


GOVERNMENT

# Orange County Unprepared For Looming Senior Population Boom, Experts Warn



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Nearly one in four people will be a senior by 2040, according to the Orange County Health Care Agency. Credit: JULIE LEOPO, Voice of OC

Orange County's senior population will surge as early as the 2040s and will continue to in the following decades while younger age groups stagnate – if not shrink – in comparison, according to local and statewide research.

In other words: OC, along with the rest of Southern California, is in for a senior boom.

The upcoming demographic shift will require serious re-investments and upgrades to public services, transportation, health care, housing and food security, according to experts and regional government reports.

OC Health Care Agency officials have estimated that nearly one in four people will be a senior by 2040.

So, has Orange County adequately prepared?

A government response strategy at the county level is just getting started. County officials in November held their first public outreach meeting as part of the effort to come up with a local plan.

That plan is still in the beginning stages, according to county officials in response to questions this month who also say the state has recognized the county for being proactive on the matter.

But if you ask Jim McAleer, the CEO for Alzheimer's Orange County, "They're late."

"But we're all late," McAleer added. "Everyone's late."

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A coalition of local community leaders, nonprofit foundations, and other stakeholders, led in part by McAleer, banded together under the Orange County Aging Services Collaborative to rally political will on the issue just before the 2010s.

The group rang its alarm bells in its [most recent, 2019 report](#) stating there's "insufficient funding county-wide to support this (senior) population" and that local infrastructure, services, and programs are ill-equipped for the coming crisis.

The group's next report is expected to drop this January.

At the moment, McAleer said there are already a few indicators of Orange County's unpreparedness – starting with the current size and capacity of the health care workforce:

“Right now, if my dad was experiencing serious memory complications, or neurologic complications, Parkinson's, it could take up to two, even three months to get an initial diagnosis with a board-certified neurologist. That's awful.”

He added: “And that's not the fault of any current neurologists. We just don't have enough. And it's not just neurologists, it's geriatricians, dermatologists, geriatric psychiatrists ... ”

Asked the same question on Orange County's preparedness, Isabel Becerra – CEO of the Coalition of Orange County Community Health Centers and Board Director at CalOptima, the county's health plan for the poor – said this:

“My gut reaction is to say, no, we are not prepared.”

She explained, “I often drive around Anaheim, Santa Ana, and Garden Grove for personal reasons, like shepherding kids around town, and the one thing I always see is elderly ladies wandering about, crossing streets, carrying ten shopping bags out of Northgate Market.”

“And they're all alone,” she added. “Why?”

## **The Way Forward**

Becerra spoke to Voice of OC over the phone on Dec. 17, at the time visiting family in Jalisco, Mexico for the holidays. There, she said, she also sees the elderly walking about – “everybody does that here, but stores are two blocks away, they're not crossing busy streets.”

In the crowded, car-dominated metropolitan areas of Orange County, “it’s dangerous” for seniors who can’t drive, Becerra said, adding there will be demand for enhanced, senior-accessible public transit, or things like “grocery drop-off services.”

“You can tell me we’re ready, but out there I see we’re not,” she added. “Especially in low-income, vulnerable communities.”

In 2009, the Orange County Aging Services Collaborative was formed under leaders like McAleer – who’s also a former CalOptima board member – to press county leaders into establishing new policies responding to the future crisis.

The group prepared a local, strategic plan for the issue in 2016, years before a 2019 executive order by Gov. Gavin Newsom calling for a strategic response statewide.

“The short-term strategic plan is broken up into ten initiatives and committees such as but not limited to, food security, social isolation, healthcare, technology, and elder abuse awareness,” said Emily Bennett, the group’s Director of Collaborative Programs.

Every year, the group aims to put out a report on the issues facing the county’s senior population with the help of the “40+ non-profit organizations” and participating cities, Bennett said in a Dec. 28 email.

**The last published report** by this group, from 2019, casts the county’s preparedness in similar terms:

Currently, the county “is not in a position to provide adequate support and care to meet the needs and challenges of an inevitably growing aging population.”

The group hasn’t put out a report since, due to the pandemic, but aims to

publish another one this upcoming January, McAleer said.

“Are we engaging this population on their interests in creating a community that supports them and their families?” McAleer wrote in a letter attached to the report. “Are we planning for more walkable cities, more transportation choices? Does our health care system provide what is needed to keep people healthy and safe?”

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Becerra looks at ways in which regional housing policy reforms can ensure quality living for seniors by the mid-century.

Specifically, “granny units” – also known as accessible dwelling units, meaning an additional, separate room on a given residential property – in areas of the county with multi-generational, family households.

Becerra said the pandemic showed granny flats are particularly necessary in low-income, immigrant communities for not just senior housing – but quarantining and protecting what will be a higher number of immunocompromised residents from diseases and future public health issues.

“Some cities are coming around,” Becerra said, referring to the **recent movement, in places like Tustin and Laguna Beach, to make granny flat permits easier to get.**

The Orange County Aging Services Collaborative’s last report also looked at food insecurity, which can put older people at risk of malnutrition and increase hospitalizations – thus, driving up “institutional costs.”

“In 2016-2017, nearly (one-third of) low-income older adults in Orange County were food insecure, but less than 3% of those older adults are enrolled in CalFresh, a county-operated government entitlement program that provides food benefits to assist low-income households,” the report states.

More recently, the county's senior programs have seen a 30-50% increase in demand compared to pre-pandemic levels, particularly with senior nutrition, said County of Orange spokesperson Molly Nichelson.

It's "primarily attributed" to COVID-19, "but it provides a window into the overall need among the older adult population," Nichelson said.

## **The County's Plan**

In 2019, Gov. Gavin Newsom ordered a statewide master plan on the issue.

The County of Orange is developing its own, in response – an effort that's prompted the collaboration of the county Social Services Agency, Community Resources' Office on Aging, Health Care Agency, and the County Executive Office.

The aim is to create a local aging plan "specific to the needs of Orange County seniors, now and in the future," and will focus on the five goals in the state's master plan, spanning housing, access to health care, equity, caregiving and economic security, Nichelson said in a Dec. 17 emailed response to questions.

The county has initiated its public outreach process on the aging plan, Nichelson said, most recently co-sponsoring a Nov. 5 public information workshop, "Mastering the Master Plan," with McAleer's Orange County Strategic Plan for Aging group.

"Yes, the County is in the early stages of developing its local plan," said Jamie Cargo, a spokesperson for the County of Orange Social Services Agency, who added in a Dec. 28 email that while county officials just held their first outreach event, "we expect efforts to ramp up more in 2022, starting with an assessment of the community's needs."

Cargo notes the county Board of Supervisors recently approved the distribution [of iPads to seniors](#), along with a training program and

subscription for online classes – all of which, Cargo said, supports the statewide aging plan goal of “Inclusion & Equity, Not Isolation.”

“The California Department of Aging has recognized the County of Orange as being proactive in addressing the Master Plan for Aging during the planning stages,” Cargo said.

By 2040, almost one in four people in the county’s total population will be 65 or older, [according to the county Health Care Agency.](#)

California Dept. of Finance [data from 2019](#), reviewed and analyzed by Voice of OC, projects Orange County could see a roughly 55% increase in its population of people ages 60 and above between 2020 and 2060.

From nearly 710,000 people to more than 1 million.

Orange County’s total population is around 3.2 million and is expected to stay that way, roughly, over the same time span.

Meanwhile, the county’s younger population of residents ages 59 and under is not only expected to stagnate from 2020 through 2060 — this age group is actually projected to shrink slightly, from roughly 2.5 million to 2 million.

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The average retirement age in the U.S. is currently 62 years old, [according to statistics compiled by the online financial advising website, Annuity.org.](#) The estimated retirement age for current workers is 64.

Around that time, the broader Southern California population — currently 19 million, including counties like Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Diego — will see a spike in people ages 65 and up, [according to a 2020 report by the Southern California Association of Governments \(SCAG\).](#)

Where that age group expanded from nearly 10% of the population in 2000 to 13% in 2016, it's expected to increase to a little over 20% by 2045, according to the SCAG report.

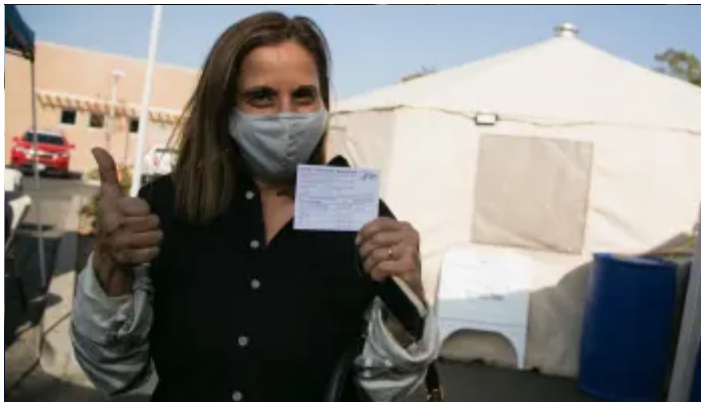
“Given rapid recent increases in income inequality [...] having fewer than half as many working-age adults per senior may disproportionately impact seniors who do not have sufficient retirement savings as this can place additional stress on social services provision,” it adds.

Becerra said “what matters most” is that Orange County’s seniors all have the opportunity to “age gracefully, surrounded by family and the resources for us to live the best quality of life.”

She added: “As I’m thinking about myself, when I’m retired, I would hope I’m not just sitting around doing nothing, but that I have activities, volunteer work – just the option of an active, healthy lifestyle.”

“For all seniors.”

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