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Cities Work to Create Aging-Friendly Communities

by Andrew Scharlach

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With America's population aging, cities are looking for ways to serve their citizens as they get older.

One in eight Americans is age 65 or older, and that will increase to one in five within the next 25 years. Moreover, the dramatic growth in the aging population will only increase in the coming years as the Baby Boomers enter their senior years. Recent increases in the pre-senior population (age 55-64) provide a glimpse of the future — triple digit increases in the past 15 years have been experienced in cities such as Las Vegas; Austin, Texas; Raleigh, N.C.; Atlanta and Phoenix.



Many cities are not prepared for this "silver tsunami." Indeed, most Americans live in houses, neighborhoods and communities that are ill-suited for aging bodies and minds. Land-use policies and zoning regulations isolate older adults from the services they need, and increase reliance on automobiles to accomplish virtually any task — whether to buy groceries, see a doctor or visit a friend. "Big-box" stores and giant malls require a substantial amount of walking and negotiating passageways not designed for an older body moving at slow speeds.

In recent years, America's cities have increasingly recognized the necessity of becoming more "aging-friendly" — places where people can live their entire lives, if they so desire. In an "aging-friendly" community, services and programs exist to assure that older adults' basic health and service needs are met, housing stock and transportation infrastructure enable individuals to overcome potential barriers to independent mobility and social interaction, and there are ample opportunities for older adults to develop new sources of fulfillment, productive engagement, and social interaction.

Creating Aging-Friendly Communities Online Conference

Next month, a unique online conference, *Creating Aging-Friendly Communities*, will provide America's cities with the opportunity to examine innovative strategies for becoming more "aging-friendly." The University of California at Berkeley's Center for the Advanced Study of Aging Services is hosting the online conference to assist communities in planning effective responses to the aging of their populations.

In addition to more than 25 presentations from nationally recognized authorities on aging and community development, the conference will feature "best practice" models from throughout the United States. The conference will offer opportunities to engage with national experts, discover what other communities are doing, network to solve community issues and identify approaches that work and access practical tips, models, tools and training materials.

Conference proceedings will be made public at the conclusion of the conference. This innovative online conference is made possible through generous funding from Helen Andrus Benedict Foundation, MetLife Foundation, Sierra Health Foundation and The California Endowment. [iCohere Inc.](#), a leading provider of online collaboration services, is providing technical and design support for this breakthrough online conference.

Demand for this conference has already exceeded the event's planned capacity. However, there are a few registration spaces open for cities that want to host the Creating Aging-Friendly Communities online conference as a connected site, facilitating participation of community stakeholders working together to create aging-friendly communities. Interested cities can contact conference@agingfriendly.org.

In addition, conference partner Community Strengths will offer an enhanced ongoing learning opportunity called a "Community of Practice," which will begin shortly after the conference and continue for six months. The Community of Practice will feature collaborative activities, discussions, guest speakers, and sharing of resources, experiences and tools to address the challenges and opportunities of making communities more aging-friendly. Those who register for the enhanced Community of Practice will participate in an intensively supported process designed to help them create real change in their communities. Further information is available at www.agingfriendly.org.

Many cities throughout the country are developing innovative initiatives to prepare for the aging of their citizens, designed to transform local communities to be "good places to grow older." The following are some examples.

Aging Atlanta: Developing Broad Community Partnerships

Aging Atlanta is a partnership of 50 organizations dedicated to insuring that the metropolitan region is a place older adults can live with independence and dignity. Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Community Partnership for Older Adults Initiative, Aging Atlanta has formed cross sector collaborations that address local needs of older adults, breaking down traditional bureaucratic and organizational barriers. Aging Atlanta has researched and piloted innovations in housing, transportation, health care, community outreach and supportive services.

Aging Atlanta has:

- Worked with six jurisdictions to develop local policy that promotes housing options for seniors;
- Implemented seven transportation voucher programs in urban, suburban and rural environments;
- Launched a region-wide education campaign to help baby boomers plan and prepare for their retirement needs;
- Created local, neighborhood-based walking clubs that not only improve the health of older adults but decrease social isolation and reconnect them with the community;
- Examined and addressed gaps in long term care support ;
- Redesigned and distributed public awareness material to educate older adults and caregivers about available local support services;
- Addressed the needs of underserved populations including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender older adults; and
- Developed a community-based minor home repair program utilizing skilled older adult volunteers.

The second phase of Aging Atlanta, the Lifelong Communities Initiative, is now working in the metro area to integrate the lessons learned from Aging Atlanta. Using local data to analyze challenges and opportunities, individual communities are working to promote housing and transportation options, encourage healthy lifestyles and expand information and access services.

Aging Atlanta is housed in and supported by the Atlanta Regional Commission, the Area Agency on Aging for the Atlanta region. For more information, please contact Cathie Berger, director of aging services at (404) 463-3235 or cberger@atlantaregional.com.

Lake Oswego, Ore.: Engaging the Community in Dialogue

Lake Oswego took a major step in creating Aging-Friendly Communities through its 50+ Community Dialogues. The city chose an approach that generated citizen interest, promoted local identification of options and a realization that solutions need not depend solely on city funding.

Rather than the city asking for comments on proposed alternatives, citizens identified issues themselves. Ideas blossomed from community conversations that involved more than 350 residents of all ages as people discussed the challenges and opportunities they experience in their lives. Statistical data from Portland State University and research from a consulting team rounded out ideas and suggested best practices.

The process was based on the belief that individuals have a strong stake in creating the future of their community and a desire to participate in shaping that future. Now the city has a newly created 50+ Advisory Board and an engaged cadre of people committed to creating an Aging-Friendly Community in Lake Oswego. As one community member put it, "After 20 years experience as an active Lake Oswegan, the 50+ dialogues have absolutely been the most energizing, positive, exciting process to hit this town. I've repeatedly been pulled aside

by enthusiastic dialogue and task force participants, as well as general citizens of all ages, with eager questions about what will be and when will be the results of this engaging process.”

For more information, please contact Kim Gilmer, director, Parks and Recreation Department, at (503) 675-2545.

Citizens Take Action in Yonkers, N.Y.

Yonkers, the fourth largest city in New York with a population of nearly 200,000, is fast becoming a “community for all ages.” Older residents are sharing their talents and experience, springing into action to benefit their neighbors and neighborhoods.

“Government can’t do it all,” said Yonkers Mayor Philip A. Amicone. “We must mobilize citizens to work in partnership with the city.”

Instigated by the Helen Andrus Benedict Foundation, United Way of Westchester, and with strong support from the City of Yonkers, local nonprofits are doing just that — mobilizing the city’s older adults into action.

Groundwork Yonkers organized teams of older adults and youth to walk the streets together, using hand-held computers to document street-level assets like parks and schools, as well as problems they see such as broken lights, graffiti, and litter in open spaces. Teams of older adults, children, and youth have turned vacant lots into community play grounds and gathering places, planted gardens and cared for new street trees.

Another local nonprofit, 55 Plus Yonkers Connections, offers leadership skills training for Yonkers older adults. Recipients of this training included GrandPower, a group of grandparents led by Family Service Society of Yonkers, which advocates for improvements in public policies and practices that benefit grandchildren they are raising. In addition, through its SMART program, Jewish Council of Yonkers recruits and trains older adults who tutor hundreds of K-12 students in Yonkers schools.

Kate Downes, president of the Helen Andrus Benedict Foundation, summed up the foundation’s grantmaking strategy, by saying, “Older adults are a huge and growing asset in every community. We believe everyone wins when older Yonkers residents are encouraged and enabled to apply their time and talents to serve the community. Feelings of trust and camaraderie are forged among neighbors of all ages, and physical improvements become visible markers of accomplishment and pride.”

For more information, contact Cathy Elser at 55 Plus Yonkers Connections at Yonkers55plus@yahoo.com.

Aging-Friendly Baltimore.: Government Driving Change

The Baltimore City Commission on Aging and Retirement Education (CARE) has embarked on an initiative to create a Center for Urban Aging Services and Policy Development: Blueprint for an Aging-Friendly Baltimore City.

Changes in Baltimore give rise to this initiative. Demographic, social and economic trends, combined with a new optimism about city living, are affecting older adults, aging services and programs. The vehicle for this approach will be the Center for Urban Aging Services and Policy Development: Blueprint for an Aging-Friendly Baltimore City.

The center will become an integral and permanent part of city government, and will bring together core city agencies, analysts, private and public funders, community leaders, senior-serving organizations, service providers, and older consumers to create new synergies between them. Mayor Sheila Dixon voiced the vision of the initiative to “capitalize on collaboration in city government and throughout our communities to ensure that Baltimore is not only a place to grow up, but also a place to grow old.”

The center will generate strategies for tapping the resources offered by mature adults, new models for delivering services to those who need them, and a foundation for public policy and funding strategies based on the realities of aging in 21st Century urban America.

For more information, go to www.baltimorecity.gov or call Amira Garner at (410) 396-4932.

Tampa Bay, Fla.: County Aging Departments Important Catalysts for Change

The Tampa Bay Region has launched an extensive planning initiative as part of its Aging in Place agenda. A comprehensive elder services master plan, developed by the Hillsborough County Department of Aging Services in collaboration with the University of South Florida Center for Housing and Long-Term Care, provides a framework for elected officials, executive leadership, public servants, partners, and citizens to examine long-term solutions for meeting the needs of the area’s growing population of older adults through 2030.

Some of the identified needs and solutions from this process include:

- County-wide senior safety zones analogous to the concept of school safety zones.;
- A Community Care for the Elderly (CCE) program that provides in-home support services.;
- Expanded transportation services, including door-to-door transportation and bus passes for elderly, low-income or disabled persons for transportation to health and social services; and

- Community Link information and referral service, providing resource information to more than 10,000 citizen requests each month.

The Tampa Bay Region is a participant in the national Aging in Place Initiative undertaken by Partners for Livable Communities and the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a), with funding provided by MetLife Foundation. As part of this national initiative, Tampa Bay was the site of Crossing the Line: Developing a Livable Tampa Bay Region for All Ages, the first of six regional workshops around the country focused on creating livable communities for all ages.

In addition, eight local partnerships were awarded "JumpStart the Conversation" grants in recognition of new or unique partnerships to help the Tampa Bay region prepare for the aging of the baby boomers.

"Hillsborough County is proud to be an initiating sponsor for the Tampa Bay Region as we begin many partnerships throughout the six counties in the region to assure that we are better prepared to help people age in place," said County Administrator Patricia G. Bean.

Robert McNulty, president of Partners for Livable Communities, said, "The diversity of Tampa Bay Region organizations partnering to improve livability for all ages is a good indicator of community-wide support for the Aging in Place initiative for years to come."

For additional information, contact Bart Banks, interim director of aging services, at banksb@hillsboroughcounty.org or (813) 307-3665.

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