

We are Called

TO HEAL. TO UNITE. TO JUSTICE.



Team Reflection

Senior Populations

Linda lives alone with her two dogs and feels nervous getting much beyond her own neighborhood ever since her husband died following prolonged cancer treatments. After switching to Medicaid, Linda's insurance plan no longer covered a medication she relied on for years for mental wellbeing, and alternatives gave her intolerable side effects. The fragmented medical systems confounds her and leaves her despondent.

Linda's story is familiar to millions of others. The Baby Boom generation began turning 65-years of age in 2011. Now a decade into the aging of this very large segment of the U.S. population, health systems like those involved in CHA's jointly-sponsored Age-Friendly Health Systems initiative, seek to make caring for seniors easier, more accessible, and meet their unique needs along with their family caregivers. [26.1]

In the next 30 years, the U.S. Census Bureau projects a 50% increase in the older adult population. In 2020 the U.S. Census reports 56.1 million people 65 years and older, and they expect that to climb to 85.7 million by mid-century. [26.2]

The early months of the coronavirus pandemic revealed the startlingly vulnerability of this population, as the overwhelming number of deaths hit this age group. Persons 65 and older represented nearly 80% of coronavirus deaths. If persons age 50 and older are also included, that number jumps to 95% [26.3]

Like Linda, isolation can befall the senior population. As they age, the vast majority of older women are likely to be widows. Whereas, even the oldest men are often married. At age 65, two-thirds of the population enjoy living in family households. Yet less than half of individuals 85 and older live in households. Isolated living is more prevalent as is living in nonfamily households or facilities. [4] These represent some of the social, environmental, and cultural factors impacting disparities and health challenges of this demographic.[26.5]

Another important factor is disability, which increases with age. Ambulatory difficulties account for 15% of disabilities for those aged 65 to 74, with the most prevalent being serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs. That increases to more than a quarter for persons aged 75 to 84, and rises to nearly half for those 85 and older. Other disabilities

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impacting senior populations include independent living and self-care, hearing, vision, and cognitive constraints.

In light of the coronavirus' devastating impact on the elderly, the Pontifical Academy for Life advocates for new models of care and assistance for the elderly. Its echoes Pope John Paul II's Letter to the Elderly in 1999. Both urge families to create conditions for seniors to live where they have been for a lifetime, "at home" among family members, acquaintances and friends, where one is familiar and has a sense of being valued. The former pontiff expressed the need for "a widespread attitude of acceptance and appreciation of the elderly, and not relegate them to the fringes." [26.6]

A further step in caring for aging populations includes advancements in palliative care. Pope Benedict XVI advocated for it as integral to care and human assistance. He also tied it to spiritual accompaniment and support from family and community, and elevated it as "a right belonging to every human being, which we all must be committed to defend." [26.7]

This Catholic narrative urges younger generations to remain close to seniors with great love and generosity. There is much seniors give in things like lived experiences, their account of the world, wisdom, patience, and serenity. By remaining close to seniors, individuals resist seeing the elderly as part of what Pope Francis has a "throw-away culture." Instead, they can be seen as treasures that can help all of us grow in compassion. [26.8]

Consider

- Is there someone advanced in years that has inspired you? Who was that person and what about them strikes you?
- If you imagine yourself around age 80, what are the things you hope for? What if you had difficulty hearing or ambulating? How would you want others to respond? And how to help create that reality for seniors today?
- What are the things your ministry enacts to benefit and support seniors? Are there fresh ideas to pursue?

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Let us pray together

Lord our God,

You have given our elders the grace to maintain their hope in you through all life's changes and to taste and see your goodness. We ask that they may find joy in a renewed strength of spirit, that they may have good health, and that they may inspire us by the example of their way of life. Grant that they may have the loving support of their friends and relatives, that in good health they may be cheerful, and in poor health not lose hope. Sustained by the help of your blessing, may they give praise to your name. We ask this through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Adapted from The Book of Blessings

[26.1] Age-Friendly Health Systems is an initiative of the John A. Hartford Foundation and the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, in partnership with the Catholic Health Association of the United States and the American Hospital Association. Resources here: <https://www.chausa.org/eldercare/creating-age-friendly-health-systems>; and <http://www.ihl.org/Engage/Initiatives/Age-Friendly-Health-Systems/Pages/default.aspx>

[26.2] U.S. Census Turning Points: <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2020/demo/p25-1144.html>

[26.3] CDC Covid Deaths: https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases_casesper100klast7days

[26.4] U.S. Census, "The Population 65 Years and Older in the United States." October 2018. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2018/acs/acs-38.html>

[26.5] <https://www.nia.nih.gov/about/aging-strategic-directions-research/goal-health-disparities-adults>

[26.6] Letter of His Holiness, Pope John Paul II to the Elderly, 1 October 1999. http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_01101999_elderly.html

[26.7] Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the Fifteenth World Day of the Sick, February 11, 2007; Also, 'Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the 22nd International Congress of the Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care,' November 17, 2007, Vatican City, Rome.

[26.8] Pontifical Academy for Life and the Dicastery for Integral Human Development, "Old Age: our Future. The Elderly after the pandemic." 9 February 2021. http://www.academyforlife.va/content/dam/pav/documenti%20pdf/2021/Documento%20Anziani/Testi%20documento/02_OLD%20AGE_DEF_ENG.pdf

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