My Turn: On the front lines of the 'age wave'

Written by
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As the CEO of Vermont’s premier affordable senior housing organization, I found “Vermont’s ‘age wave’ brings jobs” (Sept. 2) about the “age wave” in Vermont to ring true. At Cathedral Square we’re on the front lines observing the explosion of boomers seeking to live independently while receiving needed support. Finding appropriate solutions to the challenges of an increasing senior population both in regards to housing and to health care is the heart and soul of what Cathedral Square (CSC) is about.

CSC was established as a nonprofit in 1977 to own and operate housing for seniors and persons with disabilities. Beginning with Three Cathedral Square in downtown Burlington, our portfolio now includes 24 properties in nine communities, with Shelburne soon to follow. Our efforts to meet Vermont seniors’ housing needs are aggressive but still fall short of competing with the growth in demand described by the Free Press.

CSC recently completed the 36-apartment second phase to Thayer House in Burlington’s New North End. Applicants lined up outside our doors for hours before we opened for business on the day we began accepting applications. Every apartment was leased up within 29 minutes. Meanwhile, we still have a waiting list that exceeds 950 unique households.

As the article notes, the rise in the senior population is accompanied by their need for coordinated care, and luckily Vermont is well-positioned in that regard. After many years of owning and operating senior housing, CSC knew how critical it was to have a service delivery program so seniors could remain in their homes safely as they aged. In 2009 CSC developed and launched Support And Services at Home — “SASH.”

SASH is a care partnership which connects the health and long-term care systems to nonprofit affordable housing providers statewide. SASH embeds care management and coordination programming in the home, and puts residents in the driver’s seat of their care plans. The SASH program is part of Vermont’s overall health care reform and it addresses the underlying causes of avoidable Medicare and Medicaid expenses. SASH focuses on wellness, prevention and care management.

Each CSC property serving the elderly has a SASH coordinator and part-time wellness nurse who are supported by the expertise of their local home health agency, area agency on aging and mental health agency. The wellness nurse provides coaching on proper medication management, monitors vital signs, provides self-care counseling and education post-discharge from hospitals or nursing homes. The SASH coordinator has daily contact with residents enabling targeted interventions.
Together, the SASH staff serves as extenders to Blueprint for Health primary care providers and the aging services network — all to keep seniors and others with service needs safe at home.

Initial data from two years of operating the SASH program indicates that not only does it improve the quality of life for SASH participants, but it saves money. As SASH staff incorporates ways to prevent falls, bolster nutrition, foster community, alleviate isolation and depression, we are seeing fewer falls, fewer trips to the hospital and fewer re-admissions.

While SASH was piloted in CSC properties, it has now rolled out to 93 housing communities throughout the state, and even serves residents in the community at-large. Expansion of SASH is a goal CSC and our partners are striving to achieve.

It only makes good sense that the housing provider be part of the health care solution in our aging state, and fortunately state and federal officials see this logic. The road ahead has many challenges — recruiting a skilled health care workforce, providing an adequate supply of affordable housing, building a reformed health care system with enough capacity to serve an aging population — but Vermont is making the system changes needed to succeed. CSC is committed to seeing that we do succeed.

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