

Compass Article
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Health Odyssey discovers Aging Adults

My questions have grown during the many months since the new State Administration proposed and then implemented a sweeping transformation of the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. As a public servant, I know that my role is to understand how the new State health regulations, division changes, replacement of personnel, and massive moves will affect individuals and communities in Alaska.

Without answers from the state's capitol, I started out on a "health economics odyssey" at the close of our last legislative session. I would gather information on government's effects on health in Alaska's communities. I traveled the marine highway south, then north by car on Alaskan roads, and later by airplane to a total of 17 communities so far. Visiting small and larger towns, I have met with the officials and administrators of local government, schools, tribal/native corporate offices, clinics, and hospital health services. I ask about their town's economy and how health impacts their community.

Surprisingly, a theme evolved in most communities. Towns' survival in so many locations is linked to seniors and what they bring to their community. Some seniors spend an entire lifetime in their community, some join adult children who decided to stay, and others come to embark on a lifelong entrepreneurial dream. There are also those who move to retire in a beautiful, safe, friendly small community. All of these different stories give Alaska the surprising distinction as second place in the United States in per capita growth of seniors.

Administrators told me, from Craig to Tok to Anchorage, the incredibly important part health plays in their community. They have reverses in fortune, but each have an entire menu of creative plans to build their local economy. One item on those menus is senior services, because these towns understand the dramatic role seniors' play.

As the summer passed and turned to fall, changes being implemented in State senior care regulations have been impacting seniors here in Anchorage as well as in the smaller communities. Progressively, on my more recent trips, locals report that stresses to senior services have unforeseen impacts on other sectors of the local economy.

My community is facing some of the same changes affecting these other towns I've visited. I regret the loss of seniors in my own district when they leave the state after loss of the longevity bonus. I know that program cuts put a hole in the budget of fixed income recipients. Providers in our Anchorage health hub have reported increasing numbers of rural Alaskans in our local health systems, looking for work and affordable housing. People in small towns move to urban centers when they lose in the effort to hang on. I have an ache in my gut that won't go away. The State's public policy is playing a role in these warning signs, but how large a role?

I started the odyssey looking for links between what we did in Juneau and what was happening where people live in Alaska. I found towns that had survived for many generations, transitioned through dramatic changes, some before statehood.

These small communities seek ways to survive using local resources, local talent, and it is my belief they are doing so in the most efficient way. We in state government must understand these dynamics and find ways to add incentives helping our many towns to survive. The senior sector is adding new money, new knowledge, new talent, and new genius all over Alaska. Understanding the needs and strength of our senior population is the first step in developing state policy that can adequately serve Alaskan communities and their residents.

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