

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS: They worked, now it's up to us

San Angelo's elderly deserve good quality of life

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — The Rev. Billy Graham once commented that people throughout his life taught him how to die, but no one ever taught him how to grow old.

His comment suggests an obligation shared by each of us to ensure that San Angelo's senior citizens can manage their health and end of life process in a dignified fashion. After all, being a senior and being with seniors can be rewarding. Together, we can learn much about life's tribulations, joys and values by listening between the generations.

Community Development Initiatives at ASU created the Seniors of San Angelo Social Health Index to help evaluate the quality of life for elders in different San Angelo neighborhoods. The evaluation includes 17 indicators based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2011 American Community Survey. It includes items describing housing and neighborhood attributes, income and education statistics, social isolation and custody of grandchildren (guardianship) among elder residents in San Angelo's 20 census tract neighborhoods.

The index uses a 0 to 100 point scale to compare the city's neighborhoods. Higher scores indicate parts of San Angelo where seniors enjoy a higher quality of life.

The summary table for the index gives several interesting bits of information. For starters, the table identifies the Sunset area as the most elder-friendly with a score of 100 based on the 17 indicators. The neighborhood also sets the pace for the quality of neighborhood and housing characteristics, and on the income and education indicators.

The high scores for social isolation and guardianship indicate that, compared to other neighborhoods, senior residents in the Sunset area generally enjoy robust opportunities to connect to social activities and that relatively few have assumed any level of custodial responsibilities for grandchildren.

While San Angelo experienced an increase in the senior population over the past decade, the year 2011 saw a slight decrease. Ten neighborhoods, paced by the Reagan area, experienced a decline in the percentage of residents who are elderly. Sunset, by contrast, realized a small increase.

The fact that Sunset replaced Santa Rita, last year's top-ranked neighborhood for

seniors, confirms an observation we made a year ago that the senior population is moving away from the city center neighborhoods to the outlying areas.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Blackshear-Downtown neighborhood repeated this year as the city's lowest scoring neighborhood in terms of the quality of living for seniors. Indeed, a comparison of the two areas — Sunset and Blackshear-Downtown — is like a “tale of two cities.”

To begin, for example, a larger percentage of the Sunset area's total population is seniors (13 percent) compared to Blackshear-Downtown (10 percent), but a larger fraction of households in Blackshear-Downtown (38 percent) have one or more occupants age 60 or older than in Sunset (26 percent). This curious detail results from vast differences in family experiences whereby the elders of Sunset more often “age well” and continue to live with spouses (75 percent) while more seniors in Blackshear-Downtown (86 percent) are widowed or divorced.

The neighborhoods also differ a great deal on other basic demographics. For example, more than half of seniors in Blackshear-Downtown are Hispanic, black or members of another minority group. Less than three in 10 of Sunset's senior citizens are minorities.

Another contrast is that 87 percent of the Sunset seniors attained a high school education compared to only three in 10 seniors in the Blackshear-Downtown area.

People see these gaping differences through many lenses depending upon their perspective and interests. Decades ago, however, Americans agreed that markets in local communities should be able — with some stimulation from government — to provide affordable access to adequate and safe housing, health care and other necessities to retired seniors living on the most basic of fixed incomes.

On the housing front, a fundamental criterion used to define affordability is the 30 percent rule. With this rule, a domicile is affordable when housing costs are less than 30 percent of the occupants' household income. As costs exceed the 30 percent level, the less affordable the dwelling is for the occupants.

The “tale of two cities” theme reappears in applying the rule to estimate housing affordability for seniors in San Angelo's neighborhoods. Almost nine of every 10 senior households in Sunset have manageable housing costs that fall below 30 percent of their household income.

In Blackshear-Downtown, however, only 66 percent have the same level of manageable housing costs. Too many seniors in this neighborhood find that getting and keeping an affordable residence is a troublesome experience.

Of course, paralleling the affordability of housing are significant income differences between seniors in the two neighborhoods. There are virtually no seniors in the Sunset area with income below the poverty line, for example, but more than four in every 10 Blackshear-Downtown elders live in poverty.

The median income for senior households in the Sunset area is more than 25 percent higher than the median for all households in the neighborhood. Conversely, in

Blackshear-Downtown the senior median household income is 35 percent lower than the neighborhood median.

The basic idea of Social Security is to help preserve the ability of citizens to provide for themselves when faced with old age or disability. A drawback for low income and impoverished residents, however, is that the government bases benefits on lifetime earnings.

Consequently, the incomes of elders in the Sunset area are supplemented by Social Security checks that average 21 percent higher than the average for the city overall. The average check going to seniors in Blackshear-Downtown is 33 percent lower than the citywide amount.

Integration of seniors into the mainstream of community life is an important factor for aging well, while social isolation generates opposite effects. In San Angelo, English proficiency is one obstacle to social integration for some Hispanics and other elders from non-English speaking national origins.

The census estimates that every senior resident in the Sunset area is proficient in English. In contrast, nearly 18 percent of Blackshear-Downtown seniors do not speak English "well."

Living alone with no other household members is another socially isolating factor, and seniors in the Blackshear-Downtown section live alone more often than in the Sunset area by a margin of nearly 54 to 18 percent. Seniors in Blackshear-Downtown also are less likely to have access to a vehicle compared to those living in the Sunset neighborhood.

In San Angelo, more than 2,700 grandparents (5.5 percent) live with their own grandchildren for a variety of reasons. Of that number, almost 36 percent have primary responsibility for raising them and more than 77 percent of these individuals have had this responsibility for one year or more.

A "tale of two cities" surfaces again in this matter. In the Sunset section of town, very few seniors (3.1 percent) have grandchildren living in the household or have any other guardianship responsibilities. More than twice that fraction (7.9 percent) of grandparents in the Blackshear-Downtown area live with grandkids and about three of every four of those have had guardianship responsibilities for a year or more.

The presence of grandkids in the house, no doubt, adds joy to the lives of many of these grandparents. The burdens of having to assume custody in troubled circumstances, however, also take their toll.

According to the latest U.S. Census estimates, 12,407, or 13.6 percent, of San Angelo's population were 65 or older in 2011. By working with the city of San Angelo and with neighborhood organizations, nonprofit organizations such as Galilee Community Development Corp. and Helping Hands have worked magic in recent years to make real improvements for affordable housing and neighborhood revitalization in the Blackshear-Downtown section.

The Downtown San Angelo Association is helping to breathe economic vitality into the

area. Numerous other local entities pitch in to provide transportation, social activities and gathering places for seniors, nutrition and health services, uplifting spiritual experiences and many other heroic actions to improve the quality of life for elder citizens.

Nonetheless, our community needs to press on with the goal to enhance the quality of life for all elder residents, whether they live in Sunset, Blackshear-Downtown or some other neighborhood. Seniors deserve adequate housing and income, enhanced links to social activities and compassionate caregiving in their golden years.

Where Billy Graham lamented that no one ever taught him how to grow old, it befits each of us to take steps to ensure that our community opens pathways for aging-well.

To download a copy of the complete Seniors of San Angelo Social Health Index, go to <http://www.angelo.edu/dept/cdi/projects.php>.

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