



Successful Aging in Rural Communities

Lessons learned from a 2014 southwest Minnesota assessment

*Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be.
– poet Robert Browning*

We all want to live long, happy, and healthy lives. For some, retirement is a momentous transition that opens doors for travel and spending more time with family. Others strive for less dramatic changes, focusing instead on maintaining the relationships and activities that have led to fulfillment and happiness. While there isn't a common definition of "successful aging," it is often described as having three main qualities: a) living free of disease or disability; 2) maintaining high cognitive and physical abilities; and 3) interacting with others in meaningful ways.¹ Individual choices certainly impact our health as we age; however, communities also play a key role in supporting or hindering the successful aging of its residents.

In 2014, the Southwest Initiative Foundation contracted with Wilder Research to conduct an assessment to describe the needs of aging residents in the region and to identify the changes that residents thought would be most important in making the region a better place for aging residents to live.² While the study highlights specific community assets and resource gaps specific to southwest Minnesota, the results can inform efforts to foster age-friendly communities in many rural areas.

What are age-friendly communities?

Age-friendly communities are places that "actively involve, value, and support older adults, both active and frail, with infrastructure and services that effectively accommodate their changing needs."³ Becoming an age-friendly community is notably different than simply having health care services in place to respond to needs of aging residents in poor health. It recognizes that communities must be better equipped to meet the changing needs of residents as they age and provide the resources and opportunities that support the health of vibrant and active aging residents.

¹ Rowe, J.W. & Kahn, R.L. (1997). Successful Aging. *The Gerontologist*, 37 (4), 433-440.

² Ferris, M. & Johnson, N. (2015). Creating age-friendly communities: A report for the Southwest Initiative. Available at: www.wilderresearch.org.

³ Alley, D., Liebig, P., Banerjee, T., & Choi, I.H. (2007). Creating elder-friendly communities: Preparations for an aging society. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 49 (1-2), 1-18.

Age-friendly community initiatives are underway across the nation and around the globe. While the focus of these initiatives varies to best meet the needs and interests of residents, the following domains are often considered when working to create or improve age-friendly communities:

- **Outdoor spaces and buildings.** Age-friendly communities should have places where people can gather. Sidewalks, seating areas, and well-marked crosswalks are just a few accommodations that make buildings and spaces accessible for all ages.
- **Transportation.** Age-friendly communities have reliable, affordable transportation options available for residents who do not drive themselves.
- **Housing.** Age-friendly communities help people age in place by supporting home modifications and providing residents with a variety of affordable housing options.
- **Social interaction and community inclusion.** Age-friendly communities provide residents with a range of opportunities to interact with others and take part in community activities.
- **Health and social services.** Age-friendly communities offer a range of in-home and near-home services that are affordable, accessible, and adaptable to varied levels of need.
- **Safety.** Age-friendly communities have low crime rates and infrastructure that helps prevent falls, traffic accidents, and other injuries.
- **Civic participation.** Age-friendly communities involve residents in decision-making and provide opportunities for employment and volunteering.

Why are age-friendly communities important?

Communities must change to respond to the needs of a growing aging population. The concept of age-friendly communities isn't new, yet there is growing urgency for communities to become better places for aging residents to live. The number of Minnesotans age 65 and older is expected to double between 2010 and 2030. Some counties, particularly those in more rural areas of the state, need to act quickly to meet the needs of a growing aging population. For example, our report highlighted that adults age 65 and older comprise at least one-quarter of the population in 3 of the 18 counties in southwest Minnesota. This is projected to grow to 15 of the 18 counties in the region by 2025.

Aging residents are an untapped community resource. Communities planning to meet the needs of a growing aging population can focus too narrowly on the service needs of frail residents in poor health. Adults age 65 and older have a wealth of experience and expertise to share as employers, mentors, advisors, and volunteers. This experience, coupled with the fact that many adults are retiring later, can have a positive impact on local economies. In 2014, just over one-quarter of new entrepreneurs in the United States were adults age 55 to 64; this group represented only 15 percent of new entrepreneurs in 1996.⁴

Age-friendly communities can help residents maintain their health and a high quality of life. Self-reported health ratings, a strong predictor of overall health, decline with age. In Minnesota, 87 percent of adults age 45 through 54 rate their health as "good", "very good" or "excellent." However, positive health ratings are significantly lower

⁴ Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. (2015). The Kauffman Index Startup Activity: National Trends.

among adults age 65 and older.⁵ By helping residents maintain an active lifestyle, avoid injuries that limit mobility, and engage in fulfilling activities, communities can help aging residents maintain a high quality of life in their homes as long as possible.

How does this study inform how to foster age-friendly communities in rural areas?

Rural areas have many assets that can support the development age-friendly communities.

Strong relationships between residents and decisions-makers can help communities implement age-friendly initiatives. Community stakeholders interviewed as part of the study described how residents in their communities often know one another, value the contributions made by others, and have a history of working together to solve problems. Collaboration between organizations was considered both a necessity and a result of long-standing partnerships.

However, there are unique challenges impacting rural areas that can hinder efforts to establish age-friendly communities.

Residents and community stakeholders identified transportation as the most significant barrier to residents accessing services and supports. While the region does have some public transportation options available, they do not reach all parts of the region and were seen by some residents as inflexible and unaffordable. More than half of the study's survey participants also identified the high cost of services, particularly services not covered through health insurance plans, and a lack of awareness of existing services as major barriers to accessing services.

Community residents, service providers, and decision-makers interviewed during the study also identified challenges they felt may hinder the adoption of age-friendly principles in the region. Residents who live alone and who have limited social support may benefit most from an age-friendly community, but are also harder to reach than residents already connected to community resources. While close-knit communities can provide residents with social support, some residents may feel uncomfortable or stigmatized seeking services for lower-income residents, administered by people they know. Other concerns identified by stakeholders included a lack of volunteers and a need for caregiver supports.

Residents and organizations interested in establishing age-friendly initiatives in rural communities can take a number of initial steps to put these concepts into action:

- Provide decision-makers with information about age-friendly communities and their potential to improve the health of residents.
- Use asset mapping to identify existing initiatives and community resources that support the health and well-being of aging residents.
- Create or expand opportunities for aging residents to be involved in decision-making and planning efforts.
- Develop services and supports that address transportation barriers and include outreach activities to inform residents about new services and encourage involvement.
- Look for opportunities for collaboration.
- Develop meaningful volunteer opportunities that align with the availability and interests of community residents.

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), 2013.

For more information

The following guides, toolkits, and case studies may be helpful resources for people interested in learning more about rural age-friendly communities.

AARP: Network of age-friendly communities tool kit

<http://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/network-age-friendly-communities/>

Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors, Canada: Age-friendly rural and remote communities: A guide

http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/alt-formats/pdf/publications/public/healthy-sante/age_friendly_rural/AFRRC_en.pdf

Government of Alberta, Canada: Building age-friendly communities

<http://www.ifa-fiv.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/11-AF-Checklist-Alberta.pdf>

Stanford Center on Longevity and The MetLife Mature Market Institute: Livable community indicators for sustainable aging in place.

<https://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/mmi/publications/studies/2013/mmi-livable-communities-study.pdf>

World Health Organization: Checklist of essential features of age-friendly cities

http://www.who.int/ageing/publications/Age_friendly_cities_checklist.pdf

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For more information

This summary includes highlights from the report, *Creating Age-friendly Communities*. For more information about this report, contact Melanie Ferris at Wilder Research, 651-280-2660.

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