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## **Age Wave (Or the Gray Tsunami)**

The Growth in Utah's Elderly Population

by Kelli Polcha, MSW, MPA

At our ASPA luncheon/Career Fair held in February, Dr. David Patton spoke about the impact of the pending retirement of "baby boomers" (people born during the period 1945-1962) and how it will impact the job market here in Utah. This is an important issue for all of us to be thinking about, along with the other major impacts that this generation will have on all of us over the next 20 years or so. The following statistics regarding the projected growth in the 60+ population are helpful in terms of grasping the size of the wave that is coming at us.



### **Population Growth in Utah: 1990 -2000**

- 4<sup>th</sup> fastest growing state in total population
- 6<sup>th</sup> fastest growing state in the 65+ population
- 2<sup>nd</sup> highest life expectancy

There was a **sixty percent** increase over a 10 year period (1990 -2000) in the 85+ age group. This age group is the fastest growing segment of the population. In terms of planning for the impact on service needs for the aging population, it is also the population cohort that will require the greatest amount of resources in terms of health care, financial assistance and community supports.

Now take a look at the projected growth in the 60+ age group over the next ten to twenty-five years. It may seem like the impact is a long way off, but it will be felt every year between now and then in terms of pressure on government budgets.

### **Projected Growth in Utah:**

- In 2000 Utah had 252, 677 people aged 60 and older.
- By 2015 there will be 422,364 people in that age group, an increase of 67%
- By 2030 there will be 654,137 people in that age group, an increase of 130%!

Let's talk about what this means in terms of planning for the future. Our legislators took a positive step forward during this session with the creation of a Commission on Aging to study the issues and impacts related to growth in Utah's aging population. The Commission will need to examine the State's ability to meet requirements in a variety of areas. Here are just a few of the areas that will need its attention:

- Growth in funding for home and community-based services for the State's most impoverished and frail elderly, as we develop new programs to meet their needs and help them to remain independent in their homes for as long as possible.
- Growth in funding of senior citizens centers and the home-delivered meals programs to ensure adequate nutrition for all seniors.
- Development of a long-term plan to assist Utah's baby boomers in accessing affordable, long term care as they age, to forestall premature institutionalization.
- Meeting the increased need for adequate, accessible, affordable housing for seniors.
- Expanding and adequately funding the Nursing Home Ombudsman program so that those seniors who do end up in nursing homes and other long term care facilities will have access to someone to advocate for them and assure that their needs are met.

- Providing adequate transportation for this population who will need rides to medical appointments, as well as non-medical destinations to keep them active and involved in their communities, when they are unable to provide transportation for themselves.

The growth that we are expecting is not far off. It is significant enough that, without proper planning, we could find ourselves unable to meet the needs and demands of this segment of our population. And these are not just numbers. This age group will include our parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and perhaps even ourselves! We are a society that does not like to think in terms of growing older. Therefore, it is hard to motivate our leaders to pay attention to what lies ahead for all of us. There are some who believe that if we can "fix" Medicare and "fix" Social Security, we will have found the "magic bullet." While those are worthy goals and certainly need a lot of "fixing", the issues that surround getting older go far beyond these two programs. We need to begin to honor our elderly in this country in a way that shifts the paradigm from one of dealing with the "burden" of an older population to that of celebrating the fact that they have helped to shape our nation, fought to defend it and added immensely to our rich heritage.

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