

## THE IOWA CHALLENGE IN AGING

Iowa is in large measure a state of older adults. It ranks **second in the nation in the percentage of individuals over the age of 85 (2.4%), and fourth in percentage of residents age 65 and older (14.7%)** [1]. In comparison, 12.4% of the U.S. population are 65 years of age or older and 1.5% are 85 years and older. This proportion is projected to rise to 20.1% and 2.5% of the national population respectively in the year 2030. [2]

Rural Iowa is home for many of the state's elders. Iowans age 65 and older comprise 21.45% of the total population in Iowa's nine least populated counties (<8,000 people). Statewide, 42% of the 65+ age group live in 73 counties with populations of less than 24,000 residents each. [2] The combination of a high percentage of the oldest old (age 85+) and elders living in rural areas presents some significant challenges.

Summarizing a substantial body of evidence, Coward and Culter [3] conclude that the range of services for elders living in small towns and rural communities is more narrow, that fewer alternatives exist within any one service area, and that fewer health care providers are available to offer particular services. Iowa's shrinking rural communities reflects this profile. As of August 2005, 10 entire Iowa counties and parts of 50 other counties had been designated as Medically Underserved Areas. [4]

In 2003, 63 of Iowa's 99 counties were designated as Governor's Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA) for primary health care (up from 58 in 1999). Similarly, 81 counties were identified as HPSAs for mental health (up from 48 in 1999), and 29 counties reported 4 or fewer pharmacies. [4] In June 2005, Iowa had 129 certified rural health clinics located in 53 of Iowa's 99 counties. [5] A rural health clinic is a clinic located in a rural area designated as an HPSA. Iowa also had 35 licensed Gerontological Nurse Practitioners in 2003, down from 51 in 2001. [6]

It is estimated that over one-half of the rural elderly are in poor health. Patients 65 and older comprise 64% of the discharges from acute care in north central Iowa, a statistic that is likely similar in most regions of the state. [7] The incidence of dementia increases with age and is most prevalent among the oldest-old, placing them at higher risk for long-term institutionalization. In a rural environment, fewer alternative living options are available for elderly persons with dementia, forcing family caregivers to choose between care at home or nursing home care for their loved ones. It is estimated that more than one-half of elderly persons in nursing homes have at least one form of dementia. One-third of the chronically mentally ill who reside in residential care facilities (55% of residents) are 65 years of age and older. Nursing home administrators and others report that limited staff skills in caring for elderly with chronic mental illnesses are a major issue. [8]

With Iowa's growing aging population, chronic disease has become a major factor in the health and health care needs of older Iowans. Heart disease continued to be the number one cause of death in Iowa between 1993 and 2002, followed by cancer, stroke and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Crude mortality rates indicate greater mortality from diabetes, atherosclerosis, kidney diseases and Alzheimer's disease in the smaller counties, due to their larger proportion of elderly. [5]

### References

1. U.S. Census, Population Estimates 2004
- 2 U.S. Census, 2000
- 3 Coward and Cutler 1989
- 4 Iowa Dept. of Public Health Website ([www.idph.state.ia.us](http://www.idph.state.ia.us)) February 2006
5. The 2005 Iowa Health Fact Book, Iowa Department of Public Health
6. Iowa Board of Nursing 2001
7. Wasicek, 1997
8. Friedrich, et al, 1997