

9. LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

As you grow older, will your community be “livable” for you? Whether you live in the city, a small town, or the countryside, there will always be that million dollar question about the community in which you live. Will it meet my needs as I grow older and then retire? All too often we don’t think about this kind of planning until that day arrives.

Our living environment needs tend to change as we age and begin to experience more difficulties with mobility, sight, and sound. We look for the billboard or traffic signs that have the biggest lettering or we seek out the best walking path that has sidewalks and is located in a safe area. We want to create a sense of security and improve our quality of life to make the most of our retirement years so that we can remain in the community with the elements built in that we will need as we grow older and older.

In October of 2001, the town of Puyallup, Washington, participated in the AdvantAge Initiative pilot which laid the groundwork for the other areas to follow in making their communities elder friendly. The pilot project found “differing perspectives are important.” For instance, a healthy 65-year-old may place value on the recreational options available whereas a 90-year-old may be more concerned about the availability of home care services and/or if there is a sufficient number of doctors that accept Medicare.

There are four essential elements that were identified for Livable Communities by the AdvantAge Initiative pilot, also known as Elder Friendly Communities. These elements were:

- 1) Addresses basic needs
- 2) Optimizes physical and mental health and wellbeing
- 3) Maximizes independence for the frail and disabled
- 4) Promotes social and civic engagement

These elements are a starting point when looking at what a community has to offer seniors to maximize living independently and with ease.

A great number of older individuals moved into the category of senior citizen in 2006. The baby boomers, nearly seventy-eight million born in the US between 1946 and 1964, will become senior citizens over the next thirteen years. We are finding that these baby boomers are much more active. Many have taken relatively good care of their health and are not accessing services or even thinking about whether or not their community meets their needs just yet. However there will be a time when the boomers will require some sort of assistance as they age into their seventies, eighties, and beyond.

Not only does a community need to be elder-ready, it needs to be livable for all ages. Every element of our communities is affected by the growing number of elders, but we cannot ignore the other age categories. In order for elder-ready communities to succeed, everyone will need to work together for their success.

SE/ALTC conducted public forums in late 2006 and early 2007 that was inclusive of all eight counties in our PSA. Out of these forums, a great number of ideas were generated that mapped out a beginning for

making our communities elder-ready. From those forums, the following were areas of concern emerged:

- Transitioning in communities, from home to another setting such as a nursing home or adult family home
- Safer communities, minimizing crime, how to detour crime and senior scams
- Places for seniors to walk, socialize and share a meal
- Access to medical care; access to a doctor in general
- Educating the public about the needs of the elderly to include city and county officials, business owners, etc.
- The need more dentists willing to treat seniors
- Factoring in the needs of smaller towns in a county's planning processes
- Remodeling existing apartments to meet handicap accessibility requirements and to build structures that are already handicap accessible

There is a great need to sit with each community and discuss these issues as well as others as SE/ALTC goes through the planning process in our PSA. It will take a village, a relatively large village, to create an elder-ready community.

LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

GOAL: SE/ALTC will become “aging ready” in at least one county area in PSA 09. The one county area will serve as the test site for implementation of an elder ready, Livable Community in the other

seven counties in PSA 09. Once the test site has been established, another county in PSA 09 will be added and the process to make the county is aging friendly will begin by using the test site criteria.

OBJECTIVES:

- SE/ALTC will team with W4A in the development and distribution of elder readiness printed material to raise awareness regarding areas of concern and inform partners in the planning process. **2008 and ongoing**
- SE/ALTC will partner with local agencies and create a task force that will educate officials and the community about the variables needed to make the community more elder friendly. **2008**
- SE/ALTC will include in the planning process the transitioning in communities from home to another setting such as home to adult family home, or home to nursing home, etc. **Ongoing**
- SE/ALTC will include keeping communities safe by implementing measures to minimize and detour crime, senior scams, etc. **Ongoing**
- SE/ALTC will work with appropriate entities in the community to bring awareness and ensure access to adequate to medical and dental care. **Ongoing**
- SE/ALTC will educate the public and city and county officials on the needs of the elderly. **Ongoing**
- SE/ALTC will research various foundations and organizations that provide funding to assist with costs that may occur as a result of an elder friendly community. **Ongoing**

- SE/ALTC will conduct a public forum to inform and gain support for communities to move forward and implement some of the elements that will make the community elder friendly. **2008**
- SE/ALTC will seek volunteers from agencies, churches, and local officials to assist in implementing the elder friendly elements. **2008**
- SE/ALTC will begin the implementation of at least two of the top priorities identified by the elder ready task force. **2009**
- SE/ALTC and the Kittitas County Advisory Board will encourage local authorities from the lower Kittitas Valley to consider the need for a more appropriate Adult Activity (senior) Center building to accommodate the growing elderly population. **2008 and ongoing**
- SE/ALTC and Yakima County Advisory Board will ensure better access to local events by providing solutions for adequate parking availability. **2008**
- SE/ALTC and Walla Walla County Advisory Board will participate in the community events focusing on the elderly. **2008 and ongoing**

Completion date for Planning phase, end of 2008

AGING READINESS: ASSURING LIVABLE COMMUNITIES FOR ALL AGES

PROFILE OF THE ISSUE:

It is a new frontier in this country—never before have so many people lived to such a great age! Nationally, seventy-eight million

baby boomers born between 1946 and 1964 will soon join the ranks of senior citizens. In 2006, the first wave of these baby boomers hit 60 years of age. By the year 2020, over 22% of the state’s population will be age sixty or older, compared to 14.8% in 2000. Washington’s population age sixty and over, estimated at 987,405 in 2005, is expected to reach 1,724,717 by 2020, an increase of 75 percent. **In our eight county area, the general population grew by 28% between 1990 and 2000, but the population of people age 75 and older grew by 58%.**

The increasing number of older people in our country is a testament to the success of many elements of our society—public health, health care, housing, the education system, and families. And yet, these same systems face challenges in shaping their approaches to best meet the needs of the aging population that they have helped to make possible.

Interestingly, the US demographic shift has produced a nation that is producing elders in a culture that favors youth. With all of the positive changes associated with longer life spans, our country as a whole, as well as our local communities, appear ill-prepared for either making good use of the resource that the growing aging population represents or responding to the changing needs of that population. In fact, ageism is a well-documented form of discrimination in a wide range of areas, including health care, public health, chronic care, emergency services, employment, marketing, and the media.

Senator John Breaux, former Chair of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, framed the issue in this way: “As the baby boomers move toward old age, they will revolutionize

and redefine the American aging experience. The question is, are we ready? Soon, America will look different. The average age will go up to 55 and the over 65 population will double. There will be more seniors than teenagers. One out of every 5 Americans will qualify for a “senior” discount at the movie theater. And there will be one million Americans over 100 years old.”

Elder-readiness is critical for assuring livable communities for all ages. Every segment of our community is being affected by a growing number of elders, including housing, transportation, employment, land use, marketing, health care, business, volunteerism, public benefits, and public policy. While most people, from policy wonks and elected officials to mom-and-pop corner store owners, know that the population is aging, very few efforts seem to be focused on making the changes necessary to assure that our communities will work well for people of all ages.

IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS:

A recent study, “The Maturing of America,” conducted in 2006 by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (N4A), in partnership with the International City/County Management Association, the National Association of Counties, the National League of Cities, and Partners for Livable Communities, found that only 46% of American communities had begun planning to address the needs of the growing aging population.

The purpose of the survey was to “address three key preparedness questions: whether efforts are being made to assess and put into

place programs, policies, and services that address the needs of older adults and their caregivers; whether cities and counties can ensure that their communities are “livable” for all ages—not only good places to grow up, but good places to grow old; and how well equipped an area is to harness the talent, wisdom, and experience of older adults to contribute to their community.”

Areas of concern included the following:

- Health Care
- Nutrition
- Exercise
- Transportation
- Public Safety/Emergency Services
- Housing
- Taxation and Finance
- Workforce Development
- Civic Engagement/Volunteer Opportunities
- Aging/Human Services

Washington State and most of our local areas have not yet begun a systematic review and planning process to address the aging of the population. AAAs continue to reach out to the community through a comprehensive planning process every four years. Indeed, AAAs are in the process of addressing many of these issues through the “aging-friendly community” format in the current Area Plan process. Limited staffing capacity has, at times, hampered these planning efforts, and the lack of broad-based policies and initiatives at most levels of government has also been problematic. Snohomish County is a notable exception, instituting the broad-based Project 2020, resulting in numerous recommendations related to county aging-readiness.

Several areas need attention in order to

make Washington State a place that:

- Encourages people of all ages to prepare for retirement and old age.
- Has “age sensitive” service infrastructures that support people as they age.
- Establishes and adapts existing services to recognize and accommodate the needs of older adults.
- Builds and adapts physical infrastructures that support people as they age.
- Promotes creative ways for older persons to utilize their talents, skills, and experiences in both paid and unpaid roles.
- Promotes flexibility in the workplace to accommodate and support the vital role played by family caregivers.

GOAL: To become “aging-ready” by ensuring that our local communities are “livable” for all ages—not only good places to grow up, but good places to grow old.

OBJECTIVES:

Partner with the State Council on Aging (SCOA) in efforts to raise awareness at the state level concerning elder-readiness issues and strategies for addressing them. This will be evidenced by:

- Record of participation at SCOA meetings
- Notes of activities in partnership with SCOA

- Record of participation in annual SCOA/AAA collaboration meeting
2008 and ongoing

Partner with W4A in the development and distribution of an elder-readiness printed product to raise awareness about issues and assist other partners in planning. This will be evidenced by:

- Record of participation in development meetings
- Draft copies of the product
- Record of presentation and distribution of product
2008 and ongoing

Engage local governments in discussion of elder-readiness issues and strategies in order to improve focus on elder-readiness and livable communities. This will be evidenced by:

- Record of presentations and meeting participation with local governments and communities
- Relevant correspondence
- Relevant presentation materials
2008 and ongoing

Partner with W4A in developing and presenting a session on Aging Readiness at a Washington State Association of Counties (WSAC) conference. This will be evidenced by:

- Record of meetings and activities to develop materials
- Copy of presentation materials
- Record of presentation at WSAC meeting
2009