

PRESS RELEASE
Alaska Commission on Aging
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We're #1: Alaska Tops in Senior Population Growth

The number of people age 65 and older grew faster in Alaska than in any other state during the decade between 1997 and 2007. Seniors still make up just eleven percent of Alaska's population, a far lower proportion than in states like Florida or Arizona. But with a growth rate of 49.6 percent in the last ten years, the number of older Alaskans is increasing at a rate more than four times the national average.

For years, Nevada laid claim to the fastest-growing senior population in the U.S. As of this year, it has fallen to second place.

The surprising statistics conjure up images of seniors packing up their households and migrating to the frozen 49th state en masse. Are wagon trains of older Americans in Winnebagos motoring up the Alaska Highway, bearing signs that read, "Last Frontier or Bust"?

Not exactly. In fact, the number of seniors leaving Alaska is roughly equal to the number who move here. Out-migration patterns have not changed substantially in decades. Many Alaskans still retire to warmer, sunnier locations. So what explains the senior population surge?

What we're witnessing is not a change in *current* retiree preferences but rather the maturing of *past* trends in Alaskan population movements.

Thousands of working-age people migrated to Alaska during the 1970s oil pipeline construction and the era of post-pipeline spending growth in the early 1980s. With the continental U.S. experiencing a steep recession during that period, young people, many of them born in the 1940s and 1950s, moved north to fill jobs in the state's rapidly-expanding economy.

The new arrivals put down roots in Alaska; they bought homes, raised families, and enjoyed the state's natural beauty and rugged outdoor lifestyle. Now heading into their retirement years, a large number of them are choosing to stay.

The selective migration of thousands of people in a limited age range during the 1970s and early 1980s created a population spike which has

steadily moved into higher and higher age groups. Like the “pig inside the python,” this concentrated population may even decrease slightly over time, but it remains a large, visible anomaly in the state’s demographic portrait. (To view the population distribution by age group, go to <http://laborstats.alaska.gov/?PAGEID=67&SUBID=115> and click on the graph of “Alaska’s Changing Population” to see the changes unfold over time.)

It’s true that other states’ populations have prominent baby boomer segments as well. But because so many of Alaska’s boomer and slightly-older residents arrived during a narrow band of time, leaving their parents’ generation behind in their states of origin, our state has long had proportionately more residents in the boomer and slightly-older age groups than other states.

In addition to those who moved to Alaska from elsewhere, Alaska Natives – whose numbers had also expanded rapidly during the “baby boom” era – are highly likely to remain in the state during their senior years.

Increases in life expectancy also play a role in the increasing number of seniors. In fact, the fastest-growing age group in Alaska is the 85-and-older group. Individuals in this group are the most likely to be in frail health, disabled, and in need of supportive services.

Finally, the aging parents of some of our 1970s and 1980s migrants do come to Alaska to be cared for by their offspring in their later years. However, there is no indication that this group represents a large proportion of our state’s seniors.

Our fast-growing senior population primarily consists not of newcomers from other states but of our long-time friends and neighbors, those who built up many of modern Alaska’s institutions and our communities’ infrastructures.

While the growing number of seniors means Alaska must increase its capacity to supply the services and supports they will need, the state can expect a net gain in its quality of life thanks to the presence of more older Alaskans. As volunteers in civic enterprises, caregivers within their families, and mentors of cultural and professional achievement, not to mention the estimated \$1.6 billion they contribute annually to the state’s economy, seniors represent an incomparable asset for Alaska.

Other states, and even some cities, invest in advertising campaigns to attract senior residents to their communities. They recognize the tremendous economic and community leadership benefits seniors bring with them. The “retirement industry” is well-known as one of the most positive contributors to any economy. According to the Report on the Economic Well-Being of Alaska Seniors (2007), the retirement pension and health care funds this industry draws in are spent locally (triggering an economic multiplier effect), and senior spending is stable, year-round, environmentally benign, compatible with other industries, and helps produce economies of scale (particularly in health care) which benefit all segments of the population.

Alaska has the immense good fortune to be rapidly gaining seniors with no public investment in advertising at all. Our seniors are part of the latest greatest American retirement boom – without having to pack their bags or abandon their favorite people and places. And Alaska will benefit from their wisdom, perspective, and community contributions.

References:

A Profile of Older Americans: 2008, Administration on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services:
<http://www.mowaa.org/Document.Doc?id=69>

Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development population website:
<http://laborstats.alaska.gov/?PAGEID=67&SUBID=115>

Report on the Economic Well-Being of Alaska Seniors (2007):
<http://www.hss.state.ak.us/acoa/documents/seniorWellbeingReport.pdf>