

Miner takes steps to help elderly

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HOWARD - Miner County officials know that their elderly population is continuing to grow in number. But instead of grumbling about it, they decided to figure out ways to make it benefit all of the 2,884 residents in that county.

Randy Parry, executive director of Miner County Community Revitalization in Howard, says the elderly are a huge economic impact to Miner County.

"It is extremely important to increase the quality of life for the elderly," Parry said. "We need to give back to those who have given and created a life in Miner County. If they leave the county, they lose contacts with friends and families, (and) we lose a treasure chest of knowledge that is extremely important that they can give to the younger people about where we have been, why we worked so hard to keep Miner County the way it is."

According to the 2000 census, almost one-quarter of Miner County residents were over the age of 65, ranking that county eighth in the state and 93rd in the nation. Residents age 85 or over was at 4.4 percent, which was fifth in the state and 38th in the nation.

In 1960, Miner County had a population of 6,000. But since then, that number has dropped to less than 3,000 residents.

Emily Feldhaus, an administrative assistant at MCCR and a graduate of Augustana College who stayed in Howard, said that as young people left the state, their grandparents followed because they did not have access to elderly services.

Miner County officials decided to do something about that out-migration of residents, which included the elderly.

One issue that has been addressed is health care.

John Mengenhause, chief executive officer for Horizon Healthcare, is working to make sure people have access to primary health care.

"Communities we work in have a large elderly population, so access to health care is crucial," Mengenhause said.

Horizon Healthcare has nine federally-assisted community health care centers in the region, including Howard, Woonsocket, Wessington Springs, Plankinton, De Smet, Lake Preston, Bryant, Mission, and White River.

Horizon recently received a grant for telemedicine, and Howard will be one of those telemedicine locations. That could mean that two full-time physician assistants would come once a week and offer podiatry services and also bring in specialties such as mammogram machines.

"It enables us to recruit doctors who want to work in a rural area," Mengenhause said. "Telemarketing is be-

coming big in rural areas. It keeps the people in the community. It brings technology - it brings the expertise almost to their doorsteps."

A major challenge for the elderly is transportation to health care services, but Mengershausen hopes that telemedicine will alleviate that concern.

"Most people have family and friends around that can get them back and forth," Mengershausen said. "It takes time away from work for those who drive them."

A second issue Miner County officials have addressed is housing for elderly. In the past, the elderly would be able to rent apartments but then would have to move directly into a nursing home or move out of the county for specific housing needs. Now, Miner County is able to provide elderly with different options.

Two years ago, the Howard Good Samaritan Center built a complex consisting of six independent housing units, which allowed seven local residents to remain in Miner County.

More than a year ago, Greenleaf Assisted Living Center opened a facility that could accommodate 25 residents. Currently, there are 11 residents in the center.

"Greenleaf came here because they saw the progressiveness of Howard and also because we are in the top 10 counties of elderly residents," Parry said. "They saw the concentration of elderly. They said they wanted to help."

Officials also believe that it is important to educate the residents in the county that the communities need to work together in order to succeed.

"Alone, they cannot exist exclusively in a county this small," Feldhaus said. "They have to think of themselves as a county. They are all in the same boat and they have to fix it together."

Miner County also is developing a long-term strategic plan. For example, in Carthage, plans are in the works to construct a community fire hall and learning center, which could also include having a nurse visit two to three times each week.

"That way they will be able to stay in the community, get that care and keep buying locally," Parry said. "We have been looking at that. When we talk about the county, it is not Carthage, Howard or Canova - it is a county."

Parry said one of the keys to Miner County's success comes from the elderly.

"We learn from the elderly that what they knew all along was true. The reason they stay here is because of the life they have here - the values and the caring of people."