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## Getting Older: The Challenge of Aging Well in Arkansas

*Part of a series exploring issues  
from The Community Foundation's  
Aspire Arkansas report.*





Heather Larkin

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## Touching the Lives of Older Arkansans

For the last half century, the number of older people in our world has been constantly increasing, while the number of younger people is decreasing. This change in society's makeup has far-reaching consequences, ones that make a difference for every Arkansan.

Older people today live longer and enjoy better health than in the past. Many seniors continue leadership roles and make key contributions to their communities throughout their long lives. But for most everyone, there comes a time when help is needed.

Each of us has a stake in making the lives of older Arkansans better. They are our grandparents, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, friends and neighbors. We are their caregivers as well as the recipients of their wisdom. And one day the challenges of growing older will be our own.

In Arkansas there are some innovative and exciting nonprofit programs that improve the lives of our seniors. But there are also some concerns to address for many of our older citizens – concerns that require our personal and community input and energy.

Please join me in becoming more familiar with the challenges of our aging population and supporting programs that will ensure older Arkansans have the help they need to remain vibrant and productive citizens as long as possible and to keep their dignity intact as long as they live.

Heather Larkin, J.D.  
President and CEO

Cover photo: Janie Jones is a long-time Kindness Inc. volunteer who cares for clients like Anna Miller.



As volunteers for Kindness Inc., Elaine Zimny (left) and Janie Jones (right) drive seniors like their friend Anna Miller (center) to the places they need to go.

## Nonprofits Help Older People Live Independently

By Kim Dishongh

“**E**very town needs a Kindness,” says long-time volunteer Janie Jones.

Kindness Inc., in Mountain Home, is a nonprofit organization that offers free transportation to elderly residents in Baxter and Marion counties who have places to go.

“There are other groups that have transportation for doctor appointments and hospital trips and things like that,” says Jones, who lives in Bull Shoals, “but Kindness is designed just to keep people happy and keep them at home. We fill in wherever possible.”

Kindness also provides respite services for caregivers and has handymen who volunteer to install handrails and wheelchair

ramps and do other light repairs when needed, just for the cost of supplies, thus making homes safer for people who want to stay in them.

Kindness started in 1997 when a group from St. Andrew's Episcopal Church set out to brighten lives with the flowers used to decorate the church for Thanksgiving services. They delivered the flowers to shut-ins, and as they visited they heard those folks lament that they could no longer go shopping for friends and family on their own during the holiday season. Those volunteers took them shopping and pretty soon, their efforts morphed into something larger.

The outreach committee from St. Andrew's met with home-





health professionals in the area and determined that, as in many parts of the state, the quickly growing elderly population had created many needs that could be supported most easily from within local communities.

"We used to have stay-at-home moms that would go and pick up Auntie Jean when she needed to go somewhere, but we don't have that anymore," says Margaret Pflug, one of Kindness's founders. "Our children are scattered. I've got grandchildren who live in five different states. A lot of times there isn't anyone."

The program grew too large for the church to manage, so in 1999 it was incorporated as an independent agency. Kindness volunteers, many of them retirees themselves, drove 43,378 miles and spent 4,260 hours to get 222 clients to where they needed to go in 2014, according to Executive Director Debbie Wamock.

### Kindness Inc. Runs on Volunteer Support

"Volunteers use their own vehicles and their own gas money," says Wamock. "We do offer reimbursement for mileage, but 90 percent of our volunteers don't ask for it. If they did we wouldn't be able to stay in business. Most of them consider that a donation to us, and that's a huge donation. We survive on fundraisers and donations and a few and far between grants."

Judy Light, the organization's only other employee — not counting a staff member whose salary is paid through Experience Works — says clients often send donations.

"Some send \$5 or \$7 a month, and they're on set incomes so we appreciate that," says Light, who has only met about half of the organization's clients face-to-face but knows most of their addresses anyway. Light has a list of clients she calls each day, just to make sure they are OK. "I think they look forward to those calls," says Light. "Some of them can't wait to start talking, and you can tell sometimes that's the only interaction they get."

She enlisted the help of one client who gets a daily Kindness phone call in making thank you calls to donors. "And she's thrilled to be helping us," says Light.

There is a taxi service in Mountain Home as well as a bus service, but as in most rural areas availability is limited, and for people on limited income the cost can be prohibitive. Some services are limited to medical transportation or reserved for those who qualify for certain Medicaid services.

"I don't know what I would do if Kindness couldn't help me anymore," says Dorothy Elmore of Yellville, who asks for help in getting to appointments for medical treatments for an eye condition. "I don't have anybody. And it would cost me \$100 to get Ready Service to come get me and bring me back."

Doyle Link, a retired pilot, is the volunteer who usually takes her. He signed up to volunteer about 10 years ago, shortly after his wife died. "I was kind of looking for things to help other people and distract me from my grief I guess," he says. "I get a sense of satisfaction from it. I can see being in their position, you know, if you lost your ability to drive or lost your sight or just got old or had medical conditions so you couldn't drive anymore. It's kind of interesting, really. I enjoy getting to be with people. You do get a rapport with people."

### Senior Support Options in Other Parts of Arkansas

Pflug doesn't know of another organization like Kindness in Arkansas, although she has offered resources and information to people who have expressed interest in starting one.



Margaret Pflug, a founder of Kindness Inc., and clients like Anna Miller (second from right) depend on volunteers like Janie Jones (second from left) and Elaine Zimny (right).

The Senior Companion Program through the Area Agency on Aging of West Central Arkansas is geared toward helping seniors in that region stay in their homes, including helping them make meals or do light housekeeping, go grocery shopping with or for them, or drive them to the doctor. That program pays senior volunteers who visit at least two clients a week a tax-free stipend of \$2.55/hour, plus 35 cents per mile. That program, funded by a federal Senior Corps grant managed through CareLink, is also available in central Arkansas.

In-home care is also offered through the state's Area Agency on Aging units, each operating a little differently than the other. Those services are based on assessment by a care manager and are billed accordingly. There are also, of course, private for-profit companies that offer in-home care and companion services.

And there is more going on right in Mountain Home to help the elderly. Redeemer Lutheran Church has a group of volunteers who can be called on to make small repairs and to give an occasional ride to a senior who needs to go to a doctor's appointment.

That church is also home to the "Toenail Ministry" led by members with nursing experience. Once a month, about 50 seniors who sign up can come in and have their feet soaked, massaged and moisturized and their toenails trimmed.

"It's really a wonderful labor of love, rather unique kind of ministry," says Pastor Dave Gadbar. "It is a big need, and that's what we set out to do is meet some of the biggest needs of people in our community."

### Volunteer Drivers are Lifesavers, Literally

Gadbaw wants others to know they, too, can help. Jones already knows. She takes 92-year-old woman to visit her daughter in the nursing home, and during their visit she picks up a 90-year-old woman at an assisted living facility for a trip to the hair salon and then to Walmart, where she pushes her in wheelchair up and down each of the aisles so she can see what's there. She chats with the Kindness clients as she drives the to and fro, patting their shoulders and calling them 'Baby,' 'Honey,' 'Darling,' as dictated by her Mississippi roots.

Last year she rushed one client to Little Rock when he got a call at 11 a.m. from the staff of a hospital saying there was a kidney available for transplant. If he couldn't make it there by 3 p.m., the kidney would go to someone else. The friend who was supposed to drive him whenever the time came happened to be out of pocket that day, so he called on Jones, who had taken him to prior appointments.

"My husband wouldn't be here today if it weren't for Kindness," says Anna Miller, his wife. "That's absolutely the bottom line. Janie picked him up 15 minutes later and got him to Little Rock on time."

Jones stayed while he went through a battery of tests to determine organ compatibility and then got prepped for surgery. A week later, she invited Anna to make the journey back to Little Rock to pick him up and bring him home. "That's how we got to be friends," says Miller. These days, her husband is feeling better, but it's she who is suffering from health problems. So when he goes

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In 2012, 14 percent of Arkansans were 65-plus, and 25.6 percent of seniors lived alone.

Source: National Association of States United for Aging and Disabilities (NASUAD.org)





# The Caring Place Supports Alzheimer's Patients and Families

A few hours for Alzheimer's patients to socialize, exercise and enjoy themselves.

A few hours for their caregivers to rest, run errands or finish household chores.

The few hours of respite care provided each week at The Caring Place in Magnolia are a lifeline for families facing the daily challenges of living with Alzheimer's disease. Each Thursday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., clients of The Caring Place enjoy games, crafts, singalongs and activities designed to stimulate their minds and bodies, while their caregivers get much-needed time to take care of themselves.

"You have to take care of yourself before you can take care of anyone else," said Barbara Lewis, the program's director, who is herself a long-term caregiver for her mother. "That's not being selfish; it's just so important to be able to go to Walmart and not have to hurry home. Even if it's just a few hours with no stress, it's important to physical and emotional health."

Lewis co-founded the organization, which is an extension ministry of First United Methodist Church in Magnolia, eight years ago after hearing about a similar program in Hot Springs. "We heard about The Caring Place in Hot Springs and a busload of us took off to go visit it," she said. The Magnolia delegation was so impressed with what they saw that they immediately knew their community needed a similar program.

The Caring Place is largely volunteer run, and about 80 percent of clients receive scholarship assistance to enroll. Most of their clients are in the moderate or advanced stages of the disease, so volunteers receive intensive training to prepare them to interact with clients successfully. "Many of our volunteers have dealt with Alzheimer's in their own families. This is a way of bringing what they learned to the table to help others," Lewis said. "They often say, 'I wish we had had this program when my loved one was going through this.'"

Evelyn Simpson was recruited by Lewis to lead music activities at The Caring Place five years ago and has been volunteering ever since. "Music takes people back; they can remember songs from the past and follow along," Simpson said. "It's amazing to see



*The Caring Place provides fun and physical activity for clients with Alzheimer's, while giving their caregivers a few free hours for self care.*

someone who is usually non-communicative actually sing along. It's rewarding to see the joy on their faces; so often they're alone, and it makes a difference in their lives to bring them together with others."

Recently Simpson's own husband has been diagnosed with the disease, and he now attends The Caring Place with her when she volunteers. "He's in the very early stages; it's actually very good to



have him around because he's able to work with the other clients and have a good time with them," she said. "I didn't know The Caring Place would become so personal for me."

As Barbara Lewis looks to the future for her organization, she envisions seeking state accreditation to become a licensed adult daycare facility, which would enable The Caring Place to serve clients five days a week. Even in rural Columbia County, the need for respite care is great. "We want to grow slowly but surely," she said. "The social setting we provide is quite vital, especially to Alzheimer's patients, whose world is mostly isolation. Just to see the satisfaction, the smiles, the laughter keeps us going."

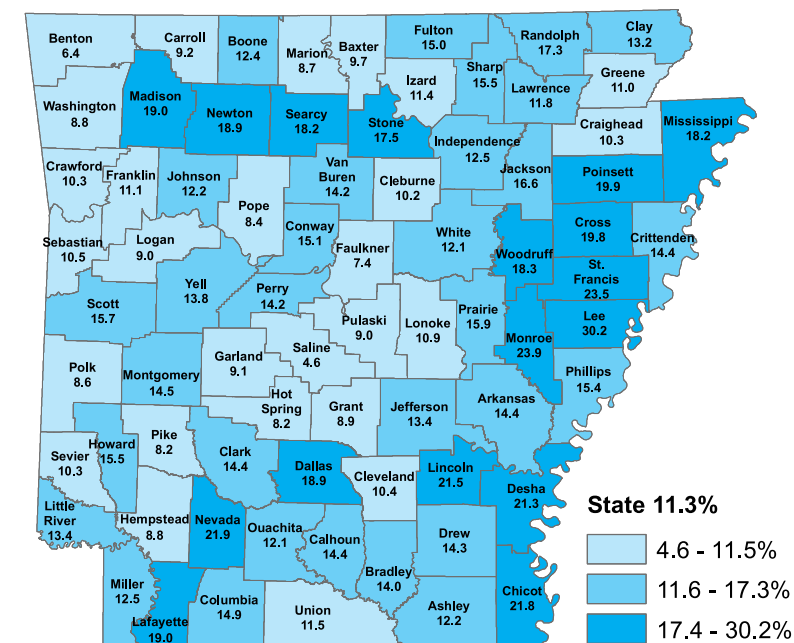


*Clients at the Caring Place celebrate President's Day in style.*

The 2013 *Aspire Arkansas* publication from Arkansas Community Foundation shows 11.3 percent of people 65-plus in our state are living in poverty. Arkansas ranks 11th in the U.S. for poverty among seniors. These U.S. Census Bureau numbers come from the 2007-2011 American Community Survey.

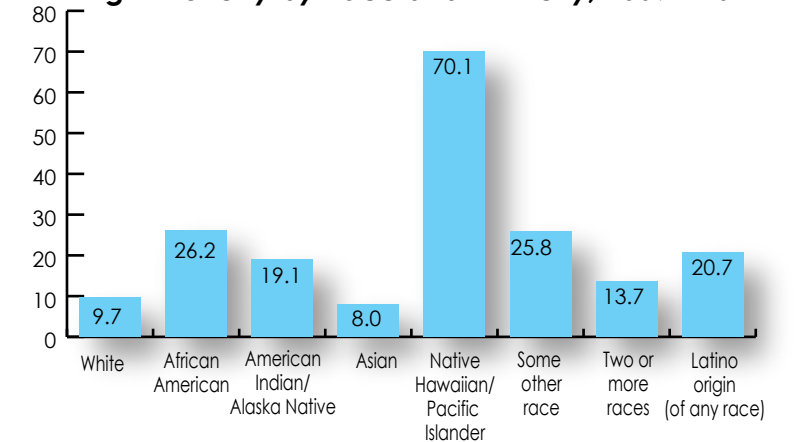
## elderly living in poverty

*Percent of population 65 years and over living in poverty; Arkansas by County, 2007-2011*



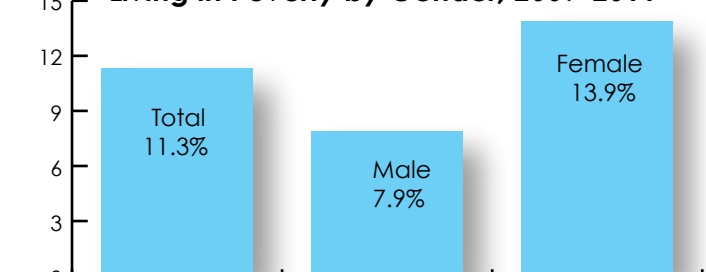
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2011 American Community Survey

## Percent of Population 65 and Older Living in Poverty by Race and Ethnicity, 2007 - 2011



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2011 American Community Survey

## Percent of Total Population 65 and Older Living in Poverty by Gender, 2007-2011



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2011 American Community Survey





Marvin "Red" Ellis receives meals through CareLink's Meals on Wheels Program

## Ten Ways to Attack Senior Hunger

### Arkansas is First in the Nation in Senior Hunger

Choosing between buying food and paying the rent or purchasing medication is a reality for 240,000 Arkansans aged 60-plus. According to a 2014 report from the DHS Division of Aging and Adult Services, 40 percent of older Arkansans experience food insecurity, making Arkansas first in the nation in senior hunger. Financial hardship, lack of transportation, living in areas with few food stores and mobility limitations are major contributors to these chilling statistics.

"We all have a part to play in reducing senior hunger," said Tomi Townley, older adult outreach manager of the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance. "Building a sustainable statewide initiative first means educating our state about the problem."

In Arkansas, 21 counties have been designated as food deserts, where people of all ages have difficulty obtaining nutritious meals. But for seniors, who are often isolated and inactive, the problem of receiving adequate nutrition is compounded.



"Our vision is to create a coalition like No Kid Hungry that will pull all the best ideas together with the organizations who can implement them to make big strides in ending hunger among older Arkansans," said Townley.

Today nonprofits in Arkansas are meeting this daunting challenge with creativity and persistence. Here are 10 innovative local programs and potential national strategies that could be put to work in Arkansas communities.

**Arkansas Senior Hunger Summit** — In October of 2014 the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance held the first Senior Hunger Summit to learn from hunger relief experts and share information on the successes and challenges experienced by older people in Arkansas. More than 200 participants shared information about successes and the challenges of senior hunger in their communities.

**Business Plans for Senior Meal Programs** — Jerry Mitchell of Area Agency on Aging of Northwest Arkansas said running congregate meals programs for seniors can be more cost effective when implementing strategies like:

- Negotiating with grocery stores to secure a single food supplier at the lowest cost.
- Monitoring and changing menus to ensure what is being cooked is being eaten.
- Training staff to order efficiently and prepare appetizing food.
- Exploring catering for other community groups and organizations.

**Convenience Store Nutrition** — For some rural Arkansas seniors, convenience stores are their only shopping option. Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance is working with these stores to provide nutritious options like fresh fruits and vegetables in rural convenience stores and to use tours of these stores to help seniors make nutritious food choices.

**Double Dollars** — More and more farmer's markets around the state are participating in the Double Dollars program that allows older people who receive SNAP benefits to purchase twice as much food for the same price at local farmer's markets. A recent Hunger in America survey said the number one thing seniors want more of is fresh fruits and vegetables.

**Friends and Neighbors Network** — A partnership between First United Methodist Church in Little Rock and the

*continued on page 10*



Participants divide food as a part of the FANN program in downtown Little Rock.



**In 2010 1,421,180 congregate meals and 1,826,906 home-delivered meals were served to older Arkansans.**

*Source: National Association of States United for Aging and Disabilities (NASUAD.org)*





# ARKANSAS VIEWPOINTS

## What are the biggest challenges facing older people in Arkansas?



By Rev. Herschel McClurkin  
Retired United Methodist Minister  
Alma, Arkansas

**W**hat are the biggest challenges facing older people in Arkansas? “I miss my Sunday School class and church when I can’t go. My relationship with God is important,” say some.

“To get myself to the aquatic aerobatics two times a week helps my arthritis, but it gets tiresome. To do the exercises and walking suggested by the rehab folks following surgery and hip replacement is not easy.”

A lady, 91, says, “If we don’t keep ourselves in touch with others and have fellowship, we go down fast! My brother offered to take our sister to church after her husband died. She refused to get out of her chair. She didn’t last long!”

Some older people say, “Keeping active and staying busy is number one, and it’s difficult with lack of transportation.” Some say transportation is their main challenge.

Others have challenges for lack of food, poor nutrition, someone to check on them, citizenship, energy, medicine, finding a doctor, waiting months for an appointment, keeping up with Medicare and Medicaid changes, finding affordable home care, facing homelessness, learning about free clinics and wondering what our government is going to do next.

What is common to all? The little three-year-old, the 20-year-old college athlete and adults are all getting older! Some of us want to and some of us don’t want to get older.

Challenges for aging people abound. More are beckoning to be aided. But people who are willing to help are always a God-given blessing.



By Jeanne Wei, M.D., Ph.D.,  
Executive Director  
Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging  
University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences

**S**enior Arkansans face a daunting set of challenges that contribute to disparities in health.

Healthcare outcome disparities are directly related to the differences in access to, and availability of, health facilities and services, primarily as a result of geographical location, socioeconomic status, education, language, race, gender and/or age.

These disparities clearly have had a negative impact on the aging population in the state of Arkansas. Arkansas is ranked 50th in the U.S. in cardiovascular outcome disparities. Among the 50 states, Arkansas ranks 47th in overall senior health, 50th in food insecurity, 46th in physical activity and 41st in poverty among seniors.

One key factor in these differences is the rural nature of the state and the distance between where seniors live and the nearest hospital or physician’s office. Telemedicine has begun to help alleviate this problem and continues to demonstrate potential for narrowing the gap.

Addressing all these multiple problems simultaneously, comprehensively and with sufficient dedicated resources, is essential to solving each one and to ensuring that seniors throughout Arkansas are healthy and are receiving equal access to, and benefitting from, healthcare.

A reduction in the number of seniors living at or below the poverty line would mean more seniors eating better, healthier and not succumbing to malnutrition or even hunger. It also can mean access to affordable transportation to a senior activity center or other fitness facility where they can participate in activities to improve their health. Similarly, good nutrition would go hand in hand with taking advantage of these activity and exercise facilities.

Solving only one of these problems might not significantly improve things soon enough for senior Arkansans, but a solution that knits all of them together will likely succeed where narrower initiatives have previously failed. We all need to collaborate together to help our loved ones, our neighbors and eventually ourselves.



*Nonprofits Help Older People Live Independently continued from page 4*

fishing or out with his buddies, Jones picks her up and brings her back to her house for tea or coffee and cookies or for supper.

Jones, who is 84, is grateful to Kindness Inc., for what it does for elderly people who want to stay in their homes and for what it does for her, too.

“I’m pretty sure that if I wasn’t a Kindness volunteer I would be a Kindness client,” she says. “It keeps me busy and it gives me purpose.” She’s moving to Washington soon to be with her grandchildren. But’s she’s pretty sure she will try to start some sort of Kindness effort there.

“It’s not so much about those of us who volunteer,” she points out. “It’s about the people we do things for. That’s what’s important. They’re why we do it. It’s a beautiful thing.”



*Ten Ways to Attack Senior Hunger continued from page 8*

Arkansas Foodbank is helping friends and neighbors in a downtown high rise work cooperatively to reduce hunger. FANN Coordinator Elaine Bultena said twice a week 18 households come to the church to unload and distribute about 500 pounds of supplemental food that allows them to have more fresh and nutritional meal options.

For an outlay of about \$200 a month from the church, the participants — about half of whom are seniors — have a consistent source of more nutritious food. The participants also hold programs to learn more about nutrition and other issues, and they decide where the small dollar dues they pay to FANN are spent — the last vote gave a donation to the Arkansas Foodbank and funded a community picnic.

**Meals on Wheels** — Area Agencies on Aging and other nonprofits statewide are a part of the national Meals on Wheels network. Home-delivered meals to homebound older people is not a new idea, but enhanced menu options and modern meal preparation allow more nutritious meals to be prepared and served to those who welcome the human contact of volunteers along with their hot meals.

**Mobile Food Markets** — Though none are up and running today in Arkansas, groups like the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance are exploring the possibility of mobile food markets that bring the chance to purchase nutritious food to small communities. In this model, a bus run by volunteers takes nutritious food into food desert counties on a regular basis.

**Senior-Friendly Food Pantries** — Arkansas Foodbank, with a grant from Walmart, implemented a program to increase

seniors access to food pantries through outreach, designating special senior hours, assisting with SNAP applications, ensuring pantries have foods seniors like and redesigning delivery systems. Phase two of the program is the creation of model Food Pantry sites that exhibit best practices and help train volunteers.

**SNAP Bingo** — Fun and games are used to promote SNAP benefits to sometimes resistant older Arkansans at retirement centers and senior housing units. To get more information out on this government program that helps seniors purchase more nutritious food, the Arkansas Hunger Alliance is playing SNAP Bingo.

**What a Waste!** — The National Foundation to End Senior Hunger’s program in senior centers in Washington, D.C., measures waste from congregate meals to help guide future menu choices and uses food waste as compost for growing healthy vegetables and fruits to supplement meals.



**In 2012, 10 percent of Arkansas seniors were living in poverty. Median household income for older Arkansans was \$32,159.**

*Source: National Association of States United for Aging and Disabilities (NASUAD.org)*



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# Aging Well in Arkansas

In this edition of *ENGAGE*, we're highlighting programs that make a difference for older Arkansans. You'll find information on nonprofits who are helping older Arkansans thrive in the cover story beginning on page 2.

Arkansas has the highest percentage of seniors who are at risk for hunger — more than 40 percent of those 60-plus in our state are food insecure. Read about innovative programs that are tackling this challenge on page 7.

Dr. Jeanne Wei of the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences and retired United Methodist pastor Rev. Herschel McClurkin of Alma give us their Viewpoints on the biggest challenges facing older Arkansans on page 9. And for more statistics on older Arkansans, see the maps and graphs on page 6.

