

Focus Group Report
Older Adult Perspectives
The Horizon Project
February 7, 2003

Introduction

The focus of this group was: older adult perspectives on Elkhart County. The group included twelve older adults, six from Goshen and six from Elkhart. Several of the participants were African-Americans. All respondents reported that they plan to live in Elkhart County for the foreseeable future.

Ideal vision for Elkhart County for the next 10 years

Education and support for youth

- Improve K-12 educational system
- Do not cut educational funding; keep the art programs; don't cut the teachers
- More youth program; better role models
- Coverage of positive youth activities in the local papers

Political involvement

- Overcome apathy about the political involvement; change the political system; the number of people who vote is much too low
- More personal involvement by many more people in the whole political process
- Need morality in politics
- City fathers need more foresight and vision; the Elkhart down town is embarrassing. We need a comprehensive plan; we need a better plan and better leaders

Personal responsibility

- Personal responsibility; unhelpful ads that say "you deserve more" are used too much
- Society encourages lack of involvement

Needs of seniors

Financial

- Financial security (6 respondents). Others acknowledged that this is probably a federal and state policy issues and not often influenced by local governments.
- Some cannot afford to move into a place like Greencroft. Others pointed out that about a 40% of Greencroft's independent living residents are low-income persons in HUD subsidized apartments and 50% of healthcare residents receive Medicaid.

- Affordable health care, prescription drugs, and hearing aids. People who are on fixed incomes have to take expensive medications. Where are the programs to help with these costs? (2 respondents)
- Long-term care insurance; very small percentage use it; it is confusing; young people do not have that mind set to use long-term care insurance.

Health

- Health status services and health care availability (2 respondents)
- Mental health; family situations; don't know where help is available (2 respondents)
- Need foresight all along the way. "I am 79 and take no medication. I have been eating well and getting exercise all my life."
- People move to retirement communities and they get younger.

Social and safety needs

- Seniors need physical activities suited to their activity level; recreational opportunities
- Educational opportunities
- Safety and protection
- Isolation; loneliness; friendships
- Grandparents raising grandchildren

Resources

- Legal aid needed that they can afford
- People are not aware of the services of the county council on aging. There is a senior insurance and financial services program.
- Transportation

Suggestions for Action Planning Team

Social services

- Need better publicity about how local agencies are serving poor seniors
- Educate people in their 40s about long-term care insurance
- Financial counseling; start thinking about it at age 40
- Encourage parents to save for kids' college education. Sometimes grandparents pay for college.
- Need a low-income senior place in Elkhart for activities. Nappanee has done well.
- Teens to contact older adults in their homes; could be a phone call. Some churches do that. Meals on wheels serves this function.
- Living in congregate housing helps overcome isolation
- Encourage older adults to volunteer as tutors. One respondent tutored at Beardsley school for three years. Greencroft matches adults and students. One respondent was matched with a Hispanic child.

Workforce Development

- Retrain workers who have lost their jobs; develop new skills
- Build a university campus in Elkhart

- Can Goshen college broaden its mission to the local community to meet more of the local needs?

Cultural Diversity

- We have many Hispanics in the community; be visionary; be proactive; we need an institute or some other resource; don't just complain; it is a challenge
- Our churches provide the moral compass; but they are behind on thinking about class and race; they could lead rather than follow

Inter-governmental Cooperation

- Jail population; use inmates to clean up and beautify; build recreation areas; let them be productive
- City government to help senior citizens; be responsive to needs such as water in a basement when a new street was put in.

Older adult perspectives on Elkhart County

Strengths

Local resources

- Park program and walking trails (lots of affirmation)
- Large number of social service agencies
- Educational programs from grade school to college
- Good retirement homes
- Recreational facilities
- Good libraries
- Elkhart county foundation — a perpetual resource
- Lots of Lilly matching grants
- Habitat for Humanity providing housing for low-income persons

Economy

- Diversity of employment
- Economically very stable

Religion

- The Bible belt environment is good for families; not so many extremes like on the East and West coasts
- Strong religious community

Culture

- Heritage in music; once the music center of the country

Weaknesses

Economy

- Lack high tech industry; that is the way of the future; unless we can attract high tech we will be out of it for the future
- We lose all of our kids because they want high tech occupations
- Diminishing employer base; companies are leaving the area

Transportation

- The truck traffic in the Goshen down town; state road 19 between Nappanee and Elkhart
- Transportation needs for the low income people with entry-level jobs; they can't get to work
- We need air service back.

Criminal justice

- Crime; jail population; seems high from reading the papers
- Making bigger jails; people need to walk the straight and narrow
- Need new laws to prevent so some people from getting away with murder

Culture and values

- People are not saving; they want it now
- We gave our children a lot; they are spoiled

Education

- The performance and image of the school system in Elkhart — low test scores; schools and realtors have been meeting; some parents are reluctant to send students to Elkhart public schools
- The state government won't let us have a college here; our youth go elsewhere to college

Government

- Political situation; it is dumb; the two party system is not working in county politics; only Republicans are elected.
- Have term limits; get rid of the old-boy system; we need intelligent young people in political office

Resources

- Need a senior center for low income people; Elkhart has nothing

Opportunities

Criminal Justice

- Ways to stop kids doing terrible things; they have not been taught not to do terrible things; there has been a breakdown of discipline in homes and schools; help the parents get out of their current mode of parenting; children are left alone too much
- Alternative rehabilitation for criminals; rather than sending them to jail

- Rehabilitation of criminals

Education

- School system is facing serious problem; tax base is decreasing; programs being cut; bring in industry that will pay taxes
- The way educators run things; too much emphasis on sports; more emphasis on raise academic abilities; praise academic progress; need better priorities; Notre Dame has the right idea.
- We need to teach English to new immigrants. They do better in school when they have English skills and some go to college.

Religious Community

- Faith-based funding from the federal government; opportunity for faith-based organizations to help kids be prepared to become parents; need instructions for being parents

Economy

- Grow and attract high tech industries

Other

- Elkhart Truth serves the community by featuring kids who do positive things

Threats

Health issues

- Use of illegal drugs
- Health problems; communicable diseases; young people do not understand the threat; there is too much early parenting by teenage parents; they are getting younger

Family issues

- Families not knowing what the standards are; the future will be worse;
- Parents are depending on medication to meet the needs of their children rather than spending time with their children

New immigrants

- Hispanics; many are illegal; they are draining our social service system; they get a lot of free help (tax supported); one pastor reported having 125 Hispanics in a church and estimated that 90% were illegal
- Reliance on the recreational vehicle industry which offers low skill jobs; the Hispanic influx is driven by opportunities in the RV industry
- Hispanics speak Spanish at home and they need to be able to speak English. Concerned about both parents and children. Schools are doing pretty well on getting students to speak English. Hawthorn Elementary School has 40% Hispanic students and they work only one hour a day on English.

Compiled by D. Koehn

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