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## Serving the aging

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With about 10,000 baby boomers turning 65 every day in this country, no state should want to be rated below average in the services it provides to this ever-growing group.

Unfortunately, that's exactly the rating given the Beehive State by AARP in its first state-by-state evaluation of long-term services for older adults and those with disabilities.

In affordability and accessibility of health care for this group, the AARP study ranked Utah 36th in the nation overall. Of particular concern is Utah's abysmal rate of signing up people who qualify for Medicaid benefits. On that criterion, Utah is among the worst in the nation, doing little to educate Utahns about the federal-state program that provides health care for low-income Americans.

Nonprofit organizations are trying to fill that void with their own outreach program. Utahns would be well-served by a central office that can help aging and disabled Utahns find the services and access the benefits that are available, as AARP and the Utah Health Policy Project propose.

Even states with the best rankings have much room for improvement in the areas covered by the report: home care, assisted living options, nursing home care and aid to caregivers. Given Utah's low overall ranking compared with all others, it seems clear the Beehive State should assess its weaknesses and do what it can, even in these lean economic times, to shore up these vital services.

There are bright spots: Utah sits atop all the states in affordability of private-pay nursing home care; its rate of sending those on home-health service or in nursing homes to hospitals is low. And the state tends to keep Utahns with relatively minor health issues out of nursing homes. That is a good basis for overall reform.

Although on average Utah's population is now the youngest in the country, the group of older Utahns is significant and growing fast. The Utah Aging Initiative, a report by the Utah Department of Human Services and the University of Utah, compiled these facts:

- Utah has the sixth-fastest growth rate in the nation for people age 65 and older.
- The 65-and-older population will grow by 51 percent from 2010 to 2020.
- The population 75 and older will increase 60 percent between 2020 and 2030.
- In Utah, one person will turn 65 years old every 23 minutes in 2015.

Clearly, the unique needs of this group will grow even more pressing. Utah should be ready to handle them.

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