

As I see it

By David Lindstrom, District 3

The baby boom generation is beginning to retire in huge numbers, resulting in increasing demands on governmental services locally and across the state and nation.

Johnson County, with the rest of the country, is experiencing an increase in numbers of people turning 60—an age threshold that signals eligibility for many of the human service programs provided by Johnson County government.

In 2006, Johnson County had nearly 74,000 residents age 60 and older. It's safe to assume that the number is now higher. The 2006 census showed that the county had more than 26,000 residents 75 and older, and more than 7,000 residents 85 and older. (In 2000, those same age groups numbered 22,000 and 5,900 respectively.) Increases in the two age groups are in the 18 percent range in just six years.

With the pending retirement of more baby boomers, the Census Bureau projects that the national population 65 and older will increase from about one in eight people to one in five by 2030.

Two years ago, the 55–64 age group had more than 55,000 Johnson County residents, so we anticipate a growing demand on services and programs provided by Johnson County Human Services & Aging, the Johnson County Area Agency on Aging, the Johnson County Health Department, and Johnson County Mental Health. These and other county departments are the community safety net for vulnerable people in need, especially those trying to live on fixed incomes in a world of increasing costs for food, fuel, utilities, medical care, and other necessities.

With advanced medical technology and improved health care, people are living longer than ever before. The need for community-based services to keep older adults in their homes, functioning at their highest levels of personal independence, continues to increase in Johnson County.

The reality of more retiring baby boomers puts a growing strain on the county's human service departments if they are to keep pace with the growing numbers of citizens entitled to the public programs and services Johnson County provides. With flat or inadequate state and federal funding, county government has struggled to keep up with demand.

In preparing for the 2009 budget, the county is bracing for a very tight year with a back-to-basics approach and no frills in keeping county government on course. Many fiscal challenges await, with expectations of lower property values, lower revenue totals from mortgage registration fees, and other decreases in revenue sources that county government will need in 2009 and the ensuing years to finance and maintain adequate public services.

In good times and bad, the demand for public assistance from Johnson County government for food, clothing, and money to pay utilities and rent is increasing from households of all sizes and ages. In the toughest times, these are the people who need us the most. Meeting the needs of our most vulnerable citizens is part of the core function of county government.

County government knows the importance of human service programs and social services to citizens of all ages through Johnson County's six outreach centers and nine nutrition sites. That vital and accessible network of neighborhood-based care allows for

the efficient delivery of county services while providing greater local control and accountability.

Many of our residents depend on community-based care from county departments to protect them through immunization programs; to inform them of possible health risks such as West Nile virus or flu outbreaks; to assist them through educational outreach; to bridge language barriers in quests for help; to provide housing services, minor home repairs, and utility bill assistance; and to enhance their overall quality of life in Johnson County.

Since the turn of the century, Johnson County, through its support system of multi-service centers and public clinics, has experienced rising demands for social services as the county's population continues to grow and becomes older. The county is painfully aware that much more can be done, and should be done, in addressing the county's human service needs, but adequate funding always remains a mountainous obstacle without putting the bulk of the burden on local taxpayers.

In closing, the Board of County Commissioners must ensure that county government keeps its heart focused on the people in line for county programs and social services while maintaining a steely eye on the budget numbers; these are hard choices and tough decisions.

The fact remains that wherever there is a human need, the work of Johnson County government is never fully complete—especially with more and more baby boomers enjoying their well-deserved golden years.

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