

Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: State Braces for Shortage of Care Providers
as Elderly Population Continues To Grow

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Text:

I'm Pat McConahay with a look at a dire situation not only for the country, but for California as well. As we face a growing senior population, we're confronted with a shortage of people to adequately handle their health care needs. This is a special report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service from the California HealthCare Foundation.

The first of the baby boomers will turn 65 beginning in January and they are expected to live longer lives than previous generations. But according to experts, the nation isn't prepared to meet the health and social needs of this growing demographic. An Institute of Medicine report found that as the number of seniors reaches 20% of the U.S. population, elderly residents will face a health care workforce that's not only too small, but woefully unprepared to meet their unique health needs.

Cheryl Phillips is chief medical officer for On Lok Lifeways in San Francisco and past president of the American Geriatric Society.

(Phillips): "Starting with a physician, does your physician understand the unique aspect of medications in the elderly? Using prescription drugs in the elderly is not like using them in 45-year-olds. Just like we know pediatrics is not the same kind of medical care that adult medicine is."

According to Phillips, only 285 geriatricians are training each year. In California alone, about 1,700 geriatricians are needed to take care of the population that is age 65 and older.

Recently, Davis Democrat Mariko Yamada, chair of the Assembly Committee on Aging and Long-Term Care, held a hearing to address what she describes as not just a future crisis, but a current one.

(Yamada): "What we learned, of course, is just how little there is in the way of recognition and support of this at the highest levels of our policy-making structure."

Michelle Nevins, executive director of the Del Oro Caregiver Resource Center in Sacramento, supports family caregivers. Nevins says it's distressing to her that there's so little focus on the aging population.

(Nevins): "It's a vital necessity. Just the simple fact that we aren't producing enough geriatricians and other health care providers is going to place a huge burden on our system in general. And I'm not sure that -- other than this recent hearing -- there's a lot of acknowledgment of that."

Health care providers, educators and advocates say the solution to the eldercare workforce problem should focus on three things: recruitment, training and retention of geriatricians and other health workers.

(Phillips): "I think the advantage to geriatrics is that we -- geriatric physicians -- work in teams. So we work with social workers and nurses and therapists and pharmacists. But very few medical students have that kind of team training or exposure early on. I think that if they did, that would be a draw, knowing that it's not all on your shoulders. You actually get to work as part of a team."

Beyond geriatricians, there are the state's half-million direct care workers, certified nursing assistants and home health aides who see seniors on a daily basis. René Seidel, vice president of programs and operations at the SCAN Foundation, says employers could do a better job of training these workers. The foundation is helping to do that.

(Seidel): "So we focused on the retraining or the recertification of the CNAs, the certified nursing assistants. Also the home health aides have to go through it and started to fund agencies to provide curricula for these two groups free of charge and focused on senior specific issues."

The SCAN Foundation's Program Officer Erin Westphal says as part of training and retaining direct-care workers, the foundation wants to help them feel like they are a meaningful part of the care team.

(Westphal): "Each of the trainings that our grantees are developing really focuses on a team approach to providing care and having the direct-care worker have a voice in not only developing, but in implementing the care plan for the older adult."

One key to addressing the eldercare issues, say Westphal and others, is keeping it in the public eye. That's something Assembly member Yamada hopes to do in the next session of the Legislature -- although she says the state's fiscal situation won't make it easy.

(Yamada): "The budget, of course, is the big boulder in the room, and we have to be able to show that by integrating services to the older adult population, that we're going to achieve greater efficiencies and actually save money and reinvest it in those programs."

This has been a special report for California Healthline, a daily news service from the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at CHL@CHCF.org. I'm Pat McConahay. Thanks for listening.