

Neighbors called key to seniors' health

By **STEPHEN BEALE**
Union Leader Correspondent

BEDFORD — A symposium of senior service organizations from the Manchester area yesterday called attention to the importance of strong, supportive neighborhoods for the health and happiness of older residents.

"Am I making the best impact on my patient in that exam room by prescribing medication or am I making more of an impact by trying to do something to improve the community, to improve the social capital of the neighborhood, to improve the walkability of the neighborhood?" asked Dr. Ethan M. Burke, an assistant professor at Dartmouth Medical School and one of the guest speakers at the symposium.

Burke said that in more walk-able neighborhoods, older men are five times more physically active than those who live in communities where they have to go to a gym. Older women were nearly two times more likely to be active. Those are significant numbers, from

a medical perspective, according to Burke.

"We rarely see pills that provide the same benefit," he said.

Walking in neighborhoods also boosts mental health, he added. Again, older men who walk a lot in their neighborhoods are 70 percent less likely to be depressed, according to Burke.

The symposium, held at the Southeastern Regional Education Service Center, was attended by representatives of the numerous nonprofit and public agencies that participate in Seniors Count, a Manchester community initiative established in 2001 to improve the lives of seniors, especially those who want to continue to live on their own.

In the past year, Seniors Count has trained volunteers to help seniors, held seminars for local physicians on aging, and convened a conference on livable communities for city planners, architects, developers, and real estate professionals, according to Arlene Kershaw, the director of senior services for Easter Seals New

Hampshire.

She told the New Hampshire Union Leader that the symposium highlighted the importance of tightly knit neighborhoods for seniors who want to remain in their homes.

Kershaw, along with other symposium speakers, said neighbors are some of the most important people in the lives of seniors. They are the people who shovel driveways, give rides to appointments, or offer their time as walking companions. "We're really exploring how to recreate that old sense of neighbor helping neighbor," Kershaw said.

This year, she said Seniors Count will be focusing on The Hollow — an area on the east side once known as Hallsville — as a test case for its neighborhood-building efforts.

Seniors Count, which was spearheaded by Easter Seals New Hampshire, is funded, in part, through a four-year \$750,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, through its Community Partnerships for Older Adults initiative.

Several New Hampshire political leaders paid tribute to the group's success yesterday, including Gov. John Lynch and Manchester Mayor Frank Guinta. Lynch said he wanted New Hampshire to be a state where seniors come and live. He also touted the importance of the Internet as a way of "bringing the world" to isolated seniors.

Guinta praised Seniors Count as an example of New Hampshire's commitment to small government and volunteerism.

"We do it very effectively through volunteerism," Guinta said. "I think it speaks to the heart and soul of the system we have in place and it's really what Seniors Count was created for."

The symposium also presented several awards. Skip Ashooh of Devine Strategies and Barry Brensinger of Laval-lee Brensinger Architects were honored with the Outstanding Service by a Community Member award. Gloria Driggers of Public Service of New Hampshire received the It Takes a Neighborhood award.