

Lack of Preparation for Demographic Shifts in Rural Florida

BACKGROUND

Of the 67 counties in Florida, 53 have a higher percentage of older adults (65+) than the national average of 14%.¹ Within two decades, this population is expected to grow from 19% to 25% of the state's total. This projection includes Florida's 85+ population, which accounts for 2.3% of its residents and is expected to continue growing as well.¹ These older adults are especially susceptible to cognitive impairments, such as dementia, which can limit one's ability to live independently.² A popular housing option for people with and without dementia is assisted living. All of Florida's urban counties have at least one assisted living community (ALC) that provides memory care services, but many of Florida's rural counties have none.³ The brief identifies rural counties in Florida that have a significantly lower amount of ALCs than other counties, and are therefore underprepared for the growth of the 65+ and 85+ populations in the near future.

STUDY METHOD

Data about the Florida ALCs were collected from the Florida Agency for Healthcare Administration (AHCA).^{*} For our analyses we used the county-level addresses reported to the AHCA for each ALC in the state. Each county was subsequently labeled as urban or rural based on the 2010 U. S. Census. According to the census, a county is considered rural if there are 100 people or less per square mile.⁴ Additional data about the number of older adults within each county was retrieved from the Florida Department of Health.⁵

FINDINGS

Four rural counties in Florida are especially underprepared to meet the needs of their older residents. These counties in particular are projected to have a disproportionately large growth rate in their older adult population compared to the rest of the state.¹ Specifically, within the next 20 years the average population of those 65 and older within these counties is expected to grow to more than 20,500. Baker county is expected to see a disproportionately high growth in its 65+ population, but currently has no ALC with a memory care unit. Gilchrist and Wakulla county are expected to see similar growth in both its 65+ and 85+ populations. Neither of these counties currently have any ALC. Union county is estimated to have comparable growth but in its 85+ population, and there is currently no ALC in Union county.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This brief highlights a potential issue facing rural Florida. There is also a disparity between the ALC services provided in rural versus urban areas regarding memory care services.³ Rural areas that are already under-resourced will have difficulty dealing with these changes. Due to Florida's growing older populations, it serves as the pacesetter for the rest of the country as it pertains to providing proper access to services for older adults. Policy makers might consider tax policies or incentive programs that may increase availability of ALCs with memory care in rural areas.

*Data was collected on February 6, 2020

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