

# Elder care: not just an old problem

---

By Cathryn Keefe O'Hare  
GateHouse News Service  
Wed Jun 20, 2007, 04:51 PM EDT

---

Story Tools: [✉ Email This](#) | [🖨 Print This](#)  
Malden -

About 100 people gathered at North Shore Community College recently to discuss a looming problem for everyone: the aging baby boomer.

The “geometry of aging,” said North Shore Elder Services Director Paul Lanzikos in introduction to the conference, is working against the free spirited youth of the 1960s and the so-called “me” generation of the 1970s. That is, what was once a triangle, with many young people at the base to support the few at the top, is now a rectangle.

“Aging: A 2020 Vision for the Greater North Shore,” featured a panel of experts, including a Harvard trained doctor specializing in geriatrics, an economist from the University of Massachusetts Boston and a UMass Boston professor in the gerontology program.

Economist Laura Henze Russell noted that Social Security, even today, is not enough to support the elderly, given the high cost of housing and other items in Massachusetts. Most dig into their retirement savings in the best of times, and some add to their debt. A sudden change in their own health or of a spouse’s health can dovetail them into a crisis.

Even more worrisome, by the time baby boomers reach full retirement age there will be fewer than two people paying into Social Security for every one person receiving benefits, Lanzikos said.

State Rep. Barbara L’Italian (D-Andover), however, who is a member of the Legislature’s Elder Caucus, hit upon one of the reasons the problem is so intractable: “A lot of people don’t want to think about aging until they’re right on the doorstep of needing care.”

Charles Desmond of Danvers, president of the Massachusetts chapter of the American Association of Retired People, noted that there are 78 million baby boomers nearing retirement. A participant in the forum, he said: “Communities need to come together and grapple with these issues.”

This conference was an attempt to get many North Shore agencies together to talk about the problems, learn about and from each other, and sign up to tackle the issues with an eye toward solutions, said the organizers, which included College President Wayne Burton and the staff at the NSCC Public Policy Institute.

“How many people want to go into a nursing home?” Lanzikos asked rhetorically. No one raised a hand.

Lanzikos talked about “sustainable living for all ages,” and presented a film touting three intergenerational housing solutions in the city of Seattle, which actually borrowed money to create them. One had a community health center, a day-care, a small library and a community-gathering place. Elders actually helped out in the day-care; all generations enjoyed the library and community room.

Conference participants highlighted more specific problems: the predilection of government to funnel people into nursing homes, which can cost \$66,000 a year, and away from home care.

Dr. Elisabeth Broderick, who practices geriatrics in Lynn and Beverly, lamented the decline in the number of doctors entering the field. Other specialties pay more in money and prestige, she said. But, elders need the specialized care that will keep them active in the community, for a happier and healthier old age.

She specifically mentioned an example of shortsighted policy, when government balks at the idea of setting up a bracelet program for elders with dementia or other conditions that might lead them to wander. But, she said, the cost of a search far exceeds the preventive program.

She also talked about her hope that all doctors will receive some training in geriatrics to solve the problem.

Professor Marion Spencer emphasized the need to decide who should pay — and how — for the services the next generation of senior citizens will need, while Robert Green of Marblehead, who serves as the president of the Massachusetts Association of Older Americans, emphasized that seniors must be their own advocates.

Beverly State Rep. Mary Grant talked about a change in society that is little noted but will add to the difficulty of finding a solution to caring for the elderly: an increase in debt for both young and old.

“Those coming up, or their parents, have mortgaged their lives for education,” she said, “so they won’t have the resources to help.”

She joined Lanzikos in calling for an informed population that will vote for legislators who will seek solutions to a problem that will affect all ages.