

North Carolina Study Commission on Aging Presentation

Wednesday, November 12, 2008

10:00am

Legislative Building: Room 643

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I am Jane Banks, the Executive Director of Ashe Services for Aging, Inc. which is located in Ashe County. I appreciate this opportunity to speak with you regarding Ashe County's efforts in creating an aging plan that is useful to our community. Our desire is to develop a plan that captures opportunities as well as challenges, primarily focusing on what the community and the individual can do to assist with successful aging.

With the waves of Baby Boomers to come, coupled with longer life expectancy and immigration, planning is crucial. We also have to recognize that our aging population is changing; not only growing in population, but changing culturally. With these changes continuously taking place, we must reevaluate, identify and assess the needs of our older adults. By 2020, Ashe County is expected to rise to 5th in the state in percentage of persons over 65 years of age, making up 29.5% of our county's population. The 85 and older population is our fastest growing segment. Its growth is particularly important for anticipating future health care and assistance needs.

Our planning process first began when the Division of Aging and Adult Services received a Planning Grant to develop a comprehensive approach to planning for aging services. In the spring of 2006, Ashe County was selected out of our region to develop a plan to create "senior-friendly" communities. Taking the lead in this new planning process, Ashe Services for Aging hosted a meeting of community leadership to discuss opportunities and a potential planning team. As we thought about who needed to be involved in this important process, we turned our attention to our county's older adults, public officials, civic leaders, legal services, the hospital, service providers, the education community, the medical community, and the general public. It was important to find a team that will work to facilitate and support an inclusive, informed, and participatory local process. In September of 2006, the Ashe County Commissioners appointed fourteen members to the Ashe County Planning Committee. Our task is to develop a five-year plan on aging with the guiding principles that the plan must be comprehensive, specific to the needs of Ashe County citizens, and must follow a livable and senior-friendly community framework.

In October of 2006, the Aging Leadership Planning Team took their first step in developing a plan. Gathering the necessary information from the community is crucial in identifying and responding to the needs of our increasing diverse older population. The Planning Team undertook a three-prong approach in gathering information. First, a survey tool was developed and distributed to a random sample of county residents consisting of clients of various services agencies, churches, neighborhoods, physician's offices, the emergency room, and restaurants. Secondly, a series of focus groups and comprehensive interviews were conducted with over 50 support service providers, health professionals, and civic organizations. Fifteen community meetings were also held

throughout the county. Finally, following the two-month collection of data from survey forms, focus groups, and community meetings, an analytical report was prepared.

As the Planning Team began to develop a survey tool, the outcome we hoped to obtain from this planning process led to our vision statement: “Empowering, enabling, and enhancing the lives of senior adults in Ashe County”. Through member collaboration and the North Carolina Division of Aging and Adult Services’ definition of livable and senior-friendly communities, our survey tool was developed as a means of evaluating our readiness for an aging population in our county. Our planning team addressed various components of a livable and senior-friendly community such as available and affordable transportation, available and affordable housing, opportunities for cultural, civic, faith, and recreational activities, and access to various healthcare services. A total of 434 surveys were completed and sixty-five percent of those surveyed were 55 years of age or older, which we felt was a successful representation of our county’s older population as we strive to meet their needs through the aging plan.

The second successful method to gathering information was the fifteen community meetings held in various areas of the county. Team members discussed livable and senior-friendly community components with an array of community members, agency representatives, various agency advisory committees, senior apartment tenants, and civic groups and organizations. Members were able to directly hear the concerns and input from Ashe County citizens, which greatly assisted the team in focusing on issues that need to be addressed immediately.

Through the report that was compiled from the survey forms, focus groups, and community meetings the members were able to identify the top ten initiatives that needed to be addressed and were of importance to the community. Our ten consisted of information and assistance, transportation, housing, healthy lifestyles, in-home care, repairs and maintenance, physical activity, satellite senior centers, safety, and assistance for caregivers. Of those ten initiatives, the team members listed their primary concerns based on surveys, community comments, and further personal observations. Four initiatives were then chosen for immediate action plans which were Information and Assistance, Transportation, Housing, and Caregiver Support. Point persons and workgroups are working to develop objectives and recommendations for these top four initiatives. These are the first initiatives the planning team will work toward resolving. The other top initiatives will be selected for work and delegation at a later time. The workgroups are currently meeting to establish objectives and recommendations that will assist in solving the problems pointed out by our Ashe County citizens. The following are a few examples of our goals, objectives, and recommendations for the top four initiatives as well as our progress in meeting those objectives.

Our goal for Information and Assistance is that community members will know what services and programs are available and understand how to access them in order to live an independent lifestyle. Our first objective is to develop “one” number to call for information and assistance and market it. The recommendation is to explore ADRC funding. Ashe Services for Aging and our collaborators recently applied for and received a \$10,000 mini grant to improve upon our information and assistance initiative. Through this funding we will work to provide a “one” number that everyone can call and receive the necessary information. We also are looking towards establishing two community forums this next year for provider agencies and programs to come together for the

purpose of presenting information about available services to community members. And we also want to establish a community site in the outlying areas of our county to host a resource center, with a computer and phone available for residents to gain information and access to services. Our team will partner with other local service providers and our Area Agency on Aging to utilize the NC CareLink resource tool for clients and providers.

Our goal for Housing is to provide all citizens in Ashe County information and access to quality, affordable housing, in which we hope to develop an inventory of housing funding resources for new construction, rental units, and repairs. Two community housing forums have already been held with speakers from the Housing Finance Agency, Western North Carolina Housing Partnership, North West Regional Housing Authority, USDA, and Habitat for Humanity. Our team also wants to increase the availability and access to home repair and maintenance by developing a network of “handy-man” providers among churches and other volunteer resources. A grant opportunity has just emerged as we will partner with the Boone Housing Authority to identify rehabilitation projects for the low income elderly and disabled. If awarded this grant money, we will be one step closer to achieving our goals and making our community more senior-friendly.

Our goal for Transportation is to enhance access to transportation to improve mobility, employment opportunities, and access to community services for all persons who are transportation disadvantaged. Our objectives for this initiative are to explore alternate methods for transportation to outlying and remote areas for older adults whom Ashe County Transportation Authority cannot serve, explore the possibility of weekend and evening transportation, and make out of county transportation more accessible and affordable.

And finally, our goal for Caregiver Support is to provide supportive services to family caregivers to assist in their efforts to provide long-term care to older adults. Our team wants to make sure that we increase the public awareness of the prevalence and importance of family caregivers and to reach and identify family caregivers within Ashe County by partnering with churches. We also need to increase the availability for in-home services and respite care by exploring volunteer opportunities, partnering with Area Agency on Aging’s Family Caregiver Specialist, and seek out grants and foundations for funding opportunities. Ashe County has a very active Family Caregiver Council who provides tools and opportunities for relief for caregivers on an annual basis. Last week the family caregiver council held their second annual caregiver celebration and candlelight reflections ceremony. This event gives caregivers a chance to network, relax, enjoy entertainment and refreshments, and receive a wealth of helpful information to help make their care giving experience easier and more rewarding.

As our Planning Team moves forward into the future, we are diligently working to fulfill our objectives and recommendations and will continue to address the identified needs on a regular basis. Ashe County has been able to develop a planning process without funding for a variety of reasons. Ashe Services for Aging, the lead agency in the planning team, is a large agency and we have a large staff, who is dedicated to meeting the needs of our elderly population. Our agency and other team members have developed crucial partnerships and relationships throughout the county. One of the biggest challenges of being a non-profit agency is the need to keep the county government informed. The Ashe County Government is very supportive of our projects and they

have been very supportive of all the initiatives we are working toward. The need to keep our county government informed constantly drives our agency to evaluate our services, the needs of our older population, and new events and programs that can meet those needs. Our county has proven that we have the initiative and desire to make our communities more senior-friendly. The chance to write a plan for the future aging population has shown that our county population has a lack of awareness of aging services. Writing this plan has shown service providers that their services are not being known by the majority of the county, which drives us to fix this major problem. This Aging Leadership Planning Team has received a tremendous amount of community support, which gives us hope that these initiatives, not just the four, but all, will be addressed to further build a livable and senior-friendly community for all of Ashe County.