

NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF RESIDENTS 55+
THE CITY OF WEST UNIVERSITY PLACE, TEXAS

1998

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INTRODUCTION

In December 1997, the West University Place City Council requested that the Senior Services Board conduct a needs assessment of the West University Place senior (55 +) population. This report outlines the results of that survey with major findings, conclusions and recommendations..

The survey was designed with the advice and direction of Chris Pollet, MSW, Director of Planning, Research and Evaluation, United Way of Houston, and Dianne Rogers, MA, former Senior Director of Programs, Sheltering Arms of Houston. Dianne Rogers was also a member of the Senior Services Board at the time of the survey.

Data were gathered using a series of Focus Groups as well as telephone interviews. Ninety-nine residents between 55 and 97 years of age were respondents.

Focus Groups included those for men only, caregivers, individuals 65+, and those between 55 and 64 years old. A randomness of selection was assured by having a number of different individuals ask residents meeting the session qualifications to participate. Each Focus Group was asked the same set of questions by a facilitator, either Mr. Pollet or Mrs. Rogers both of whom are experienced research group leaders. Two recorders took notes during each session. In addition, the facilitator outlined the major points on a large board as the session progressed.

Respondents in the telephone interviews were chosen randomly from among the names on the Senior Services roster who were not known to have participated in activities or to have received other services from Senior Services. Each respondent received a formal letter from Senior Services and a handwritten note from the caller introducing herself and naming the day and approximate time for the interview. A telephone number was included for anyone who did not want to participate. Only one call was received and only one other person refused to be interviewed. All were asked the same set of questions.

Callers were volunteers who were given detailed instructions as well as an interview sheet for recording responses. Attempts were made to standardize the calling process in order to maintain the integrity of the data gathering.

The attitude of the respondents in both the Focus Groups and telephone interviews was extremely positive. Many expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to talk about their concerns, needs and suggestions for change. They wanted assurance that the results of the survey would be presented to City Council.

SUMMARY

That West University Place offers outstanding services to the senior population of the City, defined by the Senior Services' mandate as 55 years and older, appears to be a consensus among respondents to the needs assessment survey. The Senior Services and the Police and Fire Departments received praise for their roles in making the City "an almost perfect place" in which to live.

That West University seniors are as diverse in interests, desires, needs, fitness, education, and involvements as the remainder of the residents is evident in the responses recorded during this needs assessment. It is almost impossible to consider "seniors" as a cohesive, unified group whose needs can be summed up in two or three well chosen sentences. However, this summary will attempt just that in several additional sentences while also trying to define a segment of the senior population who seems to have in common a particular need.

A major concern of the most elderly and frail as well as those who suffer from ill health is the garbage and trash pick-up. Because of frailty, dependence on canes, walkers or wheelchairs, and impaired balance, a number of these seniors are having difficulty with curb pickup. This was reported by the individuals themselves, caregivers, and other respondents/observers of all ages. One respondent said she had contacted the City for assistance but was told to ask a neighbor for assistance. Respondents in general did not consider neighbors reliable sources of help.

A number of seniors contacted did not seem aware that they could request assistance as needed through Senior Services. This appears to be the result of failing ability to see well enough to read, lack of communication with caregivers, and problems with short term memory. A Focus Group respondent suggested that seniors in need of assistance register once after a visit by a volunteer or staff member to determine the level of need. Then the garbage and trash would be picked up at a convenient location.

A second concern for those who are housebound was cited by caregivers: Most live a lonely life without telephone calls or visitors. Friends have died or moved away and family members live in distant cities or there is no family. A Senior Services volunteer calls 16 of these housebound seniors weekly, chats with them and checks on their welfare. Senior Services volunteers also contact anyone who recently had needed an ambulance or emergency care by the Fire Department to check on them.

A suggestion offered by both caregivers and others in Focus Groups was the organization of "Care" groups, either as an adjunct to the Neighborhood Watch or as separate neighborhood groups. Suggested was a neighborhood group that would maintain contact with the elderly, disabled and ill, invite them to city-wide events, and organize friendly visits. Daily reassurance telephone calls were also suggested.

A third major concern heard across the age range is difficulty in reaching City employees for a response to a problem, question or suggestion. Seniors surveyed said that neither voice mail nor written messages produces a response. Several respondents expressed frustration with the voice mail system. A strong consensus developed around a desire for a human receptionist who could aid in contacting an individual or department.

Still another concern voiced by many of all ages was enforcement of traffic regulations. Respondents said the problems were excessive speed, failure to stop at stop signs, parking the wrong way, parking across driveways, streets crowded with parked cars and trucks, and congestion around construction sites. One said that her requests for "No Parking" signs needed so she could get out of her driveway during construction of an adjacent house were ignored by the police. Others complained about difficulty in leaving driveways because of the congestion.

Several mentioned damage to lawns and curbing by trucks; some had problems with trespassing by construction workers because of the severely limited space between existing and new houses. The minimum setbacks are also diminishing sunlight and air circulation.

In a related matter, there were numerous complaints about dog droppings in yards and several about dogs allowed out at night without leashes or even their owners in tow.

A registry listing sources of assistance including senior day care, handymen and contractors who could be recommended, volunteers for chores such as changing a light bulb, and caregivers checked by the police are on the wish list. Family and professional caregivers requested a support group and classes to help them become more knowledgeable about caring for the elderly and disabled.

Transportation provided by Senior Services appears to be an important factor in making it possible for seniors to remain in their homes when they can no longer drive or do not drive outside the community. Although transportation to grocery stores is considered a plus, some said they could not take advantage of the service because

they could not stand that long or that the trips were too long. Obtaining groceries seems to be a problem for some unable to go with the group. This chore could perhaps be done by a volunteer "care" group. Individual volunteers sometimes now provide this service but there is no way to determine who needs assistance.

Several suggestions were made about the Senior Services activities which as they exist now received general praise. A wish for a center with comfortable furniture, a television and board games was suggested in both Focus Groups and telephone interviews. The center is envisioned as a place to meet friends and make friends, to have conversations, and to share pleasant time. Respondents felt confident that residents would come if a center were available.

A number of residents, including one in her 90's, requested night transportation to such events as baseball games, symphony and other musical performances, theater, and important speakers. A paid or volunteer driver was suggested as well as a cooperative program with other groups or an organization such as Rice University.

Younger seniors (55-64) were among those requesting evening outings as a group. They also were interested in attending the symphony, opera and theater. They suggested challenging speakers, an investment club, and special interest groups such as one for opera buffs. They expressed an interest in meeting and getting to know others in their age range so as they get older they will be able to assist each other. A reminder was also expressed about contemporary seniors being "younger," more able and fit, and having a wide range of interests. A committee that could assist in planning future Senior Services activities was suggested.

Several also expressed dismay that the parks were being remodeled with the very young child as the focus. They suggested exercise and stretching stations for walkers and joggers. Men were interested in having activities geared to their interests, including a putting green, shuffle board and horseshoes.

A number of concerns mentioned by respondents may be caused by the increased turnover of residents: The isolation of some of the elderly, increased traffic violations, problems with dogs, and conflicts between pedestrians and automobiles may be caused in part because we simply do not know each other well anymore. Thinking that we will be moving next week or next year and not expecting to face our neighbors every day for the next 25 or 50 years changes sensitivity and sense of responsibility to our neighbors and to our City.

However, objective responses to the stated needs and desires of residents

might begin to mend a somewhat tattered sense of community. Respondents of all ages expressed over and over again their enthusiasm about being included in the needs survey because they thought this was a way in which they would be heard. This survey may be one means of getting to know one another better and perhaps helping us to become more sensitive to our neighbors and our neighborhoods.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue to provide assistance with the garbage and trash pick-up to those elderly or disabled residents who request the service. Simplify the request process, if necessary. Use home visits if prudent to determine need. Continue to publicize the service so that those in need as well as caregivers know about it.
2. Take measures within City government to provide prompt responses to residents' comments, inquiries and complaints. Consider using a receptionist to greet callers and route calls. A consensus was reached in one Focus Group that no one in that group went to City Hall any longer because the City no longer responded.
3. Address the issue of fire rating. It appears to be a major concern among seniors.
4. Encourage the formation of neighborhood "Care" committees, perhaps under an umbrella organization such as the Neighborhood Watch which seems to have a similar purpose of promoting communication and concern among neighbors. Continue to encourage intergenerational events such as block parties, neighborhood get togethers and city-wide events.
5. Be aware of the special difficulties for older seniors that are caused by new construction, including driveways and streets being crowded by construction equipment and trucks, damage to lawns and curbing, and property trespass by construction workers that occurs when the new construction too closely borders existing houses and driveways.

For residents of all ages, consider increasing space between houses to regain a sense of space and light, as well as privacy.
6. Consider including facilities and space in City parks for residents of all ages. Men participating in the needs survey suggested shuffle board, horseshoes and putting greens. Also suggested were stretching and exercise stations for walkers and joggers. Benches a distance from the small children areas and swings appropriate for

all ages are also possibilities.

7. Consider additional funding for Senior Services so that a program for men planned by male residents could be started; that a requested "friendship" center could be piloted, that programs requested by the 55-64 year old group of seniors could be provided; that a caregiver support group and possibly workshops could be planned; that night transportation could be provided for some activities; that impact on existing programs and resources by residents from area assisted living centers could be addressed; and that a computer file of existing Harris County resources for senior and disabled residents could be set up and maintained with up-to-date data.

8. Be aware that seniors come in all shapes and sizes and represent an age span of approximately 45 years, from 55 to 100 with interests varying from preparing for a marathon to struggling with a heavy trash bag. Each is a valued resident. Each person who participated in the survey expressed a keen interest in the community and the City, even those no longer able to participate actively.

RESPONSES

. Respondents in both the Focus Groups and the telephone interviews were asked questions designed to facilitate conversation and discussion about the quality of their lives in West University Place. Responses fell under three general areas: Personal, the City and community, and Senior Services. The responses are reported below under those three categories. In some cases, comments touched on all categories and may be listed more than once. Only comments that were mentioned multiple times or mentioned during a Focus Group which then reached a consensus of agreement are listed.

The responses are a compilation of comments from the Focus Groups and the telephone interviews.

PERSONAL

- * Several persons said that there are not many unmet needs in West University Place. Living in the City was described as the best quality of life anywhere. The availability of grocery shopping and other stores was cited as a plus. The Police and Fire Departments received special praise for the care shown by the personnel and the excellence of the emergency services.

- * Some needs of seniors are not attended to because they do not know where to go for assistance. A caregiver noted that a register of available services could at one time be assessed by telephone. Someone would also visit a senior in need. (Senior Services has a list of area services. A staff member will visit a home when that is requested).

- * Seniors need to feel that they have back-up support. Neighbors are not always available and may not be known by the senior. A change in the city's climate was noted. It was described as the loss of a sense of community and caring for each other. Others pointed out that some blocks have telephone lists of all neighbors and stay in contact. An example given was Robinhood which has 42 homes and an actively caring group of neighbors.

- * A Senior Advocate who knows the City and can contact the appropriate individual or department when problems arise was suggested. (Senior Services is

able to provide similar assistance when that is requested).

* Getting trash and garbage bags to the curb was cited as a major problem for seniors who are too frail or too ill to do that chore themselves. Neighbors are not always available or willing to assist on a long term basis. Some seniors have difficulty requesting assistance. A senior expressed gratitude to the City for assistance she had received after a recent surgery. The concern about garbage and trash was mentioned in every Focus Group and the majority of the telephone interviews.

* Transportation was also mentioned as a need but most participants knew about the transportation provided by Senior Services. Several individuals are assisted by relatives and friends. A large number of senior participants still drive, at least in the immediate area.

* Homebound or disabled seniors need regular visitors or telephone calls. Daily telephone reassurance was suggested as was the creation of neighborhood care groups. Sharing puzzles, games or cards would also be helpful. Rides around the neighborhood or to interesting places that could be viewed from a car and brief visits to a mall were also suggested. A visitor who comes often enough to get to know the senior would be ideal, according to a caregiver.

* Seniors with limited mobility often live in run-down houses because they are incapable of the work involved or of arranging for and supervising necessary repairs. Many seniors need assistance with minor chores such as changing a light bulb, making minor repairs or supervising major work. A Rotary Club member said that a project to address these needs has been delayed by communication difficulties and lack of referrals.

* Older seniors cannot always protect their own property during construction of nearby houses. They also have difficulty using their driveways because of the small turn area left by construction vehicles.

* Block parties, city-wide dinners and other intergenerational activities with attention to inviting the elderly were suggested as means of relieving loneliness and keeping seniors in contact with the community.

* A center which seniors of all ages could visit for conversation, board games or watching television was recommended by several participants. It would be a "friendship" place with comfortable furniture and would be open every day. Coffee and soft drinks would be available. Respondents were confident that if such a center existed, people would come, even those unable to participate in lengthy activities.

* Many older seniors need amplified telephones. Some participants said that a State program for that purpose existed.

* Older seniors cannot always see well enough to read notices and information about the City and Senior Services activities.

* Some seniors tend to be easy marks for scams and dishonest workmen. They may be too trusting or misunderstand because of visual or auditory problems. Some respond because they are lonely.

* Seniors are concerned about rising taxes and a possible loss of the tax exemption as well as the increased cost of fire insurance. Some reported difficulty in renewing house insurance.

* Respondents of all ages expressed chagrin with the state of sidewalks and barriers created by illegal parking, including automobiles blocking sidewalks. They also complained about streets crowded by construction vehicles. They expressed concern about whether emergency vehicles could negotiate the maze. One respondent recalled an incident when an ambulance had to circle a block and approach a home from a different direction.

* Still another complaint was about residents who do not pick up their dogs' droppings and those who let their dogs out at night unleashed and at times unaccompanied by an owner.

* Some seniors felt that the term "senior" had a negative connotation. A change in the name "Senior Services" or sponsored activities to a catchy or club-type name was suggested. Names of area church and business sponsored groups were discussed.

SENIOR SERVICES

* Most participants said that Senior Services is doing a "wonderful job." The activities, transportation and 911 Saturday were all mentioned as positives. The consensus was that the manager 's current activities program is excellent.

* Participants felt that a club-type name for Senior Services would attract more seniors. They also suggested a center with no planned activities but instead a place for friendship, conversation and social meeting. This would be in addition to the present activities.

* Seniors and caregivers expressed the need for a registry of available

assistance with a single telephone number to obtain needed information and assistance. (Senior Services has a list of area services).

- * Caregivers expressed a need for a support group and classes that would help family members, friends and professional caregivers provide better care.

Respondents of the caregiver Focus Group consisted of both family and professional caregivers. Caregivers said they do not always know what is going on in the City because they do not open the mail and have no other source of information.

- * Care groups that would check on the elderly was also suggested. Seniors and caregivers expressed a need for activities for and visits to individuals too ill or too frail to take part in regular activities.

- * The need for a reliable handyman was expressed by several participants. Some suggested a list of workmen who had been checked and could be recommended; others suggested that the Rotary program for providing minor repairs be revived.

- * The addition of more sophisticated activities such as trips to the opera, symphony, ballet, the theater and TUTS were suggested. Challenging speakers and programs were also suggested, as well as special interest groups such as one for opera buffs. An investment group was also suggested.

- * Night trips to baseball games and other evening activities was mentioned several times in both Focus Groups and telephone interviews. A driver paid by the city and a volunteer were named as possible sources of transportation to night activities.

- * Men expressed the need for activities geared more to their interests such as competitive board games, shuffleboard, horseshoes and putting greens.

- * Participants pointed out that contemporary seniors are less senior and far more active than seniors were in earlier years. Several pointed out that contemporary seniors tend to be active, physically fit, involved in the community. Seniors today are "younger than they used to be" in interests and abilities. (See related material in the Appendices.)

- * Activities of interest to the 55-64 year old group were requested.

- * Additional City funding so that the Senior Services program be expanded was recommended.

- * Participants also suggested the appointment of a committee to assist the future planning of Senior Services.

THE CITY AND COMMUNITY

* Many comments made by participants were complimentary to the City. A comment by one person sums up those of many: Residents have the best quality of life found anywhere. The City has for the most part outstanding services and does an outstanding job in meeting the needs of seniors.

* Seniors are very pleased with the Police and Fire Departments, particularly in emergency responses. They also commented on the courtesy of personnel from these two departments and the sense of caring with which services are delivered.

* Many participants expressed a preference for remaining in the City throughout their lifetime. They suggested group housing, tax breaks for persons providing appropriate housing and forming volunteer care committees that would stay in contact with seniors who are frail, ill or disabled.

* The number one problem faced weekly by many seniors is getting the trash and garbage bags to the curb for pick-up. Although there is a program of assistance through Senior Services, a number of frail, disabled and very elderly residents are still experiencing problems. One said she was told by City Hall to locate a neighbor who would help her. She along with others do not find that a satisfactory solution.

* Seniors suggested that heavy trash and recycling days be expanded to two or four times a year with pick-up for those unable to deliver the items to a central area. Two persons pointed out that Bellaire has monthly heavy trash pick-up.

* A major complaint, expressed in every Focus Group and some telephone interviews, is that City Hall personnel rarely or never respond to written or voice-mail messages, comments, problems, or complaints. One participant said that City personnel should be held accountable for responding to residents. Another has decided that there are no human beings left in City Hall.

* Participants also expressed frustration with the current telephone system and wished for the addition of a knowledgeable receptionist who could direct calls.

* In a similar vein, seniors proposed a Senior Citizen Advocate who is knowledgeable about the City and could assist with concerns and problems.

* Several respondents expressed concern about the closeness of new construction to existing houses. Both sun and air circulation are being affected. Larger

setbacks were suggested to increase private space and a sense of space in the City. Neighboring driveways are being used by construction workers because the new house set back often does not provide adequate working room.

* Several traffic concerns were discussed: Difficulty backing out of driveways when streets are partially blocked by construction trucks, poorly maintained sidewalks, automobiles illegally parked in the street and across sidewalks, and speeding automobiles. A suggestion was made to permit parking on one side of the street only.

* The need for a reliable handyman was expressed numerous times. Reviving the Rotary program and providing a list of workmen who had been checked and recommended were two suggestions made.

* Rising taxes and any discussion about eliminating or reducing the property tax exemption for seniors are both concerns.

* Respondents expressed concern about the number of owners who do not clean up after their dogs or who permit them out at night without a leash or sometimes an owner.

* Concern was expressed that the parks are geared only for the very young. Some suggested exercise stops for walkers and joggers. Concern was also expressed for the condition of Colonial Park. Mentioned were old and poorly maintained weight room equipment, a leaking shower, having to go through a bathroom to reach the other section, and the generally run-down condition of the building. They requested additional programs geared to active seniors.

* Men expressed a need for more activities directed at their interests, such as competitive games and outdoor activities including horseshoes, shuffleboard and a putting green.

* Several requested that the City provide additional funding for Senior Services so that a comfortable "gathering place" could be added as well as activities of interest to residents 55-64 years old and night transportation to such diverse activities as baseball games and the opera.

1998 SENIOR SERVICES NEEDS ASSESSMENT - Focus Groups

1. What concerns or unmet needs are being experienced by seniors in West University Place? (1/2 Hour)

PROBES: A) What about any special concerns facing seniors in West University?
B) Do you have neighbors or friends in West University with special needs?

2. Out of these things mentioned, which are the two most serious? (1/4 Hour)

PROBE: Ask each participant to vote for the two problems that h/she feels are most serious.

3. What are some of the causes of these top two concerns? (1/4 Hour)

4. What services or other resources are available to address these problems and needs? (1/4 Hour)

5. What could be done to improve the quality of life for seniors in West University? (1/2 Hour)

PROBES: A) What other services, resources, programs or activities are needed?
B) Which are needed most? Rank.

6. Is there anything else you would like to add? (1/4 Hour)

1998 SENIOR SERVICES NEEDS ASSESSMENT - Telephone Interviews

CALLER _____ DATE _____ TIME _____

PARTICIPANT _____ PHONE _____

INITIAL RESPONSE:

QUESTION ONE: What could be done to improve the quality of life for seniors in West University?

FOLLOW-UP: Are there any services that would make your life more comfortable?

QUESTION TWO: Are you able to get out and do the things you want to do and need to do?

FOLLOW-UP: What assistance would be helpful to you in getting out?