



Aging in a land of youth

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Has the birthplace of the digital revolution turned its back on older adults?

By Matt Perry

As the birthplace of the computer revolution, Silicon Valley vigorously celebrates innovation and youth culture. In the shadow of the digital age, however, older adults in Santa Clara county echo a similar concern: they are second-class citizens when it comes to financial support from government agencies and high-tech foundations.

During the same year that saw the death of Steve Jobs – the computer icon considered one of the greatest inventors of the past century – older adults last year experienced a succession of service cuts by Santa Clara County and the city of San Jose.

Representatives for older adults say that senior programs are cut at a greater percentage than other services.

“They’re highly marginalized, especially in Santa Clara County,” says Steve Schmol, executive director for the Council on Aging Silicon Valley. “Most of the attention is focused on high-tech and younger people.”

In Santa Clara County, the heart of the Silicon Valley, the adult population 60 and over is expected to double in the next decade, creating further strains on social services and budgets.

Last spring, older adults rallied at meetings of the county’s Board of Supervisors and the San Jose City Council, demanding to retain critical services that included adult day health care, transportation to adult community centers, and senior nutrition programs. In a well-orchestrated effort by local nonprofits, seniors first addressed government officials, then pulled out a paper heart and ripped it in half.

“You’re tearing my heart in two,” each would say.

“Incredibly poignant,” recalled Lee Pullen, director of the Santa Clara County’s Department of Aging and Adult Services.

“We’ve lost our promise to our seniors and we are whittling away at it every day.” says Patricia Gardner, executive director of the Silicon Valley Council of Nonprofits. “They’re having to make decisions between medication and food, or heating their apartment and food.”

In 2007, senior organizers created the Aging Services Collaborative, which combined non-profits and government entities “to get us all talking the same talk,” says Schmol, who is also the collaborative’s co-chair.

To some in wealthy Santa Clara County, with 280,000 citizens over 60 – more than any other county in the Bay Area – older adults are often the detritus of society, hidden away and forgotten.

A Silicon Valley historian says that the Bay Area has always fostered a unique environment for youth culture.

Piero Scaruffi, a cultural historian and cognitive scientist who has lived in the Silicon Valley since 1983, links modern high-tech entrepreneurs to California's legacy of pioneers including Gold Rush miners, Beat poets, student radicals, electronic hobbyists, and software hackers.

"Each of these were eccentric individualists who created an alternative leaderless community," says Scaruffi. "It is as close as you can remain to being a teenager. Instead of being scolded by family and school, you get rewarded with money and honors."

Where high-tech continues to flourish, older adult representatives say that local foundations financed by well-heeled technology firms largely ignore older adults.

The Silicon Valley Community Foundation dispenses grants for 40 area companies, including Cisco, Adobe, and eBay.

The foundation granted over \$150 million in 2010, yet virtually none of these funds targeted seniors.

"Seniors are not a priority for that foundation," says Lori Andersen, director of healthy aging for The Health Trust, a collaborative dedicated to making "Silicon Valley the healthiest region in America."

Yet a foundation spokesperson says the organization doesn't always get to decide where its funds will be distributed. Although the foundation acts as a conduit to the Valley community, often the corporations themselves decide where the funds will be spent.

The foundation gave just \$500 in 2010 to three state Meals on Wheels programs – one of the only senior programs to receive direct funding. By contrast, it gave \$160,000 to Media Matters, \$325,000 to the Abortion Access Foundation, and millions to local education programs promoting math and science.

Microsoft's director of citizenship at its Mountain View office says that corporate giving is tied to specific goals that "move the needle and have the most impact," according to Sid Espinosa.

And in Silicon Valley the target areas are typically STEM: science, technology, engineering and math.

Espinosa, who is also the mayor of Palo Alto, says that Microsoft focuses on work force development and training programs.

"Part of that is making sure we remain competitive," he says.

High-tech firms also have their own philanthropic programs. Yet older adults are absent from their core values when it comes to giving.

Google gave more than \$100 million last year to various organizations, with an emphasis on four areas: education for girls, empowerment through technology, STEM, and human trafficking and slavery. Apple, Hewlett-Packard, and other tech giants were also a disappointment for those interested in the condition of older adults in the community.

"I think it's only fair that those companies reinvest a little bit more in seniors," says Schmall.

Even the United Way has slashed funds targeted to seniors.

“Our data shows that corporate giving has dropped 50% or more in the last three years,” says Gardner, who was named “Woman of the Year” for the state’s 24th Assembly district last year.

“There’s going to be corporate apathy toward older adults because corporations operate on shareholder dividends,” says county supervisor Cortese, “They don’t have a heart. They don’t have a heart for what we do.”

Microsoft’s Espinosa disagrees.

“You get so many requests from wonderful and worthy causes,” he says, rattling off a list that includes breast cancer, veterans, food banks, adult literacy, special education, open space, the homeless, and AIDS. “And that list could continue.

“Is there a bias against seniors?” asks Espinosa. “I don’t think so.”

A national expert on aging agrees that some areas of the country focus on youth at the expense of aging, but adds that dwindling support for older adult services has more to do with fiscal reality than discrimination.

Majd Alwan, executive director of Leading Age, headquartered in Washington, D.C., says that foundation support for older adults often comes from faith-based organizations. And donors to these non-profit organizations have been hit hard by tough economic times.

Santa Clara County officials claim they are doing their best to address the needs of its eldest residents.

In November, the Board of Supervisors mandated that all county decisions – building closures, pedestrian walkways, or personnel changes — include an “impact on seniors.”

In June, the county held a Summit on Older Adult Mental Health Needs that was attended by 350 health officials. In mid-December, the county’s Mental Health Department delivered its final summit report to the board, which outlined a series of recommendations, including improved access to mental health services, and better collaboration between mental health providers.

The county has an annual operating budget of \$4 billion, but county board of supervisors president David Cortese says it was forced to make \$750 million in cuts – nearly 20% of its budget.

Representatives for the aging are not hopeful about the future.

“It’s just going to get worse in 2012,” says Andersen, who is also lead staff for the Aging Services Collaborative of Santa Clara County

Representatives for older adults say that because support from both sources has dwindled – government programs and high-tech foundations – the strategy for helping older adults has changed.

“We don’t see that leadership among the elected officials,” says Andersen, “so we’re going to have to build it from the ground up. That takes time.”

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