and psychosocial resilience. This would allow aging Californians to participate in programs that have demonstrated success in affecting factors that contribute to resilience, while providing them opportunities to continue to contribute to the vitality of their communities through such activities as tutoring at low-income elementary schools, providing health care, or monitoring environmental pollution.
- **Invest in Education and Training:** State resources should be directed toward educating health care workers to identify and nurture physical and psychosocial resilience to promote successful aging. This would enable health care workers to target appropriate resilience interventions for individuals as part of routine care and encourage their participation. This would increase the likelihood that support is tailored to individual needs and, through health care worker encouragement, heighten the probability that those targeted individuals will participate in programs designed to foster resilience. State resources should also be directed toward vocational retraining programs for older adults. This would enable them to continue to support themselves as they age, strengthening their feelings of purpose and increasing tax revenues as they remain active in the workforce.



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