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Mecca's tarnish

Life a failing struggle for many area seniors

For decades, Florida has been sold as a golden mecca for those in their golden years: A place to while away retirement, with a golf cart in every driveway and a grandchild on every knee.

The reality is far different for many Volusia and Flagler county seniors. Many who move here from other states are cut off from supportive networks of family and friends. Seniors who expected a low cost of living find their fixed incomes stretched to the limit by rising real-estate taxes and insurance, and other increased costs. Disabilities can strip away mobility, diminish quality of life and dim hope.

The tragic stories are all too familiar: The elderly man discovered in a DeLand nursing home with an infected breathing tube and maggots in his eyes. The 92-year-old man who leaped to his death from his Daytona Beach condominium, distraught over his wife's failing health. The children charged with beating a veteran, now homeless.

Less familiar but more common are the daily struggles that don't make headlines. The Volusia Council on Aging has a waiting list of seniors needing vital services like housekeeping and grocery shopping. Flagler County has capped its door-to-door bus service because it can't afford to service any more riders. (That cut, like many cuts that affect seniors, hits disabled riders hard as well -- 25 percent of the people who use Flagler County's bus service are wheelchair bound.) A lack of affordable home health services might be sending local seniors into nursing facilities when they could remain in their homes -- a problem that also affects people with disabilities who are under the age of 65.

Both Volusia and Flagler counties are struggling to help seniors and the disabled, but with more budget cuts looming, services are in jeopardy.

A community shorts itself when it turns a blind eye to these needs. Providing basic, low-cost services to seniors and people with disabilities that allow them to live with dignity, in their own homes, makes sense -- both from fiscal and moral perspectives. Filling in the gaps left by state and federal funding cuts will take a local commitment. But it could dramatically improve the lives of thousands of Volusia and Flagler county residents.

Monday we looked at social services challenges specific to children in our area. Wednesday we'll focus on poverty.

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