Seniors: The Other Side of the Coin

The last article I wrote talked about the more healthy and vital seniors in our community and their many activities. I received a very thoughtful email from a Fairbanks doctor who sees a different, sadder story. I think this story needs to be told too.

Dr. Barbara Creighton brought to my attention that many seniors get closed in by the weather and the cold and dark environment. Many have a medical event that destroys their finances, making life very difficult in Fairbanks.

The lack of assisted living facilities in our area means many elderly who fail to plan or who have no financial reserves end up having to move away from family and friends. Many end up in Anchorage, which has many more facilities and the competition means there are some facilities that accept the relatively small reimbursement offered by the state.

Those with a mental illness and in need of an assisted living facility will need a “dual diagnosis” or mental health home that can only be found in Anchorage, according to Creighton. And Alaska has the highest-priced assisted living facilities in the nation. There are a few retirement communities in Fairbanks for independent living, but there is a real lack of affordable choices for senior living.

The Fairbanks Memorial Hospital Hospice is a good start for end-of-life care. But as Creighton, who specializes in internal medicine, hospice and palliative care, says, “If you don’t have a large devoted family, a team of devoted friends, or the resources to hire 24-hour care, you end up dying in the hospital. There is no inpatient hospice in Fairbanks and you may not get into Denali Center for end-of-life care if you don’t need skilled nursing care, i.e., you are actively dying or need IV medications.” She says you may get stuck in the hospital while applications are made for an assisted living facility, which could take weeks. There is no formal outpatient palliative care access in Fairbanks, but a formal inpatient palliative care consultation service started in January.
I did a little research into some options in Fairbanks. Assisted living facilities are listed on this website: [www.assistedlivingfacilities.org/directory/ak/fairbanks/](http://www.assistedlivingfacilities.org/directory/ak/fairbanks/).

The Fairbanks Pioneer Home and another facility in North Pole are available to those who need assisted living. It is a good idea to do the paperwork to get into one of these facilities before you actually need them. The Pioneer Home has an inactive list, kept by date, and an active list. So, first you get on the inactive list and the length of time you are on that list will determine where you end up on the active list when you apply for it.

The Senior Center in Fairbanks has Meals on Wheels that can help housebound seniors. There are also various activities and gatherings at the center. You can find out more from its website or by calling 452-1735. The Santa’s Senior Center in North Pole also hosts various activities and you can call 488-4663 to find out how to become a member or visit its website.

Fairbanks Resource Agency Senior Services offers home- and community-based services to adults with Alzheimer’s disease or age-related dementia, and seniors experiencing frail or disabling conditions. Its comprehensive range of services is designed for those who can no longer manage independently.

According to the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services website, “Aging and Disability Resource Centers connect seniors, people with disabilities, and caregivers with long-term services and supports of their choice. The ADRC network serves Alaskans statewide, regardless of age or income level, through regional sites.” Unfortunately, the closest Aging and Disability Resource Center is in Anchorage.

Another website that might help is [www.yellowpages.com/fairbanks-ak/senior-apartments](http://www.yellowpages.com/fairbanks-ak/senior-apartments). This has links to independent living and assisted living situations and senior help agencies.

So even before your “golden years” approach, it is a good idea to start planning for not only your retirement, but also for what will inevitably happen after. Growing older is inescapable. You may have more choices and a better ability to cope with growing older by planning, communicating with family and friends, and becoming familiar with the choices available to you. And it might behoove all of us to take a look at legislation that could help our elderly. We’ll all be there someday.

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