

Graying population

By: ALAN VAN ORMER,

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65 & Older				85 & Older			
State Rank	County	National Rank	% 65 & Over	State Rank	County	National Rank	% 85 & Over
1	McPherson	9	26.6%	1	Hutchinson	11	5.1%
2	Hutchinson	20	24.2%	2	Gregory	12	3.6%
3	Urbair	42	22.6%	3	McPherson	23	4.7%
4	Peter	57	25%	4	Peter	31	4.5%
5	Gregory	61	24.8%	5	Miner	38	4.4%
6	Kingbury	77	24.2%	6	retard	40	4.4%
7	Hand	78	24.2%	7	Kingbury	55	4.2%
8	Miner	93	22.9%	8	Dewelle	68	4.2%
9	Brookings	100	23.7%	9	Ande	67	4.0%
10	Day	110	23.2%	10	Aurora	82	4.0%
11	Douglas	140	22.6%	11	McCook	120	3.7%
12	Aurora	203	21.6%	12	Sanborn	163	3.3%
13	Sanborn	251	20.8%	13	Charles Mix	248	3.2%
14	Tripp	264	18.7%	14	Butte	343	3.0%
15	McCook	308	18.8%	15	Tripp	300	2.9%
16	Sanborn	306	19.5%	16	Brookings	465	2.7%
17	James	328	18.2%	17	James	885	2.7%
18	Charles Mix	731	13.3%	18	Sanborn	1,457	1.9%
19	Butte	827	16.8%	19	Lynn	1,726	3.7%
20	Lincoln	1,046	14.9%	20	Hanson	2,049	3.3%
21	Lynn	1,288	13.6%	21	Butte	3,120	4.4%
22	Butte	3,387	5.5%				

Shannon ranked 3,120 out of 3,147 counties nationally with 4.8% of the population over 65.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

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HOWARD - When LaVern Walter, 80, and his wife, Delores, 74, moved to a house in Howard from their 520-acre farm southeast of Fedora more than a year ago, their main worry was how they would make an adjustment to living off the farm.

"I finally decided that a person cannot worry about something they cannot do anything about," Mrs. Walter said.

The Walters are just two of many in a graying population in South Dakota, where the state's median age is

growing faster than the national average.

In 1960, the national average age was 35.4, while South Dakota stood at 27.7. In the latest census, the median age for the nation was 35.3, while South Dakota jumped almost eight years to a median age of 35.6. (See related chart.)

The median age is increasing because of a declining birth rate and an aging population, as well as longer life expectancy, said Dave Olson, a graduate assistant at the South Dakota State University Census Data Center in Brookings.

"The population is aging," he said. "All indicators say that South Dakota is aging slightly faster."

The median age of 35.6 means that half of the population is above that age and half is below it.

In the 2000 census, almost 24 percent of the 2,884 residents in Miner County were 65 years of age or older, ranking Miner County eighth in the state and 93rd in the nation for the percentage of people in that age category. In the 1990 census, Miner County also was ranked eighth, at 24.5 percent, and in the 1980 census, the county had 22 percent of its residents at age 65 or older, ranking the county first in the state that year.

For residents over age 85, Miner County ranked fifth in the state and 38th nationally in the 2000 census.

McPherson County was ranked first in the state and ninth in the nation with almost 30 percent of its 2,900 residents age 65 or over.

And Hutchinson County ranked second in the state and 30th in the nation with 26 percent of its 8,075 residents age 65 or over. It ranked first in the state and 11th nationally for the percentage of residents age 85 or over.

Like other counties with a large percentage of elderly residents, Hutchinson faces challenges in the areas of health care, socialization and housing needs.

"There are not any waiting lists as far as programs or services in Hutchinson County," said Kathi Skoglund, district supervisor for Adult Services and Aging in Sioux Falls. Her district includes Hutchinson County. "Our programs are adequately funded so we have dollars and hours to serve people."

Communities in the county also are doing special things to help their elderly residents. For example, a grocery store in Parkston has started a grocery delivery service to the elderly in that community.

"We are working with area providers in local communities to focus on the needs of those elderly patrons. This could include grocery or pharmacy delivery," Skoglund said.

Parkston, Freeman, Menno and Tripp are developing adult daycare programs within community nursing facilities so that elderly residents may participate in social activities, adult activities and also receive a nutritional meal.

The state also has developed a caregivers' program, with Hutchinson County one of the participants. The program focuses on the needs of caregivers and helps with training, case management, and purchasing appropriate equipment to service the elderly.

Factors in graying

Diane Kayongo-Male, a professor of sociology at SDSU, said there are several reasons for an increase in any population's median age. One reason is that those in their 20s and 30s migrate out of state in search of jobs. Another reason is an increased life expectancy.

"Both of these are responsible for South Dakota's aging," she said.

The Walters, who have been married 54 years, do not concern themselves with rankings. One thing they do worry about as they get older is their health.

"We have to realize we cannot do what we used to do," Mrs. Walter said. "I feel that I am not old at this point. When I was a kid, I thought that anybody 74 wouldn't be able to smell or taste or anything."

Mr. Walter said he worries about ending up in a nursing home, but hopes that won't happen.

Health and adequate home care are two of the major concerns facing an aging state.

"The housing need is more acute for the poorest elderly. The state must build more assisted living facilities or provide for other forms of alternatives to single-family housing, largely because of the state-mandated ban on construction of any more nursing home beds," Kayongo-Male said.

Gail Ferris, administrator for Adult Services and Aging in the state Department of Social Services, said nursing home occupancy is at a record low of less than 80 percent, despite the fact that the elderly population is growing.

"This is due in large part to the growth of assisted living and other housing options, along with the expansion of in-home and community services," Ferris said. "We also believe that today's elderly are, for the most part, healthier and wealthier and there are many more opportunities for them to live active and involved lifestyles."

The state Department of Health is starting to do some things in the area of telemedicine.

"One of the home health agencies we contract with has started using a video cam monitoring system for medication management purposes," Ferris said. "I would expect we will see more of this as time goes on."

The geographic factors in South Dakota also make access to services a challenge.

"Because of the distances in essential services and the decline of small South Dakota communities, many are forced to relocate to larger communities to assure access to medical care, shopping, etc.," Ferris said. "This becomes especially important as older people lose their ability to drive and must become dependent on others."

Ferris said the potential is vast for more innovative and creative ways to help the elderly.

"We will continue to see the emergence of these things as the country continues to grow old," she said.