DOI:10.32481/djph.2026.07.04

The Infrastructure of Aging Well:

How Delaware Is Preparing for Its Future

Christen Linke Young, JD; Dava Newnam; and Shekeila Hines, PT, DPT

1. Cabinet Secretary, Delaware Department of Health and Social Services

2. Delaware Department of Health and Social Services

3. Delaware Department of Health and Social Services

In the winter of 2025, Mr. Stewart*, a 78-year-old gentleman in Wilmington, Delaware, reached out to the Department of Health and Social Services – where we serve as leaders – in a moment of crisis. His electricity had been turned off, he was facing eviction in a home deemed uninhabitable, and his health was rapidly deteriorating. He hadn't filled some of his prescriptions, was forgetting to take others, had missed follow-up medical appointments, and didn't always have enough food.

While Mr. Stewart's needs were particularly acute that day, his story is one that is familiar to all of us: too many Delawareans do not have the support they need to age with dignity.

As Delaware's demographics change, we know we will continue to experience rapid growth in the number of older adults who need this support. Delaware is one of the fastest-aging states in the nation. Today, nearly one in four Delawareans is age 60 or older, and by 2040, older adults are expected to make up approximately one-third of our population.[1] At the same time, continued migration into rural Kent and Sussex counties without the benefit of natural support systems is increasing demand on health care systems, long-term care services, transportation, housing, and community-based supports.

As we confront those demographic changes, we are keenly aware we need more infrastructure to meet the needs ahead. But – as Mr. Stewart's story shows – infrastructure for an aging population means something broader than buildings and budgets. It means access to physicians, behavioral health clinicians, pharmacists, nurses, and specialists. The infrastructure includes family caregivers, home care workers, and respite services that sustain Delawareans' ability to age gracefully at home. Meals delivered to a door and the services to have a ramp installed at a threshold are additional components of a community ready to support aging. Meeting the moment Delaware faces requires us to build all of it — and to build it now.

Indeed, at the Department of Health and Social Services, we are working urgently across every program and partnership to build the structures we need to ensure we can support our neighbors in the years ahead.

Growing the Health Care Workforce We Need

One of the most pressing infrastructure needs facing Delaware is health care workforce capacity.

Older adults often require more frequent and complex care which increases pressure on hospitals, primary care providers, long-term care facilities, rehabilitation providers, and direct care workers. At the same time, Delaware, like much of the nation, is experiencing workforce shortages across

DOI:10.32481/djph.2026.07.04

health care disciplines. State workforce analyses have identified ongoing shortages in nursing, primary care, behavioral health, and direct support professions, particularly in Kent and Sussex counties.[2] Recruitment and retention challenges continue to impact providers, while many experienced health care professionals are approaching retirement age.

That is why we are incredibly proud to be partnering with stakeholders across the region to launch Delaware's first four-year medical school.[3] The new school will be accepting students for the fall of 2028. Students in the early cohorts who commit to practicing after graduation in Kent or Sussex counties can receive full scholarships to attend tuition free. Delaware has been working towards this goal for decades, and through Governor Matt Meyer's leadership this administration is delivering a critical new tool to support our increasing demand for physicians.

At the same time, health care workforce infrastructure goes far beyond physicians. We are also making major investments in training programs for other kinds of health care workers – nurses, behavioral health professionals, physician associates, and more. Strengthening this workforce is essential not only to expand access, but to support a broader shift toward delivering care where people are. In rural communities, it also presents an opportunity to build a more sustainable, homegrown workforce to train and support individuals from the communities they serve to provide care locally.

Supporting Care in Communities and Homes

Delaware also needs infrastructure to support rapidly rising needs for home and community-based services (HCBS), a central strategy for meeting the needs of an aging population.

Many Delawareans want to age in their homes and communities for as long as safely possible. Research makes clear that access to HCBS not only aligns with personal preferences, but consistently leads to better outcomes while reducing reliance on more costly institutional care.[4]

Delaware has a long history at the cutting edge of HCBS investment. For instance, adult home care services are not mandatory in Medicaid, but Delaware has been a long and strong believer in investing in this space. For Medicaid beneficiaries, we offer access to a wide variety of needed and medically-necessary home and community-based services: home care, respite, meals, and home modifications, among other core services. And unlike the majority of states, Delaware does not require a formal waitlist.[5] Moreover, thanks to a General Assembly committed to the well-being and personal choice of Delaware seniors, we are able to offer uniquely robust state-funded benefits for people not enrolled in Medicaid, allowing a broader group of older adults to access this care than almost anywhere else in the country.

As the population ages, demand for these services continues to grow rapidly. We are investing in growing the workforce of HCBS service providers. Just as important, we are catalyzing innovation in service delivery, using remote monitoring and telehealth tools to complement in-home support, and driving creative care delivery models that will build capacity in the years ahead.

Meeting Family Caregiver Needs

A third critical piece of infrastructure to support older Delawareans is robust support for family caregivers.

DOI:10.32481/djph.2026.07.04

Family caregivers – spouses, children, and other loved ones – provide dedicated care for thousands of our neighbors. Statewide, 200,000 Delawareans are family caregivers for parents or other loved ones and they provide the equivalent of nearly $2 billion in unpaid care services.[6] Yet caregivers often feel alone in the tireless work they do, without adequate resources to meet the demands they face.

We as a state must do more to support family members in this work. That's why, in late 2025, Delaware launched DelaCARES, a statewide caregiver support platform developed through collaboration between the Division of Developmental Disabilities Services (DDDS) and the Division of Services for Aging and Adults with Physical Disabilities (DSAAPD). The platform provides free online education, resources, and support tools for caregivers caring for loved ones at home. Sometimes all it takes is knowing where to turn for trusted guidance and verified resources to ease the mental burden when coordinating appointments, managing medications, balancing a household, and carrying the emotional responsibility of caring for someone.

Designing systems that support caregivers is one of the most effective ways to expand care capacity without expanding institutional settings.

Addressing Needs Beyond Health Care

We also know that infrastructure to support an aging population extends far beyond what we have traditionally understood as the role of the health care system – and it's critical we build capacity to address non-medical drivers of health like housing, food, and transportation.

Safe, accessible, and affordable housing plays a critical role in healthy aging. Communities must increasingly consider how housing design, accessibility modifications, and supportive living environments affect health, independence, and long-term care needs. Much of Delaware's existing housing stock was not designed with aging in mind. Many homes lack basic accessibility features (such as no-step entrances, widened doorways, grab bars, and accessible bathroom layouts) that allow individuals to safely remain in their homes as their mobility needs change. Services like our agency's Home Modifications Program have demonstrated how relatively small investments such as ramps, grab bars, and bathroom modifications can prevent injuries, reduce hospitalizations, and allow individuals to remain safely in their homes and communities as they age in place.

At the same time, for too many of our neighbors, simply having a stable place to sleep can be a challenge. To meet the needs of our population as it grows and ages, Delaware must continue to invest in housing supply, and comprehensive homelessness prevention and support should continue to consider the needs of older adults.

Transportation infrastructure shapes access to care, particularly in rural communities where distance and provider shortages can create significant barriers. Ensuring reliable, flexible transportation options is essential to connecting individuals with health care services and community supports, and creating efficient ways to meet transportation needs is critical. These solutions may include volunteer driver programs, demand-response transit, and ride-sharing partnerships that help older adults access transportation without requiring smartphone technology. Another component of the transportation solution is finding opportunities to bring care right to Delawareans' homes and communities using mobile health, and we are also piloting new technologies in our rural communities to support Delawareans' needs.

DOI:10.32481/djph.2026.07.04

Food and nutrition programs are also essential. Nutrition insecurity among older adults is closely tied to poorer health outcomes, increased hospitalization risk, and social isolation.[7] Investments in meal delivery and community nutrition programs are investments in preventive health care. The Department of Health and Social Services supports older adults through a variety of nutrition programs, including meals served in congregate settings and home delivered meals. Not only do these meals nourish the body, they reduce social isolation through social connections, and provide culturally familiar meals that offer comfort, dignity, and a sense of belonging.[8] As Delaware advances Lieutenant Governor Kyle Evans Gay's Food Is Medicine Initiative, we are elevating the role of nutrition as a key component of health, recognizing that food is not only nourishment, but an important tool for promoting health, and preventing disease.[9]

Moving Forward

All of these pieces — physicians and health care workers, HCBS innovation, caregiver support, and attention to social drivers of health — constitute the infrastructure Delaware needs. We are not just planning for the future; we are delivering these services today.

The policies described here are not abstractions. Indeed, we are happy to report that Mr. Stewart who contacted us last winter is thriving today. As temperatures dropped in his unheated home, the Department of Health and Social Services helped him transition from crisis to stability, starting with emergency shelter and temporary housing, while longer term solutions were explored. Along the way he caught up on important medical appointments, reestablished a routine with his medications and worked closely with state staff to navigate housing and benefit programs. By spring, he had been approved for Long-Term Care Medicaid services and secured a home at a senior living community that offered independence while receiving the in-home supports he needs. Today, he is safely housed, receiving comprehensive care management, and most importantly, connected to a vibrant community that gives him joy and dignity.

That is the future we are building for every Delawarean.

*Name has been changed to protect the individual's privacy.

Secretary Linke Young may be contacted at timothy.mastro@delaware.gov.

References

1. Delaware Division of Services for Aging and Adults with Physical Disabilities. (n.d.). State Plan on Aging 2024–2028. Delaware Department of Health and Social Services. Available at: https://dhss.delaware.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/dsaapd/pdf/state_plan_on_aging_20_24.pdf

2. Delaware Department of Health and Social Services. (n.d.). Health Workforce Subcommittee Report. Available at: https://dhss.delaware.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2025/04/healthworkforce.pdf. See also: Delaware Health Workforce Data Center. Available at: http://dehealthforce.org/

3. Delaware Department of Health and Social Services. (2026, Jun 2). State and Thomas Jefferson University Partner to Establish Delaware's First Medical School. Available at: https://news.delaware.gov/2026/06/02/state-and-thomas-jefferson-university-partner-to-establish-delawares-first-medical-school/

DOI:10.32481/djph.2026.07.04

4. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. (n.d.). Home & Community Based Services. Available at: https://www.medicaid.gov/medicaid/home-community-based-services/index.html

5. KFF. (n.d.). Number of People Waiting for HCBS by Target Population and Whether States Screen for Eligibility. Available at: https://www.kff.org/medicaid/state-indicator/number-of-people-waiting-for-hcbs-by-target-population-and-whether-states-screen-for-eligibility/

6. AARP. (n.d.). Caregiving in the U.S. 2025: Caring Across States. Available at: https://www.aarp.org/pri/topics/ltss/family-caregiving/caregiving-in-the-us-2025-caring-across-states/

7. Administration for Community Living. 2024 Profile of Older Americans. Available at: https://acl.gov/aging-and-disability-in-america/data-and-research/profile-older-americans

8. Administration for Community Living (ACL). (n.d.). Nutrition Services Program. Available at: https://acl.gov/programs/health-wellness/nutrition-services

9. Office of the Lieutenant Governor. Delaware Food is Medicine Committee. Available at: https://ltgov.delaware.gov/delaware-food-is-medicine-committee/