

You know you're old when AARP calls

Chuck Malloy/For the Lewiston Tribune

To paraphrase comedian Jeff Foxworthy, you know you're getting old when

In my case, it was when I turned 50 and received my AARP card. It helped cap a wonderful day of black balloons, mock funerals and endless "over the hill" jokes. Welcome to senior citizenship.

But I've had more age reminders since then.

At 62, I became eligible to collect Social Security, which allowed me to work part-time and afford the lifestyles of the rich and semi-retired.

In July, I'll take my next step into geezerhood when I turn 65 and become eligible for (gulp) Medicare. As my 17-year-old Swedish exchange "daughter" tells me, "you'll be really old, daddy." She's being generous. I'm old enough to be her grandfather.

There's much more to come, I know. Someday, I'll have to look at options for long-term care. I'll have to make myself more aware of con artists who prey on senior citizens, or maybe I'll have to brush up on my driving skills. I might need help in filling out my tax returns.

But I'll have a friend that could help me with all these things - AARP Idaho. It's the same friend that is available to more than 178,000 Idahoans, a list that keeps growing with the aging Baby Boom generation.

Politically, AARP Idaho stands up for seniors on some local, state and national issues, especially when it comes to preserving programs such as Social Security and Medicare. It will take positions on other issues, such as support for the Affordable Health Care Act (aka Obamacare). But AARP Idaho is nonpartisan and doesn't pretend to be everyone's political voice.

"Our membership consists of a rainbow that cuts across the political spectrum - independents, Republicans, Democrats, libertarians, liberals and conservatives," said Mark Estess, who has been the Idaho director for three years. AARP Idaho supported the creation of a state-based insurance exchange, which enrolled 86,000 Idahoans in two years, but not for political reasons.

"We don't focus on the politics; we focus on the people," said Estess, who was appointed by the governor's office to serve on the state board that organized and implemented "Your Health Idaho." He added that the exchange has been successful in helping meet the needs on the local level.

AARP's top legislative goal is family caregiving, working with various organizations to provide education, training and resource to support uncompensated caregivers. The Legislature created a task force to make recommendations about policies, education and funding.

"We're excited to be working on this, because it makes such a difference in people's lives," said advocacy director Lee Flynn, a veteran Statehouse lobbyist who has been with AARP for three years. "Even after the task force's work, caregiving will continue being a priority for AARP Idaho."

Most of AARP's work does not hinge on actions in Congress or the Legislature. For example:

- Last year, about 300 AARP volunteers statewide filed more than 30,000 tax returns for people, many of whom could not afford paying for a tax service. Not all returns came from the 50-and-over crowd.
- Volunteers who know the ins and outs of Social Security and Medicare are available for free counseling.
- AARP, through the Senior Health Insurance Benefits Advisors, has published a price guide for long-term care services in Idaho. "For people looking for this kind of information, it's a valuable resource," said Flynn.
- Retired police officers are among the volunteers helping seniors brush up on their driving skills. AARP also counsels older adults about fraud alerts and gives tips on avoiding scams.

"We have up to 10 different scam-jams in communities across the state every year, and we have up to 200 people attending," Estess said.

Involvement with AARP Idaho also lends an opportunity of access to Idaho's congressional delegation. Sen. Mike Crapo participated in a recent telephone "town hall" from Washington, D.C., and Rep. Mike Simpson recently visited with volunteers at the Meridian office to discuss a range of issues.

Volunteers provide the backbone of AARP's operation in Idaho, but a small staff plays a significant role.

Cathy McDougall, the director of community outreach, organizes events related to fraud prevention, Medicare and long-term care-giving.

Randy Simon, formerly of Gallatin Public Affairs, is the communications director.

Pamela Root oversees the office's finances and operations.

Former longtime state Rep. Tom Trail of Moscow is the state's volunteer president.

I appreciate knowing there are dedicated people who will help me age more gracefully. Now, if they only could help me get more distance off the tee.

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