



# Creating Age-friendly Communities

*A Report for the Southwest Initiative Foundation*

## Executive Summary

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” (Alley, Liebig, Banerjee, & Choi, 2007). As a growing number of adults enter retirement, is it important that communities have the infrastructure, services, and supports in place to ensure that residents can continue healthy, vibrant lives in their own homes as long as possible.

The Southwest Initiative Foundation (the Foundation) serves an 18-county region in southwest Minnesota that is home to nearly 280,000 residents. In 2014, the Foundation contracted with Wilder Research to conduct an assessment to describe the needs of aging residents in the region. The assessment results are intended to help the Foundation identify potential strategies to support aging residents, including ways to encourage the development of age-friendly communities.

## Methods

A multi-method data collection approach was used for the assessment, including: literature review; analysis of secondary regional demographic and resident health data; an online survey of 119 professionals and community residents; and key informant interviews with 13 local stakeholders. A more detailed summary of these approaches and their limitations can be found in the full report.

## The region and its residents

The review of secondary data was used to better understand the demographic characteristics of residents who live in the region and to identify specific trends, opportunities, and challenges that the Foundation may need to take into consideration when planning their future efforts.



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Some of these key descriptors and trends include:

- Minnesota's southwest region is predominately rural, with a few key economic-hub communities in Kandiyohi, Lyon, McLeod, and Nobles counties. Since 2000, population in these four counties has stayed the same or increased, while the number of residents in all but one of the more rural counties has decreased.
- In the region, 19 percent of residents are age 65 or older, 5 points higher than the state average. In two counties, Lincoln and Big Stone, over one-quarter of residents are age 65 and older.
- Poverty among adults age 65 and older in the region varies considerably by county. Poverty rates for this age group are highest in Lyon County (13%), much higher than the 3 percent poverty rate in Cottonwood County.
- The region has become increasingly culturally diverse. In 2013, 12 percent of residents were people of color. This demographic trend is largely attributable to a growing diversity among young adults and families with children.
- In all counties, at least one-quarter of adults age 65 and older live alone. These residents may be more likely to feel isolated or have greater difficulty accessing the resources they need.
- Self-reported health status, a strong predictor of overall health status, decreases with age in many southwest Minnesota counties. Among adults ages 55 to 64, at least 40 percent of residents in all but one county reported their health as "excellent" or "very good." Among adults age 75 and older, relatively few people (15-17%) rated their health that well. Ideally, with improved services, a larger percentage of residents will rate their own health positively and those ratings will stay at a high level with age.

## Community assets and service gaps

There are many different types of community-based and in-home services and supports that can help aging adults maintain a high quality of life in their homes. Overall, while a wide range of services are available in the region, these community assets are not equally available to all residents. The survey respondents reported that home health services, home delivered meals, and volunteer opportunities were some of the services most readily available in the community. Some of the least readily available services included caregiver training services, adult day health care, respite care, and companion services.

Limited transportation was frequently cited as a significant barrier for residents accessing the services and supports they need. Other common barriers included the cost of services that are not reimbursed by insurance and the lack of awareness about the services available in the region.

Across the region, some of the key tenets of age-friendly communities are widely found. Survey respondents often agreed that in many places in the region, residents felt safe in their homes and

communities, and had access to health services, grocery stores, and other basic essentials. They also felt that aging residents were respected and valued. Affordable indoor exercise options, home modification services, and affordable transportation services were the three characteristics of age-friendly communities most lacking in the region.

## Opportunities and challenges

Although local stakeholders identified a number of service gaps and barriers to accessibility, they also identified a number of local initiatives working to address these challenges. Some of the local stakeholders interviewed for the assessment had interest in shared planning efforts so that all efforts in the region could be better coordinated and working toward a common vision. The stakeholders identified a history of collaboration and the large number of organizations interested in aging issues as strengths that can be leveraged. There was also interest in more intentionally drawing on the wisdom of aging residents when creating and implementing new services and initiatives.

Although transportation was the most common concern among stakeholders, a number of other challenges were identified that may make it difficult to help residents access the services they need and to create age-friendly communities. Some residents, particularly aging residents living on farms and aging residents of color, were identified as groups that are difficult to reach and that could become isolated. Although residents may need more information about the services available to them, stigma was also seen as a barrier to residents accessing the services in their community. Many services for aging residents rely on volunteers; difficulty attracting younger volunteers to help provide services and support was a concern shared by multiple caregivers. There was also interest in more supports for caregivers.

## Potential directions

Age-friendly communities have resources and services in place that support residents they age, helping residents maintain their health and a high quality of life. This means not only responding to older residents in need of services, but also considering ways to help active adults age 55 and older, and residents of all ages to maintain their health. The following themes, based on the input of local stakeholders and the data reviewed in this assessment, can help guide the work of organizations interested in promoting age-friendly communities:

**Greater familiarity with characteristics of age-friendly communities and how they can be achieved can help local stakeholders refine their vision for the region.** Promoting the use of age-friendly community checklists with partners or requiring grant applicants to respond to key questions about community assets and concerns may increase awareness of ways that communities can be enhanced.

**Different types of volunteer opportunities may be needed to offer key supports to aging residents and to foster intergenerational connections.** A number of stakeholders noted growing difficulty finding volunteers for various aging services and supports, which may suggest that organizations need to change the way they are providing opportunities for younger residents to get involved and share their skills to make those volunteer experiences more meaningful. The relationships that develop out of volunteer opportunities should be mutually beneficial, drawing on the wisdom of aging residents.

**Education and support for caregivers could be expanded throughout the region.**

A number of local stakeholders also identified a need for more education and awareness around early signs of Alzheimer's or dementia.

**Transportation is an issue that needs to be addressed, either as an area of focus in itself or when developing strategies in response to other service gaps and regional concerns.** Seeking reimbursement for or directing fundraising to mileage reimbursement for volunteer drivers may be a way to increase interest in volunteering and increase the availability of flexible transportation options.

**Communication of any new initiatives should also inform and encourage residents to access services through existing programs.** Although gaps exist, the assessment did show a number of organizations and initiatives in place already working to meet the needs of aging residents.

**Effective outreach and engagement strategies to reach isolated aging adults will look notably different across the region.** Multiple approaches will be needed to effectively reach adults with varied needs, as well as groups that tend to be more isolated, such as residents living on farms and aging persons of color.

**Sustainability is critical.** Multiple stakeholders pointed out the need for lasting changes to address these challenges and improve the services and supports available to residents.

## Wilder Research

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### For more information

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

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MAY 2015