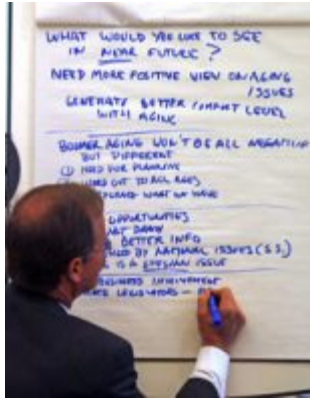


Va., boomers facing a crisis, expert says Project aims to meet the health-care demands of an aging population

Tuesday, Dec 11, 2007 - 12:08 AM



John Judy wrote down ideas during a discussion at the Older Dominion Project meeting yesterday.
Photo By: BOB BROWN

By BILL LOHMANN
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Geriatrics expert Richard W. Lindsay stood before a room of state business, government and civic leaders yesterday and let out the high-pitched sound of an emergency siren.

Virginia is about to enter a crisis, he said.

"There are two key questions," said Lindsay, former head of the division of geriatrics at the University of Virginia Health Sciences Center. "Who is going to care for the elderly? And who is going to train those individuals?"

A shortage of primary-care doctors and nurses awaits the 78 million baby boomers as they grow old, Lindsay said.

But health care is just one worrisome piece of the puzzle of how Virginia will handle the flood of aging boomers, which is the motivation behind the Older Dominion Project, a community initiative aimed at helping Virginia prepare for what organizers are calling an "age wave."

The kickoff meeting was yesterday at Owens & Minor Inc. headquarters in Hanover County.

The current population of Virginians 65 and older, about 700,000, is expected to double in the next 20 years, said John W. Martin, president of Richmond-based Southeastern Institute of Research and one of the masterminds of the Older Dominion Project.

"It's going to have a profound effect on just about every institution in Virginia," said Martin, also co-manager, along with Matt Thornhill, of The Boomer Project, a marketing, research and consulting firm.

In his recent regional report, consultant James A. Crupi said the impact of aging "will transform the [Richmond] area."

Martin said Virginia is "a little behind" in making long-range strategic plans for an aging population, so in that sense the Older Dominion Project is not plowing new ground compared to other states. But how it's plowing is innovative, by including business leaders from the beginning.

"There are a number of reports and studies out there, but what seems to have been avoided is bringing the business community to the table," said Jeffrey S. Cribbs Sr., executive director of Richmond Memorial Health Foundation, which is financing the first phase of the project with a \$100,000 grant.

Questions that emerged from yesterday's meeting were not only medical in nature, but involved work-force issues such as qualified workers and family caregiving, as well as matters such as housing and transportation. Participants talked about luring retirees to relocate in Virginia and retaining those who will already be here. They also agreed it's important to view the shifting demographics from an inter-generational perspective, not just an "old boomers" issue, and as an opportunity.

Gordon Walker, chief executive officer of the Jefferson Area Board for Aging in Charlottesville, which is on the leading edge of the aging boomer phenomenon, said it's a little like the scene from the 1960s movie "The Graduate," when Dustin Hoffman's young character was advised to get into "plastics."

"Geriatrics is the business to get into now," Walker said.

Contact Bill Lohmann at (804) 649-6639 or wlohmann@timesdispatch.com.