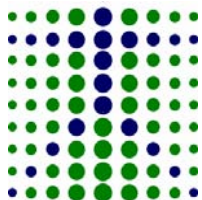


# Livable Communities & Aging In Place:

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**Developing an elder-friendly community**



**Partners for  
Livable Communities**

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*Advocacy. Action. Answers on Aging.*

**National Association of  
Area Agencies on Aging**

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## **Introduction**

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As the baby-boom population continues to age, the nation must become aware of the challenges that await such a demographic. In ten years, nearly 10,000 people will turn 65 each day.<sup>i</sup> While older adults over 85 continue to become the fastest growing population segment, the nation has yet to adapt to their needs.<sup>ii</sup> Problems of appropriate housing, transportation, health care, delivery and supportive services have become much more apparent as 1 in 5, or 80 million Americans will be termed 'elderly' by 2050.<sup>iii</sup> This unprecedented demand on health, social services and housing accommodations is a unique opportunity that the nation must recognize and begin address.

As members of the baby boom generation reach and pass the retirement age, the United States will witness a dramatic shift of economic and social forces as this segment of the population grows. A recent report to Congress by the Commission on Affordable Housing and Health Facility Needs for Seniors in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has deemed the growing needs of the increasing numbers of older adults Americans to be a 'quiet crisis.'<sup>iv</sup> Although 89 percent of baby-boomers claim they want to grow old in their own homes, many American communities cannot support appropriate housing, social services, and transportation needs for older adults living in their own homes. As the nation turns to increasing assisted living facilities to solve the problem, they fail to see a structure of livability that will benefit all groups and strengthen communities on a broad level. This strategy will allow older adults to live at home longer, significantly increasing the diversity and vitality of a neighborhood and allow more financial and social independence for older adults.



This paper serves to briefly introduce critical issues the Aging In Place initiative will concentrate on. Participants should read each section carefully and understand the key elements of each. Please consult your binder for additional resources and reading.

## **Defining the Problem**

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People in the United States are living longer. Advances in medicine and health care, more in-depth knowledge of healthy lifestyles and an increase in environmental standards have shaped longevity in humans. The consequences of a prolonged life are multi-faceted. With the older adult population rising, challenges in housing and health care also dramatically increase. Communities

across the United States needs to take appropriate steps to prepare for this burgeoning of older adults, the result being:

- One-third of older adult households are expected to have housing needs;
- Almost one-fifth of older adults will likely have service needs, and existing programs are not well structured to meet those needs.
- With 56 percent of older adults living in the suburbs, and 23 percent in rural areas, the lack of public transportation options will become problematic.<sup>v</sup>

The older adult aging process is filled with difficulties. Many barriers prevent older persons from remaining a part of their community and not enough emphasis is placed on developing a realistic, workable strategy to overcome these issues. The process of aging crosses racial, geographic and socio-economic lines to reach millions of people across the nation. While older adults feel the brunt of these problems, communities on a whole suffer the consequences.

## Housing

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Many older Americans will continue to reside in the home they raised their families, or buy a home in their later years with more than enough bedrooms to accommodate their needs. But as people age, their activities, family composition and financial resources alter. If the majority of older Americans wish to live in their homes, certain modifications need to be considered as their ability to be independent may diminish. Ideally, they should be able to find housing of the type and location that best suits their particular evolving situation. But too often,



many older adults go straight from their home to a nursing home or assisted living care facility, and there appear to be few options in-between.

In 2001, there were 21.8 million households headed by persons 65 years or older. Of these, 80 percent were owners and 20 percent were renters. The median family income of older homeowners was \$23,409 while for renters it was \$12,233.<sup>vi</sup> Some of

these housing units are in the suburbs where transportation is limited and tends to follow commuter patterns and services are scattered; others are in inner cities where steps and security issues become problems. Older adults property owners will face increasing maintenance or the need to make modifications to their homes while their own health and ability to cope with these issues is deteriorating. Meanwhile, older renters must deal with public and private

landlords who are less willing to make adaptations to meet the needs of older adults. Increased rent may be a problem if alterations occur.

There are many reasons for encouraging older persons to remain in their own homes. The strongest argument is that older adults overwhelmingly report that they want to grow old in their homes and communities. Additionally, providing home and community services that enable older adults to age in place has shown to be the most cost-effective model for aging. Medicare and Medicaid systems incorporate an institutional bias that direct federal reimbursement for long-term care services primarily to services provided in nursing home settings. The typical cost of nursing home services for an individual is approximately \$52,000 per year, compared to slightly over \$12,000 per year for home and community based services.<sup>vii</sup> This is not only a very expensive way of delivering services, it tends to propel people into that system even though their needs may not require the intensity of nursing home care.

There are other, less tangible but no less important, reasons to keep older persons in communities. The respected urbanist Jane Jacobs observed that one

of the most effective deterrents of neighborhood crime is “eyes on the street.” Older persons in their homes are the eyes on the street and much more. Lewis Mumford also endorsed this view, stating “this mixture of age groups is as essential to good life as the mixture of economic and social classes.”<sup>viii</sup> In this view, older people are regarded as invaluable community resources, and the three-generational community is beneficial for all ages. Communities are richer for cross-generational contact, for mentors who work with youngsters, for role models to persons of all ages and for older adults wisdom, experience and contributions in the labor force or as civic volunteers.



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Every year, millions of unwilling older Americans move to institutional facilities prematurely because there are no resources available to help them continue to live at home. Improved assistance programs and housing options that will allow older adults to age in their neighborhoods and remain involved in their communities is crucial.

### **New Housing Options Needed**

There are several solutions to the rising housing problems. Accessory apartments, more appropriately known as “granny-flats” can be complete apartments within a single-family home or a smaller, more separate structure on

the same lot that functions as an apartment. Older adults can find security, companionship, needed services and affordable care if they rent out a part of



their home or backyard cottage as an accessory apartment. Most zoning ordinances do not allow this land use in single-family zones but cities and states are slowly seeing the benefits. California, Portland, OR, Cary, NC, Chicago, IL and Massachusetts are reforming their zoning laws to include these “in-law suites.” Advocates say by creating this type of affordable housing shortages decrease, wealthy communities can still prosper and more units generate higher property tax

revenue.<sup>ix</sup> Other solutions include co-housing, home sharing, taxation, and financial tools such as reverse mortgage that can pay for home modifications and health care. There are many advantages to the solutions mentioned but communities must make the general public aware of such opportunities.

## **Transportation**

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The separation of home and the public realm also produces problems regarding flexible transportation options and fulfilling daily needs. As the baby boomers age, communities will have to come to terms with land use patterns that assume that older adults can drive themselves anywhere at any time just as younger people do. While many urban and metropolitan areas have a variety of public transportation options, the majority of their public systems are not fully integrated or have significant gaps in service and access.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Expenditure Survey, almost 18 cents of every dollar spent by American households is on transportation. Almost 98% of this expense is owning and maintaining an automobile.<sup>x</sup> The Survey also shows that lower income households (earning between \$12,000 and \$23,000 a year) spend almost 27 cents of every dollar on transportation; the percentage spent on transportation increases as income decreases.<sup>xi</sup> For older adults on fixed incomes, this could mean a choice between owning a car and obtaining necessary health care services.

According to an AARP Public Policy Institute Fact Sheet “Transportation: The Older Person’s Interest,” older adults use private vehicles more than any other mode of transportation, traveling as passengers or drivers. Even in urban areas where public transit is more accessible and less expensive, private vehicles are still preferred by the majority of older people, and like people of any age, most older people rely on friends or family instead of public agencies for a ride.<sup>xii</sup>

Many government and advocacy group policies and programs focus on keeping older adults actively behind the wheel. Public programs are mostly geared toward giving older adults a ride, not toward providing other transportation options. Helping older adults to stay behind the wheel is necessary. Most older adults will tend to travel by car for reasons of health, comfort and convenience. Yet, by continuing to focus on driving, we are deliberately creating places with the built-in necessity for driving, and thereby eliminating options.

### **Suburban Lifestyles and Aging in place**

When baby boomers flocked to the suburbs for their chance at the ‘American Dream,’ they probably never imagined that one day their ability to run their daily errands, chat with friends at a local restaurant, and visit the doctor would depend upon the possession of an automobile and a driver’s license, or upon someone else to drive them there. The same generation that spawned the growth of the suburbs is now dealing with the negative consequences of once innocent choices for a better quality of life. As the boomers continue to age in the coming years, the traffic congestion and separation of land uses that are now inconvenient at best may well become real barriers to community interaction and to the ability to meet the needs of daily life in the future. This will be most apparent for people with low incomes and frail health.

The national conversation on this looming crisis is focused mostly on the provision of services, tax breaks and housing modifications. While such modifications and programs are necessary and useful for many older adults, this focus is treating the symptoms and not the disease, ignoring the real issue of how to build places where all life transitions are more easily accommodated.



Aging in place is more than the ability to remain in one’s home; it is also the ability to continue to function and thrive in one’s community. Combating the disease entails careful attention to physical details of place; in the case of suburban sprawl, it will entail radical surgery to restore community accessibility to meet the variety of needs and situations of older adults.

## **When Driving is not an option**

Driving is not an option for nearly 7 million Americans aged 65 and older, according to the AARP.<sup>xiii</sup> The report also states that older individuals are more likely to walk to their destination than to use public transportation.<sup>xiv</sup> In fact, the Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey revealed that nearly one-fifth of all daily trips made by non-drivers age 70 and older are made on foot.<sup>xv</sup> How can we support the option of walking, and how can we make public transportation more accessible and appealing to older persons, especially those for whom driving is not an option?

While a small percentage of these persons never learned how to drive or rarely ever drive, the majority of non-drivers choose not to drive for safety reasons associated with the aging process. Driving also may not be an option for older adults on a fixed income who cannot afford to purchase or maintain an automobile. Issues of fear for personal safety, inconvenience, difficulties in negotiating the system, and accommodations for disabilities are also factors that deter older adults from using public transportation. Federal, state and local policy should account for those who cannot or do not drive, and should implement definitive strategies to reintroduce walking and public transportation as real options for more older adults in suburban areas.

One of the most effective policy that can be implemented for affordable and convenient transportation is the concentration of mixed-use development, where public agencies, health care and social service providers, commercial establishments, churches and residential areas are clustered on interconnected and well-designed streets. Another solution is to develop more walkable communities for older adults.



Improved street lighting and larger sidewalks will invite older adults and community onto the streets. More pedestrians make neighborhoods safer, more sociable and promote healthy walking habits.

## **Recreational Opportunities**

As the nation's obesity swells to unprecedented levels, it is crucial for older adults to have accessible recreational facilities. Preventative measures such as exercise and eating nutritionally can significantly prolong healthy years, resulting in less care and services in the long run. Dependence on cars, increased technology and the fast-food industry has made people exercise less while increasing their intake of fatty foods. This new super-sized combination needs to be addressed in communities for everyone, including older people.



It is recommended people get 30 minutes of physical activity each day. Less strenuous activities like taking the stairs instead of the elevator, gardening, walking a short distance instead of taking a bus or car can fulfill 30 minutes of physical activity without compromising too much energy or time. Health organizations have advocated forming a walking group to combine social and recreational activities. A National Institute of Health news release stated 28%

of men and 39% of women are sedentary.<sup>xvi</sup> A sedentary lifestyle is defined by having no leisure-time physical activities such as sports, physically active hobbies or light to moderate exercises such as walking, gardening or stretching. With almost half of older women and a fourth of men sedentary, it is understandable heart disease and other chronic diseases are the leading cause of death among persons of age.

Recreational opportunities for older adults can have a profound effect on the physical, mental and emotional state. Community centers and gyms that have catered to an older population have had great success. Group classes like meditation, yoga, water aerobics, weight lifting, biking, and even dancing allow older adults to get their heart rate up, make friends and commit to a healthy lifestyle. Many organizations that offer recreation classes have reduced older adult rates or offer them for free. Older adult's bodies are going through constant changes as they continue to age. Recreational sites would allow them an informal place to become more physically fit and understand body changes more fully.

### **Social, Cultural and Educational Enhancement**

The baby boomers have made one of the biggest educational, social and financial impacts of any generation. Honored as best-educated generation, this group has the lowest fertility rates ever recorded and are more health conscious and active than their predecessors. Women in the workplace have achieved more pay and equality than any other generation, and today's older adults are wealthier than previous generations.

While they are aging, this generation is living longer and expects their social and political involvement to carry well into their older years. A community that can support their older adults population with appropriate social, cultural and educational opportunities will be a successful community. Offering neighborhood-based programs like volunteer groups, social clubs, art classes and lectures allow older adults to maintain a part of the community and continue to enrich themselves. Studies have shown that people who are socially active

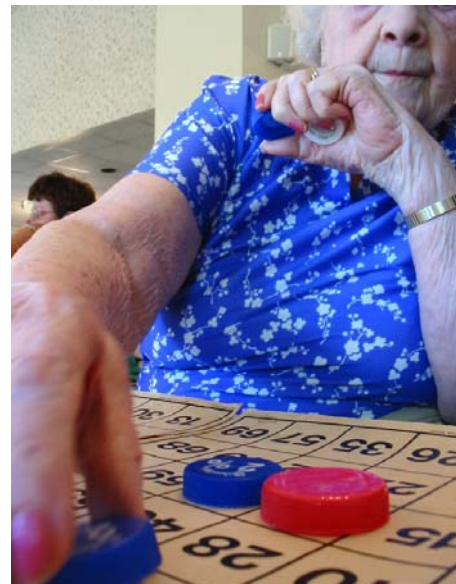
are usually physically and emotionally healthier than their non-social counterparts. Areas that promote social, cultural and educational options to improve the lives of older adults will inevitably enhance the lives of everyone.

### **Social Opportunities**

Technical advances in the last half of the century, albeit important, have created a more anti-social environment. Relationships are still a critical part of daily living; contact with friends, neighbors or non-resident relatives are important in any stage of life. As daily interactions begin to taper off with old age, many older adults do not make an effort to find alternative sources of social interaction. Studies have shown people who experience social isolation have been linked to declined physical and mental well-being. Factors like financial or health status should not quell social interactions of older adults within a community. It is important for a community of non-government organizations, health and social services and private industry to help foster a social network for older adults in a community.

Older adults may wish to participate in activities like a group event, play or even volunteer activities, but do not know how to get involved or even, if such an opportunity exists. By promoting social outlets for older adults, communities can increase economic development, participation in community affairs and allow older adults to connect with others. Communities need to create a life that is continuous of baby boomers and older adult's current lifestyles. People who have been active in their community do not wish for their voice or social interactions to be lost once they hit a certain age.

Many older adults find giving their services through volunteer activities such as mentoring school children, providing childcare, being on a board and aiding various public programs very rewarding. Forty-five percent of people over 65 volunteer annually, donating 1.8 billion hours if their time and expertise worth \$22.7 billion.<sup>xvii</sup> Hours donated to help children in school and with childcare have helped thousands of parents and children as well as foster an inter-generational relationship between children and older adults. *Governing Magazine's* Rob Gurwitt described how an inner-city elementary school in Philadelphia has benefited from older adult volunteers. For two hours or three times a week, older adults give the students patience, wisdom and devotion, resulting in "better comprehension, steadier classroom behavior and a new readiness to learn."<sup>xviii</sup> The students of Howe Elementary School have thrived but so have the older adults—they enjoy establishing a relationship and helping in the community.



## Cultural Opportunities

As the older adult population expands, organizations must use this opportunity to connect with older adults using cultural aspects. The baby boom generation has indicated their sizeable interest in cultural facilities, events and performances. It is important to continue to provide this age group with ample cultural prospects. Non-government organizations, non-profits and private organizations have conducted several successful programs that link older adults and culture together. For example, Real Art Ways, a contemporary arts organization, has involved community older adults in a program called “Artists and Communities.” The project called Millennium Quilt had older adults from the Parkville Senior Center in Hartford discuss issues of community, identity, death, and technology throughout their lives while creating a quilt. A documentary was also produced to capture the whole process. Upon completion, older adults displayed the quilt to students and the community. The film and quilt were also shown at the Hispanic Senior Center where an exchange of cultures in the community helped older adults relate to each other. Real Art Ways also conducted a project called “The Problem of Possible Redemption” where older adults read James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. The reading was a way for older adults to talk about war, art and death personally and metaphorically. The project was filmed and open to the community to view.

Projects like the ones demonstrated by Real Art Ways have proven to be very effective. Using art and cultural activities to discuss larger issues like death, love, family and community have enabled older adults to converse more openly on difficult issues.

As cultural opportunities for older adults expand, there will be a great need to highlight the uniqueness of culture within each community. In 2000, an estimated 84 percent of the population 65 and older were non-Hispanic white, 8



percent non-Hispanic black and 6 percent Hispanic. By 2050, minorities will have increased substantially—64 percent will be non-Hispanic white, 16 percent Hispanic, 12 percent non-Hispanic black and 7 percent non-Hispanic Asian and Pacific Islander.<sup>xix</sup>

An increase in minorities is a strong indicator that older adults will want to have many different cultural options as they age. Current cultural opportunities may not reflect the changing demographics, leaving an important population without services. Bi-lingual events may prove to be an essential aspect of cultural opportunities. Organizations should view diversity within the aging population as an important way for older adults to share cultural differences with each other.

## Educational Opportunities

While some older adults may think their school days have long expired, there are several benefits to allowing older adults to have educational opportunities. Older adults can use education as an intellectual and leisure tool and make a difference in future generations lives.

In a US News & World Report article, scientists found “intellectually challenging work boosts cognitive skills in older adults even more than in younger people.”<sup>xx</sup> Mental workouts can stimulate brain cells, which ultimately result in minimal cognitive losses. The article cites reading, classes, interesting jobs, travel and a challenging partner brain-food for older adults. Communities that capitalize on educational facilities like reading, classes and technology information sessions will help older adults stimulate their brains.



One area that is very popular with older adults is computer and internet classes. As technology has increased and older adults wish to keep up with the digital age, computer and internet classes have been a tremendous success. Classes range from introduction to computers and the internet to advanced classes that continue to build upon older adults knowledge. Older adults feel they can bridge the age gap by learning to email children and grandchildren, get information without going to a library, read the daily newspaper in large-size font, pay bills and perform a number of other activities that were only recently accessible. Technology has also allowed an increase of older adults to work part-time, seasonal, temporary and consultative positions. Continuing to use reasoning techniques and multiple tasks at the same time in a job related atmosphere, states *Psychology and Aging*, allows older adults to do better on cognitive function tests than those not working. While this is beneficial, there are other activities that should play into a well-balanced lifestyle. Classes in art, reading, writing, mathematics, and music will keep older adults in your community sharp.

Local governments can also create public education classes that would allow older adults to gain crucial information about their emotional, physical and mental health as they continue to go through new stages in their lives. Studies show educational attainment has been linked to higher life expectancy. Information gleaned from these life skills classes can help older adults with nutrition, exercise, older adult community networks and organizations, and a host of other preventative and supportive measures to ensure a high quality of life in each community.

## Older Americans as Economic Generators

With increasing discretionary income and time on their hands, older adults can contribute more than a friendly presence in the community. Retired older adults have invested significant time and money into communities making them



substantial economic generators. By controlling the majority of wealth in this country, older adults have supported local arts and cultural programs through philanthropic donations, boosted economic development in communities and regions and donated billions of hours to community service. The American Association of Retired Communities estimates that one relocating retiree can have as great an economic impact in a community as three to four factory workers.<sup>xxi</sup>

The baby Boomer generation is the largest consumer demographic in the United States. There is a high expectation that clothing stores, travel packages, cultural and social events will cater to this generation like it has in the past. Statistics reveal there is no slowing; boomers will continue to be buyers. Places like The Gap learned the hard way when their sales plummeted while trying to get into the teenager market.<sup>xxii</sup> For a few organizations, it may be as simple as replacing tight low-rise jeans with classic fit to gain back the market. But for most, the action of a middle-aged woman attempting to buy tight low-rise jeans does not even register as a dilemma. This can be similar to sustainable living and older adults. If communities do not recognize there is a problem and there is not a market for older adults to spend, the city has lost an important economic generator.

In a study by AARP, older adults were asked to compare their generation to their parents' generation. Overall, older adults of this generation stated they are more



self indulgent, will live longer, will be in better health, more self-reliant and will have more money when they retire. Jim Lehman of Lincoln, CA represents this generation's philosophy. He and his aging friends that frequent lunch spots, attend meetings of the Chamber of Commerce, and members of the Lincoln Art League are considered a "peculiar sort of superhero" due to their economic impact on the city. Cities like Gadsden, AL and Hanna City, IL have also benefited from older adults who are active in the community and enjoy spending money. Economists

agree retirees are one of the strongest ways to improve a city's economic development.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In order to ensure the retired population spends money, communities must provide safe and walkable streets, viable transportation options, and accessible services. Leaders must see their community through a holistic eye. If older adults cannot use public transportation or walk to the city center to eat lunch, buy a book or experience a play or lecture, they cannot make as strong an impact. Housing, transportation and services all have a direct effect on the economic impact older adults will make. To state simply, the easier it is for older adults to be active in their community, the more economic and social contributions they will generate.

## **Health and Social Services**

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While family support still remains strong factors such as greater longevity, geographic diffusion and more women in the workforce have made earlier forms of care-giving to older adult family members difficult. United States health and social services are vital to today's older adults but many alterations must be made in order to successfully meet the needs of an ever-growing population.

At present, more than 11 million Americans of all ages need long term care as a result of physical or cognitive limitations. Two-thirds are over the age of 65 and require assistance with activities of daily life, such as eating, bathing, dressing or getting around. Less than 20% percent of these people reside in nursing homes.

Over 80% of people who have long-term care needs rely on family members and friends to provide most of their care, at an estimated value of \$196 billion annually. These individuals live either in their own homes, with or without a spouse, or in the home of a close relative or friend.

Long term care options are limited and costly. Medicare does not cover long term care services. The average annual cost of care in a nursing home is over \$50,000, and current long term care insurance is cost prohibitive for most modest-income individuals and benefits are limited in scope and duration. Before individuals can qualify for Medicaid, the largest government-funded long term care program, many are required to "spend down" their assets. Community and more home-based care can offset some of the expense of traditional institutional care.



The most preferred form of long term care is provided through home and community-based services, such as home-delivered meals, homemaker services, and respite care, that enable people to remain independent in their own homes and communities.

One of the biggest outcries across the nation is services are uncoordinated and disjointed, making distribution difficult for communities. One solution is to track and coordinate organizations within the city to ensure equal coverage throughout the area. Coordination of common standards, age and definition of poverty is an important step to integrating resources throughout each community. Communities that revamp services will not only supply consistent health and social services, but will allow residents to save on medical expenses.

## **Public Safety Services**

As Americans continue to grow older, communities must ensure there are services that will effectively protect them. Most communities have safeguards in position to help citizens with a variety of issues from abuse to traffic safety. A large number of communities also have councils to ensure older adults are not overlooked. Such councils develop partnerships with a variety of judicial and social services to minimize victimization of older adults.

Below are several public programs that serve the older adult community and their role in creating a safer environment for older adults in their community. These programs are only as effective as each community wishes to make them. Complicated procedures and lack of marketing to older adults are two basic factors that can alienate an older population. Working with each program to ensure communication, procedures and results are effective and positive for the older community will allow programs to prosper.

**Adult Protective Services Program** works with people who are 18 and over who lack the physical or mental capacity to provide for themselves on a daily schedule. This program attempts to prevent abandonment, financial exploitation, neglect or self neglect, mental or emotional abuse, sexual and physical abuse to adults who cannot protect their own interests. Approximately 10% of older adults are victims of abuse and only 1 in 14 cases are reported on a national level.<sup>xxiv</sup> This program provides confidential protective services to vulnerable adults.



**Legal Aid programs** assist people with limited incomes deal with a legal suit or settlement. While this program was created to help all age brackets, this is a valuable resource for older low-income people. This program provides advise and representation in areas ranging from housing, family law, income maintenance, public benefits, consumer affairs and guardianship. Some states

like Delaware have specific older adult-oriented legal aid programs to focus on issues that are specific to the age group.

**Coalition for disability rights programs** offers assistance for people with disabilities. Such programs allow disabled people to help themselves and live as independent life as possible. While this is a primary goal, disability rights programs also seek to provide resources to enforce the rights of disabled people. Some programs deal with issues on a legal front while others focus on training and collaborative measures. As older adults people grow older, their ability to move freely greatly diminishes. Disability rights programs help older Americans with these new developments and attempt to work with their needs on an individual and group level.

**Traffic Safety Programs** recognize the difficulties transportation and driving issues pose for older Americans. Poor transportation alternatives and the desire to remain independent keep many older adult people driving. With the exception of teenagers, older Americans are more likely to be in a car accident for every mile they drive than any other age group.<sup>xxv</sup> Some communities have 'refresher courses' available for people over 50 to ensure driving skills are still satisfactory. Other programs highlight different preventative measures like eyesight, larger street signs and longer lights for pedestrian crossing.

**Community Watch programs** deal with crime and victim prevention, victim assistance, citizens involvement and public education. Founded on active participation from residents, this program has helped neighborhoods become more alert to activity in their area while instilling a community bond. There are a variety of similar programs that produce the same results. These programs are especially valuable for older Americans because factors like poor lighting, large bushes or vegetation and empty streets can be frightening to utilize. Many neighborhoods that have older adults living in them rely on their eyes and ears in the daytime when most people are away at work. Community watch programs in turn help the older adults at night when they are more vulnerable.

Public safety programs like the ones outlined above are essential for older Americans safety. Maintaining trust among older adults in the community is a strong asset. Victimization of older Americans has become far too easy and communities must see that resources are available and accessible for the older community. Coordination between services is also important so there is not discrepancy throughout programs. Vulnerable, frail and minority older adults are sometimes and easy target, ensure your community has the resources to adequately deal with this demographic.

### **From Universal Design to Universal Communities**

In recent years, urban design has become a more pressing issue for cities, suburbs and even rural areas. Design issues pertaining to the specific needs of the aging can benefit all people, not just the older adults. Improved street

lighting, additional benches, well-maintained sidewalks, increased signage and more time to cross the street benefit all members of a community, including visitors. Older adults often struggle with activities of daily living due to restrictions in mobility, eyesight and other impairments. More street lighting increases safety, increased signage allows older people to feel confident about using public transit, benches allow them to rest while waiting and longer lights assure them pedestrian safety. Modifications of a physical urban environment



allow older adults to be more independent in their everyday activities. Additionally, the development of pedestrian walkways, improved street design and accessibility has been proven to aid economic and public interest in the area. While these may seem like elementary design techniques, a majority of communities have not retrofitted their streets for such convenience and safety.

Universal design is expanding from the streets of communities to homes. Builders have begun to devise houses that cater to older individuals, disabled people, babies, and even large furniture. Houses have four-foot wide hallways, a master bedroom on the first floor, door handles rather than knobs and easily reached light switches. There must also be one entry into the house that does not have steps. For the high percentage of people who want to stay in their own homes but may encounter problems in the later years, this solution allows independence and stability for older adults.

### **What's Needed Next: Local Leadership**

There are many factors that play into the success of an elderly-friendly community. While grass-roots campaigns are critical, local leadership and key community stakeholders can produce policy changes more easily. Powerful figureheads who champion an issue usually increase public awareness and raise legitimacy, resulting in increased services and funding.

Many economists view baby boomers retirement as a huge marketing campaign for communities. As stated before, boomers are not the stereotypical retirees who are content to spend their last years in a seaside condo. Interested in film festivals and lectures, cooking classes and skiing, older adults are seeking locations that can support their present and future lifestyles. In a study done by the University of Illinois, older adults highlighted five main characteristics of an elder-friendly community. Transportation, affordable housing and housing alternatives,



strong older adult-serving organizations that provide services, social and recreational activities, churches with an outreach program and a safe community were listed as most important factors.<sup>xxvi</sup> For communities to supply these features, local governments must first assess their elderly-friendly status as a whole. Have local planning commissions evaluated issues like mixed-use and affordable housing, zoning laws, transit design, and land use as it relates to older adults? Have broad-based accessibility and social services been fully addressed in the community? Are older adults considered a burden in the community or an asset? These preliminary questions must be posed in order to understand your community and how each local government can improve upon it. Another important way to understand your community is to listen to the constituents. This program is being developed for older Americans so involve them in the process. It is important their everyday issues are heard and they are consulted on decision-making. Once the community direction has been established, leaders need to assess financial backing.

In an era of lean budgets, local leaders must be creative in acquiring funds. Public-private partnerships, incentives and grants must be incorporated into each focus area. Creative funding allows networks to expand and as a result, continues to further promote the issue of aging in place.

In signing up for the Aging In Place program, participants have made the first move towards strengthening older adult services. Keeping the pledge to retrofit your community is the more challenging part. Local governments must attend to the present while envisioning the future. As the aging crisis becomes full-blown, prepared communities will already have the knowledge and instruments in place to tackle older adult issues. Key players like local leadership should motivate the community to become engaged in the Aging In Place initiative.

### **Your Next Steps**

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There is a growing imperative for a comprehensive national agenda of rethinking, retrofitting and redesigning our existing cities, housing opportunities and social services so people can age where they feel most comfortable; their homes and communities. Preserving the sanctity of home for older adults will also cut the national healthcare budget by curtailing the migration to healthcare facilities as baby boomers grow frail. Communities designed to serve the needs of youngsters, older adults and citizens with special physical and mental conditions will be livable for everyone.



As the population aged 65 and over grows, communities should ensure that they are prepared to accommodate this shift in demographics. While there is no single answer for aging because every older adult faces unique challenges as they approach old age, there are several areas to highlight. Communities need a system of services that integrates health care, daily living needs, transportation, housing,

recreation, social services, and educational, social and cultural opportunities to allow older adults to age in place.

To adopt these principles, the cooperation of local, state and federal officials is crucial, as well as the integration of private sector services into the delivery system for older adults. Incentives such as tax breaks for developers who build integrated older adult housing around public transit facilities will be key in ensuring the success of these strategies. The aging population will only increase in the upcoming years, making this issue inevitable. Communities must understand that in changing their transportation policies, street design, lighting public parks housing opportunities and public spaces, this 'universal design' will serve the entire community.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>ii</sup> U.S. Census Bureau
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- <sup>v</sup> *A Quiet Crisis in America: A Report to Congress by the Commission on Affordable Housing and Health Facility Needs for Seniors in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* [www.seniorscommission.gov](http://www.seniorscommission.gov) Delivered to Congress, Washington. 28 June 2002.
- <sup>vi</sup> Rosenbloom, Sandra "The Mobility Needs of Older Americans: Implications for transportation reauthorization." The Brookings Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, Series on Transportation Reform. July 2003. p.2.
- <sup>vii</sup> "A Profile of Older Americans: 2002." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Aging.
- <sup>viii</sup> "Home and Community-Based Services, 2003" National Association of Area Aging Agencies Internet: <<http://www.n4a.org/hacbservices2003.cfm>>
- <sup>ix</sup> Mumford, Lewis. *The Urban Prospect*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc, 1968), 41.
- <sup>x</sup> Nasser, Haya El "Granny Flats' Finding a Home in Tight Market" USA Today
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- <sup>xii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xiii</sup> AARP. "Transportation: The Older Person's Interest." AARP Public Policy Institute Fact Sheet Number 44R. March 2002. Page 1 <<http://research.aarp.org/ppi>>
- <sup>xiiii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xvi</sup> AARP. "The Policy Book: AARP Public Policies 2003." AARP Public Policy Institute, Washington. Page 11.
- <sup>xvii</sup> National Institutes of Health, "Well-Being Improves For Most Older People, But Not For All, New Federal Report Says" August 10, 2000. p 2. Internet: <http://www.nia.nih.gov/news/pr/2000/0810.htm>
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- <sup>xix</sup> Gurwitt, Rob "Teachings of the Elders" *Governing Magazine*. February 28, 2001. p. 2 Internet: <http://governing.com/view/vu022801.htm>.
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- <sup>xxiiii</sup> Sappenfield, Mark. Christian Staff Monitor, "Retirees Breathe New Life Into Fading Towns" (May 27, 2003): 2.
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- <sup>xxvi</sup> University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute, Michigan Office of Highway Safety Planning "Promising Approaches for Elderly Mobility" <[http://www.michigan.gov/documents/PAEEMLowRes\\_82326\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/PAEEMLowRes_82326_7.pdf)>

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Real Art Ways Home Web Site  
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Additional Real Art Ways resources  
[www.artistsandcommunities.org/pages/ct\\_artist.htm](http://www.artistsandcommunities.org/pages/ct_artist.htm)  
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