

University of Louisville Center on Aging

The population of Americans age 65 and older is projected to double to 72 million — nearly 20 percent of the total U.S. population — by 2030. Just last year, the oldest “baby boomers” (those born between 1946 and 1964) turned 65. The aging of this large generation will bring important challenges to the systems and institutions that support and enhance the lives of older adults. This offers unprecedented opportunities to proactively impact seniors’ health, understand their health risks and behaviors, and more effectively manage the cost and use of health care services.

Nowhere is this effort more critical than in Kentucky. Compared to their counterparts in other states, Kentucky seniors rank at or near the bottom in measures of overall health (50th in the U.S.), mental health (50th), oral health (45th), amount of exercise (50th), and healthy eating (41st). In addition, older Kentuckians have among the highest rates of tobacco use (49th) and lowest rates of preventive care such as vaccines and cancer screenings (43rd for women, 35th for men).

These startling statistics highlight an urgent need for a comprehensive initiative dedicated to the needs of Kentucky’s older adults. It is with this in mind that the University of Louisville proposes to launch the Center on Aging, a new initiative that will transform geriatrics research, education, and care in Kentucky.

Establishing the University of Louisville Center on Aging

In July 2012, Dr. James O’Brien, chair of the Department of Family and Geriatric Medicine at the University of Louisville School of Medicine, contacted his colleagues across the university to compile an inventory of aging-related programs. A resounding response from interested faculty members — from fields as diverse as medicine, dentistry, social work, nursing, education, psychology, and public health — underscored the need for a common vision for promoting lifelong wellness and productive aging.

By facilitating interdisciplinary connections, the Center will leverage faculty expertise to promote the health and well-being of older adults and their families through research, education, clinical care, and community programs.

Building an evidence base for new interventions

The Center on Aging will convene faculty experts from across the university who are engaged in biological and social sciences research in geriatrics and gerontology. The University of Louisville is already a leader in research related to polypharmacy, the simultaneous use of five or more prescription drugs. Adverse drug reactions — the sixth leading cause of death in the United States — are a common problem in older adult patients who use multiple prescription drugs. Adverse drug reactions due to polypharmacy are a particularly significant issue in Kentucky, which is third-highest among all states in prescription drug use.

In addition to continued research in polypharmacy, Center on Aging investigators will focus on three areas:

- Clinical research: Patient-focused studies of mobility, dementia, delirium, stroke, vision, age-related cancers, heart failure, and end-of-life care, among others.
- Basic biomedical research: Studies of the molecular underpinnings of aging and aging-related diseases such as atherosclerosis, osteoporosis, diabetes, and degenerative nervous system diseases.
- Social and behavioral research: Studies on health services delivery, economics of aging, long-term care, elder abuse, pain management, spirituality, palliative care, and caregiver stress.

Results of the Center's research will help shape policies affecting older adults that will guide lawmakers and the healthcare industry. With Louisville an international leader in aging care and wellness — home to more than 18,000 industry professionals and the nation's largest collection of corporate headquarters in nursing home, rehabilitation, assisted living, and home health administration — the Center is uniquely positioned to rapidly translate research results into improved interventions for older adults. Strategic partnerships with local industry leaders and entrepreneurs, and continued work with the Center for Long Term Care Innovation, will focus Louisville's significant aging-care research expertise on the issues most critical to older adults.

To facilitate data exchange and analysis of aging-related research, the Center will establish a:

- Seminar series: Weekly lectures from Center faculty from across the university.
- Lecture series: Annual event featuring a presentation from a world-renown aging expert.
- Pilot grant program: Seed funding to initiate interdisciplinary research collaborations.

Filling a critical gap in geriatric health care

Although the number of Americans age 65 and older is projected to skyrocket by 2030, experts do not expect a concurrent increase in the number of geriatricians available to treat this large population. Indeed, at the field's current rate of growth, the U.S. will have only 8,000 geriatricians — or one for every 9,000 older adults — by 2030.

The University of Louisville has the only geriatrics training program in Kentucky, graduating 30 new geriatricians since 1999. The Center on Aging will have a significant impact on training new physicians and healthcare professionals to provide the next generation of leadership in geriatrics. It will establish scholarships for students interested in geriatrics and gerontology. It will also offer fellowships for graduates of medical school and other professional schools who plan to pursue advanced training in geriatrics or gerontology.

The burgeoning aging population is increasing the demand for well-trained and competent healthcare workers to respond to the needs of older adults and their families. For example, geriatric social work is one of the nation's fastest growing occupations, with high demand for specialists and the promise of job security. The University of Louisville's Kent School of Social Work offers a master's degree in social work with a specialization in gerontology. Students

learn about the unique challenges of social work practice with older persons and complete 16 hours per week of field education in geriatric settings. The Schools of Nursing, Dentistry, and Public Health will also be closely involved in training professionals committed to careers in aging.

To promote interactions between geriatricians, gerontologists, and others who are working to meet the needs of older adults, the Center will sponsor interdisciplinary training programs for health professionals, weekly grand rounds, clinical medicine conferences, and clinical experiences for interdisciplinary audiences. It will also develop specialized continuing education opportunities for medical, health, and social service providers.

Providing state-of-the-art clinical care

The Department of Family and Geriatric Medicine has provided patient-centered care since 1972. The department is one of only nine in the United States, positioning the University of Louisville at the forefront of the effort to preserve and enhance the quality of life of our country's older adults.

The Geriatric Medicine Program is staffed by geriatricians, nurse practitioners, and social workers. They provide care to patients in the hospital and in clinic, nursing home, and home visitation settings. This team of geriatrics professionals works together to address the unique healthcare needs of older adults, including:

- Managing multiple chronic conditions.
- Recommending preventive screenings and vaccinations.
- Promoting behaviors that minimize accidental injuries, such as preventing falls.
- Addressing problems stemming from polypharmacy.

Patients are first assessed through the Geriatric Evaluation and Treatment (GET) program. They receive a medical evaluation by a geriatrician, a cognitive evaluation by a psychologist, a review of their medications by a doctor of pharmacy, and an evaluation of their caregiving and support needs by a social worker. The multidisciplinary team then develops a personalized treatment plan tailored to each patient. Launched in 1984, the GET program has become the national standard of care for geriatrics patients. Its success recently necessitated relocation to larger clinical space, a move made possible by generous philanthropic support.

In addition to clinical programs housed in the Department of Family and Geriatric Medicine, the Center on Aging offers an unparalleled opportunity to bring together physicians and providers from other departments who provide clinical care to seniors. Now patients will enjoy a coordinated, streamlined referral process to access specialists who treat conditions commonly experienced by older adults, such as cardiovascular disease, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, cancer, stroke, glaucoma, macular degeneration, and diabetes.

Connecting with caregivers and the community

An estimated 62 million people in the United States are providing unpaid care for a chronically ill, disabled, or aged family member or friend. While most call the experience “very rewarding,” the majority of caregivers have had no formal training and lack a strong support network for sharing best practices, learning about new approaches to care, and coping with stress.

The Center on Aging will serve as a central resource for educating Louisville caregivers tending to older adults. Specifically, the Center will:

- Offer regular educational opportunities open to caregivers and other healthcare providers.
- Publish a quarterly electronic newsletter for caregivers and others who are committed to the health and well-being of older adults.
- Maintain a user-friendly website with timely information and a schedule of upcoming educational events.
- Collaborate with agencies in Louisville who provide care to the older population.

In addition, the Center will develop training programs in aging-related topics for Kentucky businesses, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations. Topics may include workforce development and leadership for older employees, mental health and aging, overview of Medicare and Medicaid benefits, and access to long-term care.

Finally, the Center will advocate at the local and state levels for expanded infrastructure to meet the needs of the ever-growing population of older adults. For example, the Center will work with state officials to establish Kentucky’s first PACE (Program for All-inclusive Care for the Elderly) program. Under the supervision of an interdisciplinary healthcare team, PACE coordinates all preventive, primary, acute, and long-term care services for eligible enrollees. This all-inclusive service enables most enrollees to receive care at home rather than in a nursing home, allowing them greater independence.

The Center will seek to acquire space (approximately 5,000 square feet) in the Nucleus Innovation Park in downtown Louisville, where several companies engaged in aging-related activities already reside. The Nucleus building is near the university’s Health Sciences Center campus, allowing easy access to research facilities, educational offerings, and clinical providers for faculty, staff, and visitors.

Developing a broad base of leadership

The Center on Aging’s mission and goals will be met through diverse programs under the overall supervision of the director. Dr. O’Brien will serve as initial director. He has worked in geriatric medicine for more than 30 years and is internationally known for his work on elder abuse and neglect. He has been named a “Best Doctor in Louisville” by *Louisville Magazine* and received ElderServe’s Champion for the Aging award. In 2011, Dr. O’Brien was inducted as a Fellow in the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland.

The director, associate directors (to be named), executive vice president for health affairs, executive vice president for research, and deans of the Schools of Medicine, Dentistry, Nursing, Public Health, and Social Work will serve as the Executive Committee, providing leadership and oversight for all aspects of the Center's programs. Other groups that will have a role in guiding the Center include:

- Steering Committee composed of all members of the Executive Committee, additional faculty members appointed by the director and sponsoring deans, and program directors who assist with guiding the development, ongoing evaluation, and administration of the Center's programs.
- Advisory Board with representatives from community-based organizations that serve older adults and civic leaders who are passionate about issues related to aging.

How you can help us achieve our vision for the Center on Aging

The Center on Aging will be Kentucky's premier institute committed to improving the health and well-being of older adults. It will address the opportunities and challenges of aging by initiating, building, and sustaining collaborations with state agencies, the aging care industry, senior citizens' interest groups, policymakers, and other universities. The Center will lead efforts at the local, state, and national levels to improve the aging experience through research, education, specialized clinical care, and community programs.