

Experiencing Rural Gerontology
Findings and Reflections upon a Visit to and Interactions with
Aging & Family Services of Mineral County, West Virginia

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When asked what he would do when he retired, one particular aging gentleman responded that the first year he would sit on his front porch in his rocking chair. Then, upon reflection, he reckoned that the second year he'd commence to rock. This potential retiree would be well advised to consider the opportunities beyond his rocking chair at the Aging & Family Services of Mineral County (AFS) (<http://wvaging.com>). AFS offers, within its limitations, an astounding array of opportunities and services for the aged.

According to its twenty-eight page brochure, the AFS in 1974 began to serve the 6,900 senior citizens in Mineral County from the old Lincoln School House, with Doris Nield directing a staff of three. (The U.S. Census has a 2012 estimate of the population of Mineral County of 27,956, with persons 65 or older at 18.4%, 5,144. [<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/54/54057.html>] The difference may be that the AFS counts seniors as 60 or older, rather than 65, for eligibility purposes.) The AFS's mission statement is To promote and maintain the highest quality of life and independence by developing and providing services that meet the needs of the elderly and their families. The West Virginia Director of Senior Community Services, Scott Mallery, graciously agreed to meet with me on February 12, 2014, and, since he engendered such a warm hospitality, I promptly consumed a large part of his morning. Following the interview at the AFS offices, he also conducted for me a tour of the Keyser Senior Center and arranged for me to meet with two clients, a gentleman of 78 and a young lady of 63.

AFS sports a \$2 million annual income from federal and state funding, employs 70 in in-home care, 12 in nutrition, and ten in the office, offers its own employee retirement program, and ended 2013 with a \$100 thousand deficit. It provides a ton of services:

(1) It operates senior centers in the city of Keyser (30 S Church St) in central Mineral County and

in the Frankfort District (10 Summit Drive, Frankfort) in the eastern part of the county.

- (2) It administers the Elderly Nutrition Program, which provides (a) Meals on Wheels to the homebound in the Keyser, Ridgeley, Wiley Ford, Short Gap, and Fort Ashby areas, and (b) congregate meals once a day at both the two senior centers (M-F), and the Elk Garden Fire Hall and Piedmont Mid Rise (51 Jones St) (both on M, W, Th, F, 10 a.m. - 2 p.m.).
- (3) It offers in-home care programs:
- (a) Community Care, federally funded, for those 18 and older who are eligible for Medicaid and medically determined to be physically impaired, needing assistance with personal care activities such as grooming and hygiene.
 - (b) Medicaid Waiver, federally funded, for those 18 and older who are eligible for Medicaid and medically determined to need nursing home care; currently AFS assists 60-80 home-bound elders through its case management service.
 - (c) Lighthouse In-Home Care, state funded, for those 60 and older who are not eligible for Medicaid but are financially eligible per the Lighthouse sliding fee schedule,¹ for those who are medically determined to need personal and environmental assistance up to 60 hours per month, i.e., two hours per day, including personal care, mobility, nutrition, and housekeeping.
 - (d) Family Alzheimer's In-Home Respite program for caregivers of those diagnosed with

¹The costs of services are determined on a sliding scale based on the annual income of the individual receiving care. Hourly fees charged to the individual range from \$1 - \$16. Their assets or household incomes are not considered factors, just their individual income. The Annual Income is followed by the Hourly Rate:
\$20,220 and under B \$1; Up to \$25,220 B \$2; Up to \$30,220 B \$4; Up to \$35,220 B \$6; Up to \$40,220 B \$8; Up to \$45,220 B \$10; Up to \$50,220 B \$12; Up to \$55,220 B \$14; Over \$55,220 B \$16. (www.payingforseniorcare.com/paid-caregiver/wv-lighthouse-program.html)

dementia, on a sliding fee schedule, for up to 16 hours per week.

(4) It sponsors day trips, multi-night tours, the annual Mineral County Senior Olympics, and provides a variety of activities at the senior centers, including the Boomers Café in the Keyser Senior Center and a field track at the Frankfort Center, bingo, chair dancing, crafts, decorating, exercise, speakers, walking (70-80 in a current program to, metaphorically, hike the Appalachian Trail), billiards, ping pong, darts, bowling, computer training, and internet access. The AFS Newsletter, a 16 page quarterly, keeps current with articles and tips on matters of interest to the aged.

AFS both employs licensed care technicians, with a minimum of 32 hours training and supervised by Registered Nurses, since 1988, and also engages the services of volunteers.

Volunteers do not reduce personnel costs.

AFS provides services to the elderly because the elderly in Mineral County are in need of them. Fox News Magazine reported on February 25, 2014, in an article entitled “The Gallup-Heathway’s Well-Being Index Determines Happiest and Most Miserable States in America,” that based on a nation-wide poll of factors including education, employment, access to basic needs and levels of physical and emotional health,⁶ the residents of West Virginia were the most miserable in the nation⁷ for the fifth consecutive year. (<http://magazine.foxnews.com/at-home/gallup-healthways-well-being-index-determines-happiest-and-most-miserable-states-america?intcmp=HPBucket>)

Nevertheless, AFS can reach only 40% of the seniors in the county, as miserable as the unserved majority may feel. One of the most critical problems facing AFS clients involves food, and this problem has many facets that affect the AFSs ability to assuage hunger. In 2013, the AFS

nutrition staff of twelve prepared and served 16,500 congregate meals and 30,500 home-delivered meals, i.e., in an average month it serves 1,375 congregate and 2,540 home-delivered meals, i.e., on an average day it serves 65 congregate and 120 home-delivered meals. Five days a week, the Keyser Senior Center serves 20-25 elders in the congregate meals, and 70-80 with home delivery meals; the Frankfort Service Center serves 25-30 congregate and 50 home delivery meals. Four days a week, AFS also serves Piedmont and Elk Garden. For the Meals on Wheels program, AFS has one driver and one truck each for Keyser and Frankfort; AFS pays all delivery staff. For the majority of the elders AFS serves, this is the only meal of the day.

The state provides a ton of policies. Federal and state regulations (<http://www.wvsenior-services.gov/DocumentCenter/ProgramSpecificDocuments/tabid/92/Default.aspx>) both impose numerous restrictions on the deliveries, and restrict the number of elders served food. For example, the meals for home delivery are sealed in trays; if the food is hot, it cannot cool during transit, if cool, it cannot warm. The drivers cannot deliver beyond the distance within which the food retains its authorized temperature. In addition, drivers cannot drive more than one mile off the main route. Both rules preclude serving elders in need who live too far from the senior center or too far from the main routes. Federal regulations also impose restrictions on the food itself. For example, AFS cannot serve ketchup because the government deems it having excessive sodium. Minimally fortunately, the state provides a portion of the funding and imposes fewer restrictions; consequently, on two days of the week, the program may operate more efficiently and productively in feeding the aged.

In addition to existing and proliferating laws, regulations, rules, and policies, limited funding affects the number of elders served. The Older Americans Act of 1965, Public Law

89-73 (<http://www.house.gov/legcoun/Comps/OAA65.pdf>; reauthorization bill status at <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/hr3850>), prohibits charging for services. Thus, in the Keyser Senior Center meal room, on a table by a wall, a forlorn can labeled "Donations" receives little patronage, for AFS cannot present a check from the waiter to those who dine. The donations from the elders apparently average about \$2 per person, per meal. The nutrition programs depend upon donations and feeding from the AFS general budget. Mineral County funding support, an annual \$3,500, has not increased in forty years. AFS incurs an annual deficit of \$60-80 thousand in its nutrition programs, which it offsets, only in part, with profits in the home care program. All AFS fund raising income funnels directly into the nutrition program.

The chronic shortage of funding is exacerbated by an imminent program cut of 7.5% in state funds. This follows previous cuts in federal funds under the Older American Act. This will directly reduce the number of employees in the kitchen and directly impact nutrition to the elderly.

For Community Care and Medicaid Waiver folks, the monthly cost to the state for in-home care to keep them in their homes is \$2,000; the cost to the state to keep them in a nursing home is \$7-8,000 per month. Due to a Department of Health and Human Resources funding freeze two years ago, the Medicaid eligible waiting list currently is one and a half years long for the 2,000 such elders in the state and the 30 elders in the county. By the time the government calls their name to receive in-home care; many already are either in the nursing home or dead.

As with most West Virginia programs for the elderly, transportation in Mineral County is a critical problem for the aged. The sole public transportation is the Potomac Valley Transit Authority, which operates routes through Hampshire, Hardy, Grant, Mineral and Pendleton Counties. The Keyser Loop route makes three daily circuits about the town, none of which

includes a stop at the Keyser Senior Center, none of which apparently coincide with the meal times at the Center. (<http://www.potomacvalleytransit.org>) The county does provide funding for transportation, only for specialized need, three days a week, with one employee, one vehicle. For those who drive to the Keyser Senior Center, the available parking is limited, tortured, and perverse. There is but a single local source for motor coach tours, the price offered for charters is not competitive or within the budget of elders, and AFS has had to cancel scheduled multi-night tours, including two for which I myself had made a deposit.

A challenge for the AFS is its own facilities. The Keyser Senior Center currently calls home a large brick building built in the 1800's, and the AFS itself uncomfortably shifts about in a former dentist's home and office it acquired sixteen years ago. AFS owns five acres of land outside the city limits, and hopes to build a new senior center and headquarters there, but the state provides no funding. AFS is casting about for grant monies.

Upon introductions by Director Mallery, I met with the two adult interviewees in the Boomer's Café while at the same time the Center commenced serving the noon meal in the next room. The lady and gentleman were unanimous in their praise for the Keyser Senior Center, totally satisfied, and opined that its highest qualities were its atmosphere, sociality, and food (A fabulous cook). The interviewees felt that the folks were like family, and that they needed to come and participate in the activities. If it went away they would miss it and would have to search out a replacement. I can attest from my reception at the door that the folk, staff and elders, are friendly to newcomers.

The interviewees, when pressed, allowed that AFS needs more grants and needs more people. I venture to guess that many elders in the county simply do not know about AFS and its

programs, and that many elders, like me, feel that we are not old enough to need it.

Director Mallery asked if he could use the final paper Aas we look for grants and funding opportunities in the future. I feel honored that he could use it to continue the work of AFS, and I bid him both permission and my very best wishes in his most worthy endeavor.

Bibliography

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