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# Aging together: Stories of struggle and sacrifice among Detroit's elders



Katie Bailey | MLive.com Members of St. Patrick's Senior Center play bingo in the auditorium of the Midtown Detroit center, Tuesday, May 27, 2014. St. Pat's has been serving area seniors since 1973 and offers a daily meal prepared on site, activities such as dance classes and yoga, health and wellness services and an advocacy center.

2 / 5



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**MLive Detroit, WDET, The Craig Fahle Show, and Model D are partnering over the coming months on a series of stories exploring aging in Detroit, the metro region, and throughout Michigan. You can take part in the Aging Together series by sharing your thoughts on key issues affecting seniors in Metro Detroit and across the state. [Click here](#) to offer your insights into aging issues.**

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DETROIT, MI - Vernice Williams thought she was done raising children 50 years ago.

Harry Anderson's car trouble has him wondering how he'll eat every day.

Thomas Washington misses his wife, dreads trips to the grocery store and is likely to see his pension slashed.

These are some of the stories of struggle and sacrifice among Detroit's seniors, who live in a place where the hardships of growing old can seem that much more difficult, even while the city's neighborhoods and families depend on their oldest members for survival.

Washington pointed, over and over as he spoke about his long life in Detroit, to the living room chair where his wife used to sit every night before she died a few years ago.

The 88-year-old lived in Detroit when things were better.

He was here when the blocks were full of occupied houses, when the buses ran on time, when the street lights were lit, the businesses were flourishing, jobs were abundant and city sights were breathtaking. He was here before crime grew out of control, before anyone ever dreamed of cutting promised pensions or selling prized, city-owned art.

But his favorite years in Detroit, he said while sitting in front of an ancient TV in his east-side home of 40 years, were those he and his wife spent taking care of each other as they grew old.

"My wife," he said, pointing to the chair. "I met her here. We made a home here."

"Detroit was swinging. Everybody was working. Then it started going down, down, down."

He's one of some 83,000 people over 65 in Detroit, one of the city's elders who rely primarily on relationships with caregivers, family members and service organizations with often dwindling resources.

Some languish in poverty and face seemingly impossible odds, but many thrive, and sometimes do so while

carrying whole families on their backs.

"Although there are these tremendous challenges that we see, somehow these older folks kind of find a way to cope, and often become kind of the backbone of their neighborhoods," said Peter Lichtenberg, director of Wayne State University's Institute of Gerontology.

MLive, along with **WDET** and **Model D**, will explore stories of growing old in Metro Detroit and chronicle efforts to help amid shifting populations and extraordinary circumstances in a long-term series kicking off this week.

In Detroit, keeping reasonable access to healthy food, comfortable housing, recreation and health care can be a struggle, and one that seniors often choose to endure to remain in their longtime home.

"They have, in many senses, succeeded against all odds," said Paul Bridgewater, CEO of the Detroit Area Agency on Aging (DAAA). "Many come from the south. Many have a limited education. They've been able to move themselves from an agricultural society to a middle class society. They may have been the last generation to have really been afforded opportunity with limited education and limited skills."

A **2012 DAAA study** found that Detroit-area residents age 60-74 were dying at a rate 48 percent higher than their peers in the rest of the state.

"What we've found in Detroit is seniors are dying faster than their counterparts in the suburban communities" said Bridgewater.



Katie Bailey | MLive.com Boxes packed with Easter meals of ham, peas and potatoes sit waiting for pick-up at the Detroit Meals on Wheels warehouse early Easter Sunday, April 20. About 2,250 Metro Detroit seniors rely on daily deliveries of food from Meals on Wheels. Another 265 are on a waiting list for the government-funded service.

*Katie Bailey | MLive.com*

The discrepancy is attributed largely to poor access to health care and delays in treatment.

About 20 percent of Metro Detroit seniors live in households without cars, according to Bridgewater.

About 2,250 rely on Meals on Wheels for food.

Another 265 are on a waiting list for the government-funded, daily meal delivery service.

"These individuals have to wait until somebody dies, moves to a nursing home or moves in with a relative," said Bridgewater. "So we've got individuals waiting for somebody to leave the program to get on the program."

Harry Anderson, 85, is one of those waiting for a spot.

He used to rely on rides from a cousin who lives with him for trips to suburban grocery stores, until their car broke down.

"It would help a lot," Anderson said in between breaths from his oxygen tank while he sat in the cluttered living room of his west-side Detroit home, with sports highlights blaring from his TV.

"I don't like to complain..."

"Just being able to move around, that's been the hardest for me," he said. "It's hard. You have to wait for one hour or more."

He was referring to long waits at the bus stop.

The region's weak public transportation is a major problem cited by senior service workers across the region.

"Some people, if you have a doctor's appointment in a neighboring city, you can't get there," said Yuliya Gaydayenko of the West Bloomfield-based Jewish Family Service of Metropolitan Detroit.

"A lot of it is medical, health care-related. But even just going out of the house for social purposes or for a meal, or to grocery shop. Or, like a lot of our clients, they want to do their hair once a week. That's their kind of social appointment. It's part of life and that's what they want to maintain and it's getting difficult when you don't have good transit options."

Some help appears to be on the way for seniors.

Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan has expanded the city's fleet of buses from 143 to 200 since taking office at the start of 2014, and is pursuing federal grants for more.

But the city's financial condition has kept him from establishing a senior services department, a move the mayor's office said Duggan hopes to make in the future.

And Gov. Rick Snyder, projecting that one in four Michigan residents will over 60 years old by 2030, at the start of June proposed \$20 million in new funding for senior services in his 2015 budget, including \$5 million to boost Meals on Wheels and \$1 million targeting elder abuse. The Senate and House budgets included similar funding. Lawmakers are expected to finalize a budget this month.

But it would take some very specific forms of help to make life easier for some Detroiters in their not-so-golden years.

Vernice Williams, 77, is one of thousands of Detroit grandparents who have adopted grandchildren.

It goes a step further in her case.

After the grandson she raised was shot and killed 16 years ago and the mother of his children fell into legal trouble three years ago, Williams took in two teenage great-grandsons.



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From left, Vernice Williams, Hattie Wigley and Juanita Davis, talk during a meeting of the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Committee in Detroit, Wednesday, June 4, 2014. The committee aims to support grandparents raising their own grandchildren in the area by connecting them with resources, advocating for their rights and providing support group meetings. The three women pictured are all grandmothers raising their grandchildren, or in Williams' case, her great-grandchildren.

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“I had no idea that I was going to be raising great-grandchildren,” she said. “And then you have to put your life on hold so they can have a place to stay... I don’t have any regrets. I’m glad that God brought them to my life.”

Her two adopted children are now 18 and 19, but she said her job is far from finished.

“I thought I was done 50 years ago,” she said about raising children, calling it both a burden and blessing.

The most difficult part of taking on the surprise responsibility late in life: “Having enough money,” she said, simply.

“You’ve got a responsibility, and the state doesn’t give you a lot of help,” said Williams, who works as a receptionist. “You don’t need much, but you need some... I need dental work, which I can’t afford to have done because I have to think about them. This was the time when I was supposed to be worried about myself.”

Aid specifically targeting seniors caring for children is what’s needed in Detroit, said Juanita Bridgewater, who leads a support group for grandparents raising grandchildren and is the wife of the DAAA CEO Paul Bridgewater.

She said high rates of poverty, addiction and incarceration in Detroit lead to extraordinarily common cases of grandparents stepping in to take responsibility for their children's children.

The committee estimates about 13,000 grandparents are raising grandchildren in the city.

"Some of the grandparents, they would go without their meds to make sure their grandkids get what they need," she said.

"This is a huge need."

Adding to the anxieties retired Detroiters face are seemingly inevitable pension cuts for former municipal workers as the city looks to address \$18 billion in debt in bankruptcy court.

Washington, the east-side widower, is one of some 21,000 city retirees living in fear of soon finding a shrunken pension check in his mail box.

"I worked all my life," he said, sipping on a plastic cup of ice in the dim living room of his Garland Street home, a duplex with a dangerously crumbling porch.

"I didn't sit around waiting for nobody to do nothing for me."

Meanwhile, when venturing out to seek food or health care, he often waits a full hour at the nearest bus stop to board one that isn't full.

"Sometimes longer than that," he said.

He shakes his head in dejection as he talks about it, but still shows glimmers of optimism.

"... We've got a new mayor. Maybe he'll get something going. They say it's going to get better. I'd like to see that."

*MLive photographer Katie Bailey contributed to this report.*

*Follow MLive Detroit reporter Khalil AlHajal on [Twitter @DetroitKhalil](#) or on [Facebook at Detroit Khalil](#). He can be reached at [kalhajal@mlive.com](mailto:kalhajal@mlive.com) or 313-643-0527.*

*What aging issues are you or loved ones dealing with? [Share your input and experiences](#) with the "Aging Together" team and help bring attention to aging-related issues in Detroit, Metro Detroit, and across Michigan.*



*Aging Together is a summer-long project between **MLive Detroit**, **WDET 101.9FM Detroit** and **Model D Media** that explores the issues of older adults in Detroit, Southeast Michigan and the state.*

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