Making Your Community Livable for All Ages:

What's Working!

n4a

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Executive Summary

The United States is experiencing a rapid expansion in the number of older adults. Every day, 10,000 people turn 65 as the front end of the baby boomer generation begins to enter their next phase of life. By 2030, when the final boomer has turned 65, older adults will represent nearly 20 percent of the population. Even more significant is the greater longevity many older adults will enjoy, living for decades after officially becoming "seniors." Indeed, from 1980 to 2010, the centenarian population increased by 65.8 percent, while the total population increased by 36.3 percent. The percentage of those in their 80s and 90s is increasing at even higher rates.[1]

With the longevity boom, today's older adults desire and will likely have a different aging experience than that of their parents and grandparents. Trends indicate that fewer of them will move to traditional retirement communities or age-segregated housing; instead, they wish to remain in the homes or in the communities where they have established roots–to "age in community."* These older adults intend to continue to be active in their communities. Many will remain in the paid or unpaid workforce, and they expect to be civically engaged and respected for their contributions.

Supporting the growing aging population poses challenges for most American communities–particularly post–World War II suburbs. The majority of older adults live in suburbs that were designed with little regard for the level of connectivity needed to enable older adults and people with disabilities to flourish in their homes and communities. Access to community features such as transportation, recreation, health care and shopping are often lacking, creating barriers to full independence and engagement. The trend in many American communities over the past several decades was to segregate people by age. In addition to segregated functions, we also segregate activities and services by age, i.e., senior housing and senior centers. Communities today are therefore tasked with making adjustments in order to support the physical, social and other needs of dispersed populations who live in situations that may not suit their changing needs as they age.

Tasked with the responsibility for planning, coordinating and advocating for aging services at the community level, the Aging Network is in a unique position to integrate individual and community interests in order to facilitate aging in community. The Aging Network is a key partner in community change efforts in our neighborhoods, cities and counties. Indeed, the Older Americans Act (OAA) mandates that they do so, stipulating that Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) will "serve as the advocate and focal point for older individuals within the community by (in cooperation with agencies, organizations, and individuals participating in activities under the [area] plan) monitoring, evaluating and commenting upon all policies, programs, hearings, levies and community actions which will affect older individuals."[2] The OAA also places accountability for planning with the AAAs. By promoting Livable Communities, the Aging Network can convene the appropriate representatives from all sectors of the community to lead a comprehensive, integrated community approach to healthy and successful aging.

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* This document uses the term "age in community" to refer to community-wide support for residents to age well and thrive, in lieu of the term "age in place," which is more commonly used but is sometimes more limited to the dwelling unit level.

Most AAAs have already embraced this agenda. As reported in the 2014 National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a) survey, "Trends and New Directions—Area Agencies on Aging," more than 70 percent of AAAs have taken steps to develop Livable Communities by meeting with other public entities to address housing, transportation, land use and other key development issues. Much of their work involves establishing cross-sector coalitions and developing projects and plans for Livable Communities that address the needs of citizens across the lifespan.[3]

Recently, n4a also worked closely with six AAAs and their local partners to advance Livable Community initiatives through the Livable Communities for All Ages Learning Collaborative (LCC) supported by MetLife Foundation. These communities convened local multi-stakeholder collaboratives that collectively identified priority issues to tackle, determined outcomes and developed action plans in areas including mobility and access, housing, age-friendly businesses and culture change related to how people perceive aging in our society. Brief descriptions of the efforts in these communities and the lessons learned are shared throughout this report.

This document offers an overview of Livable Communities and identifies key strategies that are pivotal to the success of local initiatives that are truly moving the needle on making communities livable for all ages. The report is intended as a resource for local public and private entities and citizen change-makers who want to ensure that their communities are making the right decisions and allocating appropriate resources to improve vital physical and social support infrastructures that meet needs across the lifespan.
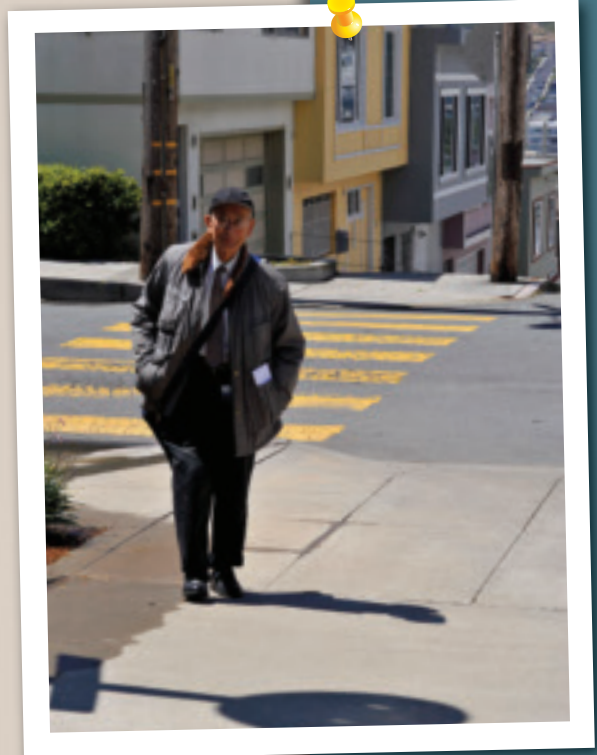
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The following "Top Ten List" provides guidance to communities based on key strategies that are successfully advancing efforts to make communities more livable for all ages.

1. Collaborate Across Traditional and Nontraditional Sectors

A local collaborative effort should construct intersections and promote new thinking across sectors, including those that are often not at the table for discussions around aging (e.g., the business, faith-based, minority and young adult communities). Local government is a key partner, emphasizing particular departments (e.g., planning, housing, transportation, health, parks and recreation, public works). By identifying and leveraging community assets across sectors, Livable Community collaboratives generate opportunities for shared solutions while also benefitting from "economies of scope,"[4] which occur when single solutions benefit multiple issues and populations.

2. Celebrate Racial and Ethnic Diversity

Not only is America's aging population more multigenerational, it is also becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. By seeking input from and engaging the diversity of its residents, a community will better understand the disparate health and wellness challenges faced by a heterogeneous community of older adults. Communities must consider the varying needs and preferences of different racial, ethnic and cultural groups as they seek to create a public realm that works across the lifespan for all of the community's residents.

3. Build Individual Relationships

Activities do not create results; people create results. Livable Communities advocates need to invest time in building individual relationships with stakeholders in key sectors. They need to empower sector champions who are willing to leverage their expertise and influence to advance the community's emerging livability agenda. Fostering these relationships often pays off in improved coordination, innovative partnerships and development of a new cadre of passionate supporters. Indeed, new relationships across sectors often offer the most fruitful ground for breakthroughs and the people building these relationships are often the brightest stars in this work.

4. Honor Your Unique Local Community

The *genius loci*, or "spirit of place," must inform a local narrative and set of actions that resonate with your particular community. Communities need to prioritize the topics around which there is enthusiasm from those key stakeholders and volunteers who step up to the plate. Though attaining livability entails multiple interrelated issues that need to be addressed and will continue to evolve as circumstances change, local communities of all shapes and sizes can undertake manageable steps to begin making themselves more livable for all ages.

5. Revere Older Adults

Unlike in many other countries, age is not revered in the United States. As a result, older Americans are frequently underappreciated and undervalued. Livability initiatives should seek to change people's perceptions of their own aging and the way they view aging in the broader community. Older adults and their caregivers represent a valuable but under-tapped resource, as well as an important market segment. Developing this social asset can both meet the needs of older adults and promote local economic growth.

6. Embrace Longevity as an Opportunity

One of the best ways to value older adults, while also reaping the value of their contributions, is to meaningfully engage and leverage this enormous asset for the benefit of the community. A shift in mindset—from simply recruiting volunteers to mobilizing community leaders—will serve the dual purpose of advancing important community objectives while providing older adults with a sense of purpose.

7. Tackle the Social Factors that Determine Community Wellness

While access to health care is essential, many other factors are the primary drivers of people's health. These include: community safety, family/social support, environmental quality and the built environment, as well as access to healthy food and physical exercise. By building relationships and partnerships with organizations across community sectors, a Livable Community collaborative can influence policies, plans and programs that affect the social and environmental determinants of health, thus advancing healthy and active aging.

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8. Seize Opportunities to Infuse Age in Everything

Identify planning and budgeting processes into which you can insert the perspectives of older adults. This will both advance older adult livability principles and prevent community decisions that unintentionally create barriers to innovative aging solutions. Invite people participating in relevant community forums to join your collaborative. Look for opportunities to infuse an "age in everything" perspective into community decision-making.

9. Send the Right Messages

Discussing a Livable Community for all ages solely through the lens of aging will not resonate with many of the sectors that a livability initiative seeks to engage, or frequently even with older adults themselves. It is therefore important to create messages that convince different stakeholders it is in their interest to participate in this effort. Messages framing the benefits of engagement should be customized to each sector.

10. Leverage Local Dollars for Livability

The broad, cross-sector work of Livable Communities requires significant coordination, a role that demands dedicated staff time, and a role best undertaken by people with expertise in community organizing. Additionally, a Livable Community collaborative should look beyond government funding by nurturing relationships with potential funders who seek to impact the community and establishing a variety of ways in which different partners can support this work.

"Making Your Community Livable for All Ages: What's Working!" describes some key strategies for effectively developing Livable Community initiatives. The report draws from the experiences of local communities—those that have taken major steps forward and those that have struggled; all of these communities have learned important lessons along the way. Communities ready to utilize this report's guidance will be well-positioned to generate local support and partnerships, and to realize incremental successes that will help to make them places where all people can live and age well.

n4a Mission

To build the capacity of our members so they can better help older adults and people with disabilities live with dignity and choices in their homes and communities for as long as possible.

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