

7 Conclusions

The present report aims to provide those working to improve senior health in San Mateo County with a wide variety of information on current and projected senior health. To achieve this, it relies on many sources of information, chief among them the San Mateo County Health System, specifically the Aging and Adult Services Division and the Health Policy and Planning Division. Their work is supplemented with statistics from the US Census Bureau, especially the American Community Survey, as well as a broad range of academic and policy studies, geospatial statistics and visualizations, and the results from a small, targeted stakeholder survey.

The report is not an advocacy tool nor does it aim to make conclusions with respect to the underlying causes of the status and trends in the health status of older adults living in the county. This is best left to the experts and practitioners who not only work with the data every day but with the people they concern.

So what then can be concluded from the report and its detailed statistics and charts on demographic trends, major causes of death and illness among seniors, the financial burden of healthcare, and the importance of health insurance, access to and quality of care and the changes that the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act are bringing to the county in the next few years?

First, the detailed statistics can help to identify areas in need of more specific information and/or further research into the underlying causes of the issues. Experts will undoubtedly raise a number of follow-up questions related to the data and information presented in the report and thereby initiate a deeper conversation about specific aspects of senior health or the broader policy approaches taken.

For example, the authors see the following areas that could benefit from increased attention emerge from the report:

- Beyond the surveys conducted by the SMC Health System little information exists regarding the perceptions, expectations and plans that San Mateo County residents, especially the Baby Boomer generation, have with respect to their retirement age. This concerns, in particular, detailed breakdowns by age, sex, race/ethnicity, nativity and socio-economic status. Since the county's senior population is projected to grow the most rapidly over the next twenty years, it is important for planning purposes to know more about its characteristics.
- More emphasis could be placed on understanding senior health issues in the context of place. The maps presented in the report are only a first cursory look at how healthy aging is influenced by place and neighborhood. More spatially explicit analyses can help our understanding of differences and similarities among older adults aside from the typical features age, sex, race/ethnicity and income. They can improve our understanding why a program succeeds in one area but fails in another or help identify and reallocate resources to locations that would otherwise have gone unnoticed and thereby lead to efficiency gains in public spending.
- The increased recognition of the linkages between and synergistic benefits of horizontal cooperation between different sectors of government, e.g., the public health system, the housing department and transportation agencies, should be promoted further through the development of systems-oriented, quantitative indicators that capture how each component is contributing to enhancing the overall quality of life in the county for seniors and how their maximum impact is tied to the others.

A second way to view the report is to step back and consider the broader picture that emerges. This approach may serve as input for a larger conversation regarding the formulation of a vision for the county and its residents with respect to aging and senior health. Within this context, a few generalizations are possible on the basis of the report, each with its own opportunities and challenges that are summarized in the following.

- San Mateo County is an aging county. Notwithstanding migration patterns and other factors influencing life expectancy and the decision to age in the county, the county is expected to see a significant rise in the number of older people by 2030 and seniors are expected to be the fastest growing population segment.

Opportunities	Challenges
<p>Older adults are a significant contributor to the local economy and studies have shown that they benefit in particular from the growing knowledge economy, which means they are likely to be an active part of the economy for longer and adding higher value to it than in the previous, manufacturing dominated economy.</p>	<p>Employers need to better recognize the contributions of older adults to their businesses and workplaces should become more flexible in terms of work models and ways to harness those contributions.</p> <p>For the county, having more and a larger share of seniors in the total population will require expanding certain types of services such as medical care, transportation and senior-appropriate housing.</p>

- Racial and ethnic diversity are also expected to grow.

Opportunities	Challenges
<p>Diversity can be a catalyst for openness, tolerance, innovation, and creativity.</p>	<p>Increased racial and ethnic diversity among seniors requires greater adaptation of service providers to understand and respond to customs and cultural characteristics.</p> <p>If socio-economic divisions run alongside racial and ethnic differences, there is an increased potential for exclusion, prejudices, and misconceptions.</p>

- Health disparities will remain an issue of concern.

Opportunities	Challenges
<p>Improving the health status of the most disadvantaged produces social and economic benefits that can exceed the costs of the programs and policies.</p> <p>Senior health is also tied closely to healthy life at younger ages. Therefore, today's investments in healthy lifestyles, prevention, and medical care, especially for disadvantaged populations will pay off in the future.</p>	<p>Disparities by income, race/ethnicity and educational attainment remain persistent, despite many efforts.</p> <p>Tackling these complex challenges requires multi-pronged efforts that already start in childhood and are not limited to health but include education, justice and social inclusion. This requires a long-term strategy and commitment of resources that is difficult maintain in current economic conditions.</p>

- The healthcare system will need to accommodate more seniors and their specific healthcare needs, such as chronic conditions, overweight and obesity and associated co-morbidities.

Opportunities	Challenges
<p>The increasing focus on healthy aging, active living, and prevention can help the county manage the needs and costs associated with a growing, aging population.</p> <p>Better horizontal coordination among the different sectors of county and city governments and agencies as well as a focus on continuous lines of service across the full spectrum of senior health needs will allow targeting resources better and more holistically.</p> <p>Programs focusing on healthy eating, active lifestyle, etc. that are useful for all of the county's residents will also benefit seniors.</p> <p>Studies show that while life expectancy grows and more seniors will suffer from some health impairments, this does not translate into an equivalent need for additional hospital beds or capacity if care is coordinated better, ambulant services are expanded, and innovative technology used smartly.</p>	<p>Making more with less in the context of tight public finances will be critical.</p> <p>Having accurate and timely information for planning will also need to be a focus to prepare for the "silver tsunami".</p> <p>A generally low ratio of certain healthcare providers, e.g., mental health professionals and general practitioners, can create bottlenecks in availability of care, especially for socio-economically disadvantaged seniors.</p>

- The high cost of living, especially housing, in the county will pose challenges to seniors living on limited incomes.

Opportunities	Challenges
While the county is nearly built out, affordable housing can be created and built in a variety of ways and non-profit organizations have identified and successfully tested different approaches.	There is already a shortage of affordable senior housing in the county and adding spaces in response to a growing senior population will require innovative solutions.

- Mobility is a key ingredient for health aging and a growing number of seniors will not be able to drive independently anymore.

Opportunities	Challenges
<p>Senior mobility can be supported through a variety of means, including SamTrans' senior mobility initiative, expansion of TOD housing that is suitable for seniors, partnerships with NGOs providing senior mobility solutions, and expansion of public transportation alternatives through SamTrans, CalTrain and BART.</p> <p>Mobile and communication technology can also play a role in matching transportation needs with supply in the future.</p>	<p>Building transportation and mobility networks is costly, time-intensive and often requires infrastructure that is built for the long-term and hence less adaptive to changing situations. The difficulties surrounding the high-speed rail project between San Francisco and Los Angeles demonstrate the complexity of transportation issues.</p> <p>Aside from bigger infrastructure investments (e.g., Grand Boulevard Initiative), nimbler and more flexible solutions must be developed.</p>

- Healthcare insurance, especially Medicare, is a key instrument to ensure that older adults have access to medical care when they need it.

Opportunities	Challenges
<p>The ACA is bringing a number of important changes and improvements to the way healthcare is delivered and charged for in the country. Coverage expansion for younger adults today may reduce prevalence of chronic conditions and other health issues in the long-term as these adults enter senior age.</p> <p>Better coverage and the orientation towards quality and performance metrics in healthcare can also help reduce avoidable hospitalizations.</p>	Healthcare costs are expected to continue to rise faster than inflation, putting more pressure on public finances, including the county's. The implementation of the ACA will yield new insights into what works and what does not, but a number of years will go by before this information will be available.

Together with the specific goals formulated by SMC Health System (see **Error! Reference source not found.**) we hope that these broad strokes at the opportunities and challenges lying ahead we hope to help frame and contribute to the debates that are underway in San Mateo County to make it a more vibrant, livable place for all residents in the long-term.