How Do We Do Better?

An introduction

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In 2020, the U.S. 65-and-older population was the fastest-growing demographic since 2010, increasing by 34.2 percent nationally. In Arizona, the pace was even frenetic, growing at a clip of 48.4 percent.

Further, our geographically diverse state is one of the most-favored U.S. destinations for older retirees. The number of seniors calling the Grand Canyon State home grows annually; older adults will continue to increase in number as more members of the baby boomer generation reach retirement age.

As this shift in age demographics continues, the implications for many federal and state programs that support older adults are real and in need of our attention.

"As people live longer lives, the challenge for us as a society is to develop ways to benefit from the wisdom and experiences of older adults," says Dr. Kathleen Insel, professor and chair of the Biobehavioral Health Science Division at the University Arizona College of Nursing. "At the same time, [we must grow] the workforce to support an aging population, creating educational opportunities and improving quality of life for older adults."[1]

On top of the growing numbers of seniors who require healthcare services or round-the-clock attention, those who experience social isolation or loneliness may face a higher risk of mortality, heart disease and depression, says a new report from

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[1] The University of Arizona, "Improving Life for an Aging Population," The University of Arizona, https://health-sciences.arizona.edu/tomorrow/improving-life-aging-population.

the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.[2]

In Arizona, says the United Health Foundation, challenges in the senior care environment include high suicide rates, shrinking volunteerism and low flu vaccination numbers. Early deaths among the state's elderly (ages 65-74) have increased and, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, physical inactivity had increased by a whopping 20 percent among those 65 years and older, in fair or better health.[3]

> **Our actions to improve health and reduce disparities must be well-informed.**

Adults ages 65 and older make up approximately 16.9 percent of the U.S. population, just more than 55.6 million adults. In less than 10 years – by 2030 – this senior demographic is projected to make up 21 percent of the population (73.1 million), according to the U.S. Census Bureau. With this in mind, better than 1 in 5 people in the U.S. will be of retirement age.

It is critical we understand and address the short- and long-term trends affecting the health of this growing population; our actions to improve health and reduce disparities must be well-informed.[4]

According to one report, with the growing number of long-term care facilities in Arizona, a complementary need exists to provide a broad continuum of services addressing the unique requirements of the frail or disabled. Included is a more meaningful exploration of the level of healthcare delivery necessary to accommodate senior citizens. As critical is the identification of current barriers to accessing healthcare. Once recognized, these barriers must be removed for the sake of the growing number of seniors moving from more independent family

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2 Engineering National Academies of Sciences, and Medicine. "Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System," (The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine: The National Academies Press. Accessible from https://www.nationalacademies.org/our-work/the-health-and-medical-dimensions-of-social-isolation-and-loneliness-in-older-adults, 2020).

3 America's Health Rankings, "10th Annual Senior Report," (Minneapolis, MN: United Health Foundation. Accessible from https://www.americashealthrankings.org/learn/reports/2022-senior-report/state-summaries-arizona, 2020).

4 *Ibid.*

settings into retirement communities or assisted living.[5]

A major growing public policy involves the challenge of "assuring that sufficient resources and an effective service system are available in thirty years, when the elderly population is twice what it is today." This shift will be driven by the baby boomers, who in 2030 will be aged 66 to 84—the "young old"—and will number 61 million people.[6]

The growth of the elderly population in Arizona will likely lead to increased demand for healthcare and other services, and may put strain on the state's resources to meet these needs.

The baby boomer generation, those born between 1946 and 1964, is currently facing a number of healthcare challenges in the state of Arizona. In the past, access to affordable healthcare and lack of preventative care were major issues. As this generation ages, they will increasingly face chronic health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer. These conditions will require ongoing management and treatment, putting a strain on the healthcare system. Additionally, the cost of healthcare for the baby boomers is expected to rise as they require more specialized care. In the future, the aging of the baby boomer population is likely to further strain the healthcare system in Arizona, particularly in terms of access to care and cost.

Baby boomers in Arizona, like those across the U.S., face a number of key challenges as they age. Among them are the increasing prevalence of chronic diseases, which can require ongoing medical treatment and management. In addition, baby boomers are experiencing rising incidences of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Lack of access to healthcare is an issue, leading to delays in diagnosis and treatment – and less-than-ideal outcomes. And, a shortage of healthcare providers, particularly in rural areas, often retards timely attention.

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5   J. R. Knickman and E. K. Snell, "The 2030 Problem: Caring for Aging Baby Boomers," Health Serv Res 37, no. 4 (2002).

6   *Ibid.*

Reducing healthcare costs

The overall financial costs for senior citizens with chronic diseases can be significant. Additionally, chronic conditions may require ongoing (and more expensive) care, further stressing the financial burden. There may be light at the end of the tunnel for our valued at-risk seniors. There are proven measures that can reduce the cost of healthcare, at least among the three leading causes of death for senior citizens in Arizona:

- **Preventive care:** Regular check-ups, screenings and vaccinations can help detect and prevent health problems before they become serious, ultimately reducing healthcare costs in the long run.

- **Chronic disease management:** Implementing disease management programs that focus on reducing hospital readmissions and managing chronic conditions can help reduce the overall cost of care.

- **Telehealth and remote monitoring:** Telehealth and remote monitoring technologies allow for more convenient and accessible care, particularly for seniors with chronic conditions, helping reduce the cost of in-person visits and hospital stays.

- **Care coordination:** Coordinating care between different healthcare providers and community resources can help ensure seniors get the best possible care, reducing unnecessary costs.

- **Medication management:** Implementing medication management programs that focus on reducing medication errors, promoting the use of generic drugs and identifying drug interactions can help control the cost of medications.

- **Assistive technology:** Assistive technology, such as personal emergency response systems and home health monitoring, can improve safety and independence of seniors, which may reduce the need for more expensive care.

These solutions should be tailored to the specific needs and preferences of individual seniors. Coordination between healthcare providers and community resources is essential to ensure seniors get the best possible care at the most reasonable cost.

Technology in healthcare

Telehealth has become increasingly important in the healthcare sector in Arizona, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted, telehealth allows patients to access medical care remotely, through the use of video conferencing and other technologies.

The advent of technology, specifically Artificial Intelligence (AI), is also expected to have a significant impact on the healthcare sector. AI can be used to analyze large amounts of data, such as electronic health records, to identify patterns and predict outcomes. This can help healthcare providers make more accurate diagnoses, develop more effective treatment plans and identify patients at risk for certain conditions. AI can also be used to automate certain tasks, such as scheduling appointments and processing insurance claims, freeing up healthcare providers to focus on patient care.

In assisted living communities and residential care facilities in Arizona, technology is expected to play a key role in improving the quality of care for residents. In the next decade, the healthcare sector in Arizona is likely to see a continued growth in telehealth, remote monitoring and AI. Additionally, there is a growing trend toward value-based care, which focuses on improving the quality of care while controlling costs. Another emerging trend is the use of wearable technology and mobile apps to track and manage health conditions, which can help seniors and other patients to better manage their health. Telehealth and remote monitoring technology will play a key role in helping seniors to age in place, which will likely become an increasingly popular option for aging adults in the state of Arizona.

In summary, emerging trends in healthcare expected to shape the next decade in our state include:

- **Telehealth and remote monitoring:** The growing use of telehealth and remote monitoring technologies will continue to make healthcare more convenient and accessible, particularly for seniors and individuals living in remote areas.

- **Artificial intelligence and machine learning:** The use of AI and machine learning will continue to grow in the healthcare sector, helping providers make better-informed decisions and improving the efficiency of care.

- **Personalized medicine:** Advancements in genomics and other technologies will enable healthcare providers to tailor treatments to the specific needs of individual patients, leading to more effective and efficient care.

- **Value-based care:** The shift towards value-based care models, in which providers are paid for the *quality of care* rather than the *quantity of services* provided, will continue to gain traction in the healthcare sector.

- **Integrated care:** An increased focus on integrated care models will help ensure seniors get the best possible care.

We can do better.

For the "Summer 2023 Special Issue: Healthy Aging in Arizona," we put the subject to the healthcare experts around the theme *Opportunities for the Senior Healthcare System.*

In the first article "Advocacy in Assisted Living Setting: Who's on Your Side?" Stephen Des Georges and I examine the critical importance of senior care advocacy in a Q&A format. Effective advocacy improves the delivery of healthcare, because communication between patient and provider is greatly enhanced. This leads to greater efficiency in diagnosis and treatment. In any elderly care setting, the professional staff must be as deeply involved as possible; patient advocacy is a win-win for all parties.

Next, in "Retiring Baby Boomers and the Coming of the Silver Tsunami," healthcare professional Jessica Craig and I unpack the implications of growing life expectancy rates – what does it mean to healthcare that people are living longer than ever before? We explore what we call the "silver tsunami" and ask where our time is best spent: Do we stand quietly wondering how the wave grew to such proportion, or do we take action now to provide the necessary and caring treatment deserved by our senior citizens?

"Dementia: What You Should Know" is a look at the disease and different therapies available to patients. In this piece, I am joined by Nathalia Zambakari, a board-certified critical care nurse practitioner, as we look at what you should know about dementia, its stages of progression, where to find support systems, and the variety of resources and services available to those caught in this difficult journey.

"Living Well with Dementia," is submitted by Dr. Maribeth Gallagher, director of dementia programs for Hospice of the Valley. The good doctor explores caregiving and its impacts to the caregiver. "Without support, the health and well-being of caregivers often suffer, despite their best efforts to provide care and oversight. She offers her insights to solutions and resources for those whose family suffer from dementia.

Next is a dementia care-focused submission, "Designing an Effective Dementia Care: A Manager's Prespective." Dr. Estève Giraud, assistant research professor at Arizona State University's Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems, teams with Tammie Easterly, manager of Prescott Valley Assisted Living, to dig into patient-centric care. Easterly's perspective is unique – she manages one of the few facilities that specializes in dementia care in Yavapai County, Arizona. Both authors endorse integrated models that include tiered approaches to elderly care, believing them to be viable options for patients in need of health services.

Next, we present, "Healthcare Answers: Education, House Calls, Tech are in the Mix." Crafted by medical specialist Dr. Allen Holloway Jr., the submission reviews the impact that technology is having on healthcare delivery. He reviews quality-of-life issues, the impact of COVID and the likelihood of future virus variants. "Advancements in the areas of individualized medicine, genomics, artificial intelligence and virtual reality are likely to lead to new treatments and therapies that can better address the specific healthcare needs of each patient," suggests Holloway.

"Senior and Rural Healthcare Services and the Benefits of Technology," is submitted by Teri's Health Services executives Trevor Cooke, chief strategy and compliance officer, and Cassie Davis, director of business development. The pair reason that the pandemic has driven a new frontier: the necessity of utilizing technology in the delivery of healthcare. Dr. Cook and workmate Davis share the ways primary care providers, therapists, psychiatric providers and large healthcare systems have utilized telehealth technology to connect with their patients.

In our eighth article, "The Time is Now: Create an Estate Plan Today," attorney Kent Phelps, a co-founder of Trajan Estate in Arizona and Utah, and the founder of Estate Lawyers PLLC, offers his thoughts on the importance of estate planning.

Phelps shares his decades-long experience in estate planning and the importance of creating a legacy for loved ones. He concludes: The answer to the question, "What should I do about my estate *now* for the benefits of loved ones *tomorrow*?" is "Begin the plan."

A final thought. Writes Lynn Parramore, a senior research analyst at the Institute for New Economic Thinking, "Piles of studies have called attention to the fact that in the country ranking number one in healthcare spending per capita, people are living shorter lives, feeling more depressed, and are more likely to skip treatment due to cost than in many developed nations." She continues, "In a performance ranking of 11 high-income countries compiled by the Commonwealth Fund in 2021, the American healthcare system came in dead last, with the worst outcomes of any of the nations studied."[7]

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We must do better. We must act compassionately to ensure that our senior citizens – those Dan Rather has called "The Greatest Generation" – are properly and effectively treated. Therapies, treatments, medications and attention can be improved, and will be improved as technology reaches full blossom, eventually giving way to the next iteration of innovation. I hope you find this inaugural healthcare issue to be informative and thought provoking. I appreciate the contributions to our inaugural issue and look forward to the growth we will realize over future issues, as well as the expanded conversations that will take place as a result of our work.

Sincerely,

Dr. Christopher Zambakari

Publisher, *Healthy Aging in Arizona*

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7   Lynn Parramore, "America, Land of the Dying? Alarming Study Shows U.S. Killing Its Own Population," Institute for New Economic Thinking, https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/blog/america-land-of-the-dying-alarming-study-shows-u-s-killing-its-own-population.

About the Author

Christopher Zambakari is the owner and operator of three assisted living residences in Arizona, and has spent a decade focused on the high-quality care and treatment of senior citizens in need of such attention. A tireless advocate on behalf of this growing population, Zambakari has built into his mission of service a priority on lending voice and guidance to the challenges – both physical and emotional – faced by his residents. His three properties – Apollo Residential Assisted Living in Glendale, Desert Haven Home Care in Phoenix, and Villa Fiore Assisted Living-Prescott Valley – offer the highest levels of customized care, administered by respectful licensed medical and caregiving professionals.

A Rotary Peace and Paul Harris Fellow, Zambakari is a Doctor of Law and Policy, and the founder and CEO of The Zambakari Advisory, an international consulting team of experts in the areas of strategic intelligence, program design and transitional processes. The Advisory provides innovative solutions to societal challenges in the areas of peace, security and economic development, while informing decision making at policy leadership levels.