



Tompkins County Office for the Aging

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Strategic Planning-2014 Economic Security

A Consensus Conference on the topic of Economic Security and Employment was convened at Finger Lakes Independence Center (FLIC) on June 19, 2014. Lisa Holmes, Director of The Tompkins County Office for the Aging facilitated the meeting. Participants included:

Gregg Thomas, Law NY
Kirby Edmonds, Dorothy Cotton Institute
Suzanne Motheral, Tompkins County Office for the Aging
Jan Lynch, Finger Lakes Independence Center
Zach Nelson, Greater Ithaca Activities Center
Peter Reilly, Tompkins County Department of Social Services
Ed Bergman, Tompkins County Department of Social Services
Joan Barber, Volunteer, Tompkins County Food Pantry Network
Roy Wollney, Resident, Town of Enfield
Kaye Wollney, Resident, Town of Enfield
Karl Graham, Alternatives Federal Credit Union
Lorraine Cloud, Tompkins County Office for the Aging
Sara Jane Blake, NY Statewide Senior Action Council
Lisa Monroe, Tompkins County Office for the Aging

The following is a summary of the discussion and findings of this Consensus Conference.

Introduction and Demographics

According to the 2010 Census, 5.5% of older adults (age 60+) in Tompkins County had incomes at or below poverty. This is approximately 882 people. There is a high rate of home ownership among Tompkins County older adults, with 88 % owning their homes.

According to the 2012 Tompkins County Needs Assessment, 29% of Tompkins County residents over age 60 were employed; of those, 59% held full time positions, and 41% held part time positions. This data showed a 5% increase in employment between 2004-2012, with most of that increase among those in full-time work. This indicates a growing trend of workers remaining employed later into life.

Strengths and Highlights

Relative to the rest of New York State, Tompkins County has a strong economy and low rates of unemployment. The colleges and university provide a stable economic base, and this is expected to continue, with investments in construction, infrastructure and the greening of the economy.

Employers in Tompkins County value diversity, including the hiring of older adults and persons with disabilities. There is a large number of talented older workers who hold professional positions at Cornell University, Ithaca College, and Tompkins Cortland Community College. Individuals can continue working in these positions well into traditional retirement years because they are typically low in physical demands. For those older adults who are struggling obtaining employment, Tompkins Workforce NY assists with job seeking, resume building, and technology education.

There is an increasing trend in employers providing a living wage to their employees.

There is a tremendous amount of information available about local employment trends and areas of job growth. This information helps to plan for future needs.

Tompkins County older adults have high rates of home ownership, with 88% of older adults being home owners. This means that money is available to them in case of need or emergency.

Many needs of older individuals are currently being met by non-profit organizations such as Foodnet, Gadabout, Friends in Service Helping (FISH), and Finger Lakes Independence Center (FLIC). These agencies benefit from the high rate of volunteerism from talented, energized members of the community. The richness of these services and many others help to strengthen the economy.

Challenges and Opportunities

Tompkins County's dependence on Cornell as an employment hub tends to drive average wages down throughout the County. Not all positions at Cornell pay well or provide pensions or retirement. Tompkins County's low rate of unemployment leads to high demand and competition for few job openings, with little flexibility in jobs. There is competition between older workers and younger workers for scarce jobs. Students are willing to work for less, driving wages down. Many older workers retire to accept jobs at much lower wages than their previous positions; this change in income can be difficult to sustain

Workers face a variety of challenges as they face employment at later age. Unfamiliarity with changes in technology can limit the positions older workers are best suited for. At the same time, employers perceive workers to be less able to manage technology, and therefore hiring practices can be biased against older adults..

If employed, older adults may face decrease in benefits due to their employment wages. The term *benefit cliff* describes the paradox of decreasing benefits with increased income. Workers may have to choose between which is more cost effective, their earned wages or their earned benefits. Guidelines for benefits have strict cut offs which prevents some individuals from receiving services when they are close to qualifying. It is a challenge to change these benefits because they are not under local control.

The loss of factory and manufacturing jobs in Tompkins County has led to an erosion of the middle class. Rarely are jobs offering pensions, and middle-income individuals are not eligible for economic aid programs.

Public transportation for rural locations is expensive and time consuming.

There is an opportunity to change the values of community members to shift from cost-per-service to service-per-service. Providing services in exchange for another service would help to decrease costs demands, and improve the collaborative nature of the community. However, some expenses such as heat and utilities are solely cash based.

Reliable internet access is an issue for many people in the county. Many areas do not have adequate coverage, which leaves people out of accessing the internet entirely. The rates are very expensive and are not locally controlled.

Skyrocketing medical costs is a challenge for community members. This high cost includes the cost for alternative medicine practices, which are typically not covered by insurance. Some of the most frequent medical concerns include the cost of drug plans, diabetic supplies, and the financial challenges associated with the Medicare Part D donut hole.

There is a lack of affordable housing in Ithaca and Tompkins County. The City of Ithaca's vacancy rate is only 0.5%, when a healthy rate is typically 5%. The lack of housing drives the cost of rent higher. Related to this, as home values increase, property tax increases can be unsustainable for seniors on fixed incomes.

Residents of mobile homes face home deterioration, and there are not public funding streams available to help with the cost of repairs. Additionally, mobile home parks are often located in rural areas where transportation is an issue.

Adult children or grandchildren with substance abuse issues may exploit financial resources of elder family members.

The other side of employment and economic security issues is the need for an adequate workforce to meet the needs of the older adult population. There is a high demand for health care workers which is increasing, while the supply of workers remains stagnant. This low supply is due to the low wage of the positions and the lack of local training opportunities. The aides available are often unable to travel far distances to rural residences due to the cost of fuel. Additionally, there is a lack of available young or middle aged adults to provide assistance with unskilled jobs, such as yard maintenance. The workforce demographics indicate that those age 25-44 are far fewer than those age 60+. There simply will not be enough young or middle aged adults to provide the all the support needed by older adults.

Recommendations and Priorities

- Promote education on financial planning and financial management. Promote the concept that retirement planning begins when a person starts working. Assist people make good financial decisions early in life to have the resources needed to manage later in life. Assist people manage the money they have wisely. Raise awareness of frauds, scams and financial exploitation.
- Coordinate part time employment opportunities to create sustainable full time salaries to meet the needs of elders. For instance, the Village model enables several elders to pay toward the cost of hiring one aide or handy-person who delivers services to multiple people. This ensures that the elders' needs are met, while providing full-time, sustainable employment opportunities for workers.
- Work to decrease cost and increase efficiency of rural public transportation.
- Increase the number of available home health aide workers. Implementing a living wage, local training programs, and fuel reimbursements to help entice more people to fill this employment need.
- Explore local options to promote barter systems, cooperative volunteer banks and/or time trading programs. COFA can play an important role by connecting people and services. Part of this model could involve methods to split and share foods through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA's). Outreach should include people of all ages and include diverse communities.
- Ensure that people are aware of all the economic supports that can assist them. These include Medicare savings programs, drug programs, and housing subsidies. Eliminate bureaucratic obstacles wherever possible. Provide effective outreach to rural communities, letting people know what services are available, with clear messaging.
- Educate and advocate for policies to prevent poverty and to meet the long term care needs of elders. Encourage political action, voting and campaign finance reform.
- Educate individuals about the importance of home equity and how to use a reverse mortgage for assistance if needed.
- Uncover and correct bias and discrimination in all forms, including the skills and assets of older workers.

