

Aging face bleak future

By LORAIN McCLISH

A great many aging adults are isolated, living in inadequate housing, eating inadequate food and have an income of under \$3,000 per year. More than 50 percent of them are in eight states: California, New York, Pennsylvania, Florida, Illinois, Ohio, Texas and Michigan, in that order.

Dr. John Bell, clinical psychologist with a Veterans Administration hospital in California, painted a bleak picture of the aging when he gave these facts to a gathering of professionals in social service and health fields in Oakland County this week. The conference was sponsored by Michigan State University's Graduate Center at Cranbrook.

His talk was sprinkled with suicide statistics, the fact that social security benefits are not keeping up with escalating prices and that the aging is the most neglected minority in public health.

Lack of transportation accounts for part of the aloneness of the elderly and tops the list of major problems, followed by housing and health.

HOUSING FOLLOWS on the heels of transportation as a major problem mainly because those in a low income bracket are spending 40 percent of their entire income just to get a roof over their heads.

"In surveys taken, their first choice overwhelmingly is to live independently in their own home," Bell said, "but income aside (and for a variety of reasons) only 18 percent have achieved this."

One out of five, he said, were living "in grossly inadequate housing."

Health has been pushed down the list to the number three problem since Medicare, but "arthritis and rheumatism are still with us." Lack of hearing is hard to correct and does a lot towards putting the aged into isolation.

All of these problems become further complicated "when you realize

that most persons over 65 years of age have not had the kind of education we have or that we are giving to our kids. Only 32 percent ever finished high school and this manifests itself particularly in communicating."

"The red tape and the complicated procedures we have for getting public aid or subsistence for whatever is needed, and is available, becomes so complex they just drop it," Bell explained.

Bell chooses to use the term "aging adults" when he talks about this group of people. "Aging is a process, not a state," he says, "and the word adult has some prestige, separating all of us from those under 18."

OF ALL terms used (elders, seniors, and such) Bell scores most "golden agers" because "so many aspects of their lives are far from golden."

Bell said, "Some of us view the aging as children and talk to them that way. Some see them as incapable and treat them that way. Some see them as disengaged from life and want to keep them that way. Some see them as rigid, unable to learn, so we won't introduce them to anything new. Some over protect, some over demand. Some fear he's going to die on their hands if they get too near. Some see him as dull."

When he explored fears the aging have, he said "fear of death is not as extreme as we might imagine. The how is much more important than the fact. They are afraid of being alone when they die but they can talk of death in the abstract without emotion."

The aging are fearful of progressive illnesses, illnesses which lead to debilitation and, again, loneliness that this may bring, and "they will bear pain better if they know it will not bring isolation."

What they need most, Bell said, when all of the basics are taken care of, is "the need to love, (not be loved), the need to care (not be cared for) and the need to be useful."



Maggie, age 67, lives on old-age assistance which leaves her, after paying bills, \$20 a month for food

Society bypassing elderly?

By SHELLEY EICHENHORN

The aged in our "super-industrial" society are caught in a time machine racing faster and faster into the future.

"As the rate of change speeds up, more and more older people feel the difference keenly," said Alvin Toffler in his book, "Future Shock." "They too, become dropouts."

The problem of keeping up in a society that is racing by is the dilemma of the elderly in the United States as well as other industrialized societies. The traditional roles of teacher and sage that once marked "the years of wisdom" have been robbed from the aged.

Another price of life in an industrial world is the demand for mobile workers ready to move off the land in pursuit of jobs. This contributed to the breakup of the extended family including grandparents, aunts and uncles.

THE NUCLEAR family emerged.

Today, only 20 percent of the aged in the United States are living with their children, according to Professor Boaz Kahana, chairman of the Oakland University psychology department and lifespan developmental psychologist.

More and more, however, older people are living with their adult children as they are needed to help with child care once mothers return to work," he said.

"We're conditioned to think the aged can't contribute to society because of the emphasis on youth, health and competition in our culture," Kahana said.

"But, the elderly can be an active part of society."

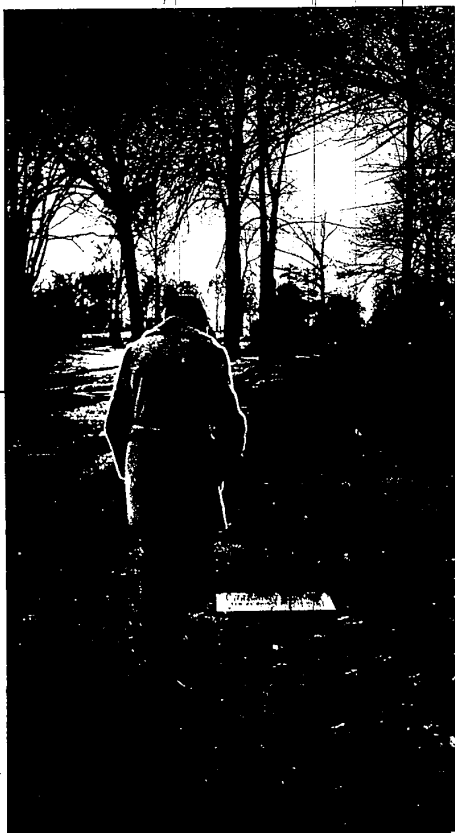
KAHANA THINKS we must find solutions to these problems as the lifespan increases for all.

Although most experts agree that the aged are better off in nonindustrial societies because they do have a role and status. "The grass isn't always greener. Life is not all peaches and cream for them," Kahana said.

Often status is in name only. "When you look at how he's actually treated, the elder doesn't have all the power in reality sometimes," Kahana explained.

ALSO IN nonindustrial cultures, the aged are a smaller percentage of the populace.

"In Thailand, the average life expectancy is 54. In the United States, it's 67 and in Norway, 71. Thus, nonindustrial societies can afford to give in to a smaller elderly population."



Loneliness at its worst



Loneliness is forgotten during a walk with a younger friend