

Seniors fear costs, reprisals

By CAROL MAHONEY

"While Maggie Kuhn works diligently on the national level for the rights of the elderly, local people are devoting time and attention to the needs of Birmingham area seniors.

Pat Watt, a former member of the Birmingham City Commission, said she has had a long standing interest in the problems of the aged. Through her work on the commission and as an elder of the First Presbyterian Church, she said, "I became acquainted with senior citizens and became aware of the problems they were having."

Mrs. Watt said that one difficulty for the elderly is their inability to keep up with ever-increasing utility bills, particularly heat. Mrs. Watt said that some people were taken by surprise last winter when the government did not pay the same portion towards their bills as she had the previous year.

She said she knows of three women, all over 70, who had to pay on last winter's fuel bills through the summer months. "These women haven't been able to catch up with last winter, let alone pay aside for next," she said.

TRANSPORTATION is another problem. "Some of these people never drove cars," said Mrs. Watt. "In the case of those who did drive, their eyesight is too poor to drive now or they can't afford to buy a car."

Another inconvenience for retirees is the lack of a food stamp center located in Birmingham. "The closest ones," said Mrs. Watt, "are in Berkeley and Troy." Since many of them depend on food stamps to supplement a limited budget, this poses a transportation problem. "They have no way to get there," said Mrs. Watt. "It's embarrassing to have to ask someone get the stamps for them."

Housing continues to be a big concern for the elderly whether it involves maintaining their own home or finding a suitable place to rent which is within their means.

"One lady in her 70s has been looking for a first floor rental unit with no stairs," said Mrs. Watt. "She lives on an upper floor now."

RENT INCREASES are another factor. There were a rash of them this spring and summer according to Mrs. Watt, who said that at least seven people have told her about the problem. "One increase was a jump of \$15 per month," she said. "The lowest was \$50."

She said that the increases seem to be the result of landlords refusing to give leases. "People don't know from one month to the next if there is going to be a rent increase. They live in constant fear and insecurity."

a building where the heating is done by one furnace.

"It is turned on in the morning and heats up like a bake oven with the temperature reaching into the 80s, but then in the evening it is turned off."

Rental increases and other inconveniences are accepted without complaint because, as Mrs. Watt said, "Some people just don't want to say anything because they know there are so many people waiting for rentals."

In general Mrs. Watt said that when discussing housing for the elderly, you are really talking about two kinds of people. There are those who envision a time when they will no longer be able to care for their homes, and those who have already reached that point.

Another difficulty is psychological, Mrs. Watt explained. "The senior citizens we are dealing with today are from a different generation. Some are shy about speaking up for their rights and don't like publicity. They have been good citizens and have a justifiable pride. They don't want to be involved with anything controversial or upsetting. As a result their needs are not tabulated."

Mrs. Watt added, "I believe there are people in Birmingham living in quiet desperation. My concern is what to do about it."

A newly formed group which will address itself to the needs of the elderly is the Birmingham Area Seniors Council.

BOB MASSEY, a Birmingham resident who is co-president of the council said, "We are just getting off the ground." With a nucleus of 20 to 25 people the council has elected officers and plans to develop services.

Massey said the goals of the council are to promote the provision of needed services for Birmingham area senior citizens and to develop a community network between existing groups and agencies in their interest. He also said that the council has enlisted the membership of church groups in the area.

The group hopes to make known to seniors services that are already available to them. In addition, Massey said, the council will encourage the development of systems to meet the needs of the elderly and make it possible for them to remain in their homes as an alternative to institutional care.

Presently the council meets on the last Wednesday of the month at the Birmingham Center for Continuing Education. Massey said that the group hopes to establish a headquarters and obtain someone to staff it on a full-time basis.

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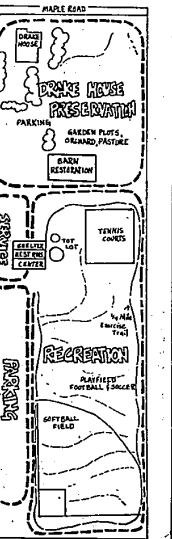
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