



TEXAS  
Health and Human  
Services

Aging Texas Well

## Issue Brief

# Social Determinants of Health in Aging

Social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, live, work, and age. These conditions, along with genetics, individual health choices, and health care system policy, contribute to the overall health and well-being of the population.<sup>1</sup> In 2050, the number of Texans 65 and older will reach an estimated 9.4 million.<sup>2</sup> Identifying the needs of the growing older adult population in Texas must be considered within the context of SDH.



### SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

#### Economic Stability

Economic stability refers to the financial resources a person has available to them, from the ability to purchase food to the quality of housing they can afford. Housing is among the highest of monthly expenses for older Texans. The majority of Texans 60 and older spend over 30 percent of their monthly income on housing, leaving less funds for food, medical expenses, and other necessities.<sup>3</sup> Research indicates a strong link between poverty and poor health, with low-income adults nearly five times as likely to be in poorer health compared to those in the highest income group.<sup>4</sup> In Texas, 4.5 million older adults live in poverty, with an estimated 20.5 percent of adults 60 and older living under 150 percent of the Federal Poverty Level.<sup>5</sup>

#### Education

Knowing information about health and how to manage chronic conditions is critical to staying healthy. Health literacy is the degree to which people understand necessary medical information needed to make health decisions.<sup>6</sup> Low health care literacy in older adults is linked to increased use of emergency services and higher costs.<sup>7</sup> In many Texas regions, the percentage of people with a health literacy level of "basic" or "below basic" is nearly 70 percent.<sup>8</sup> Efforts to educate older adults about health could help address differences in health care understanding and lower costs for older Texans.



#### Social and Community Context

Social isolation and loneliness can lead to major health risks for older adults. Social isolation is associated with increased fall risk, a higher probability of cognitive decline, and increased risk of heart attack and stroke.<sup>9,10</sup> Loneliness can also lead to depression and other mental health issues.<sup>11</sup>

Volunteering is a way older adults can increase their social connectedness. Other options to stay engaged include:

- Staying involved with their faith community.
- Participating in programs at a local senior center.
- Socializing with friends and family.
- Pursuing a new hobby or participating in outdoor recreation.

**In Texas, the baby boomer generation completes more hours of service than any other cohort.<sup>12</sup>**

## Health and Health Care

Approximately 40 percent of Medicare beneficiaries 65 and older have four or more chronic conditions.<sup>13</sup> In addition, insurance status throughout the lifespan can impact health and expenses in older age. Though many older adults receive health coverage through Medicare when they become eligible, those who were formerly uninsured have health care costs 51 percent higher than those insured before eligibility.<sup>14</sup>

Family members are typically the primary caregivers for older adults needing assistance with daily tasks. Family caregiving can allow an older adult to age in place and avoid the expenses of around-the-clock care. Texas family caregivers provide over 3.2 billion hours of care, resulting in approximately \$35.5 billion a year of unpaid work.<sup>15</sup>

**34 percent of family caregivers in Texas report having two or more chronic diseases and 14 percent reported they have heart disease or have had a stroke.<sup>16</sup>**

With the large number of family caregivers providing critical, unpaid care for older loved ones, the health of the caregiver is equally important. If caregivers themselves are not healthy, they can have a diminished capacity to provide care. Though limited, respite care can provide temporary relief for caregivers. The availability of community supports, including transportation services and respite, has been linked to lower rates of hospitalizations in older adults.<sup>17</sup>

## Neighborhood and Built Environment

An older adult's location in relation to needed resources can impact their health as well. For instance, 57 percent of the total physician workforce in Texas practices in the five most populous counties, though only 44 percent of older adults reside in these counties.<sup>18</sup> Research suggests rural older adults are more socially isolated than their urban counterparts, leading to health risks associated with isolation.<sup>19</sup>



Likewise, rural areas may not have as many resources — like public transit and variety in health care and social services — as urban areas. This can lead to longer waits to see doctors, longer travel time, and reduced access to specialists for rural older adults. Additionally, 10.5 percent of Texans 60 and older are food insecure, compared to the national average of 7.7 percent.<sup>20</sup> Food insecurity is the limited access to food due to lack of financial resources, location, or availability of local options.<sup>21</sup> Access to nutritious and affordable food options near the homes of older adults is necessary to decrease the risk of malnutrition.

## STATE PROGRAMS

Texas Health and Human Services Commission programs offer services that address SDH. The Office of Area Agencies on Aging oversees the state's 28 local AAAs that provide programs to help with the physical, mental, financial, and social needs of older adults and caregivers. The Office of Aging and Disability Resource Centers administers information and referral support through local ADRCs to connect people with services and provides limited caregiver respite assistance.



Medicaid provides eligible older adults with low-incomes access to health care coverage and long-term services and supports. Similarly, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program provides food assistance to eligible older adults who need help with their monthly food budget. Programs like Medicaid and SNAP that address health and financial SDH are critical for older adults with low incomes or complex health needs.

The HHS Intellectual and Developmental and Behavioral Health Services division provides mental and behavioral health services across the state through local mental health authorities and local intellectual and developmental disability authorities. LMHAs provide counseling, crisis services, residential and outpatient services and substance use disorder services. LIDDAs administer Medicaid waiver services, such as Home and Community-Based Services, and non-Medicaid services in the community. The state's Long-Term Care Ombudsman program serves older adults in long-term care facilities to ensure residents' rights and choices are respected.

### **Aging Texas Well Initiative**

The HHSC Aging Texas Well initiative helps Texas prepare for healthy aging at the individual, community, and state levels. ATW uses sixteen focus areas that align with SDH to support and develop age-friendly policies and programs:

- Caregiving
- Community Supports
- Education
- Employment
- Financial
- Health and Long-Term Care
- Housing
- Legal
- Mental Health
- Protections
- Physical Health
- Recreation
- Social Engagement
- Spirituality
- Transportation
- Volunteerism

A key part of ATW is Texercise, a health promotions initiative that encourages healthy lifestyle habits at the individual and community levels. Program elements are implemented locally and offer group programming, health education and motivation to remain active. In 2018, Texercise launched an evidence-based program that incorporates structured learning, brainstorming, action planning, and problem solving to build self-efficacy. This initiative addresses health-related SDH and ATW focus areas through promotion of healthy choices to prevent or reduce risks of chronic health conditions.

Additionally, the HHSC Age Well Live Well campaign interprets the policy and research analyzed by ATW to educate the public and inform community outreach. This outreach aims to motivate local organizations and community service providers to build partnerships, share resources and develop programming to meet the needs of older residents. Through educational resources, community-centered activities, and capacity building, this campaign addresses a wide spectrum of the SDH and ATW focus areas at the community level.

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