Livability for All
Two nationwide initiatives help pave the way.

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As planners know, where a person lives — and his or her access to housing choices, transportation options, and health care services — can greatly impact his or her quality of life. Individual communities work on these issues every day, as do national organizations. In many cases, their efforts coincide.

Take what's happening in Macon-Bibb County, Georgia; Fort Worth, Texas; and West Sacramento, California. All three have livability challenges, and all of them are working with AARP, one of the nation's largest nonprofits, to overcome those hurdles.

Through its work on livable communities, AARP supports the efforts of neighborhoods, towns, and cities to become great places for people of all ages. Two of its initiatives are the AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities Tool Kit (tinyurl.com/pzbkahk) and the Livability Index: Great Neighborhoods for All Ages (tinyurl.com/lak7hob).

The chief aim of the AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities program is helping communities become more livable for all residents, regardless of age, by addressing their needs through a deliberate planning process that results in features such as better housing and transportation options, access to key services, and opportunities for residents to participate in community activities. Since its inception in 2012, 65 communities have participated in the program.

The AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities framework can be adapted as needed by AARP state offices, municipal and local governments, nonprofit organizations, community partners, and volunteers. The tool kit's framework explains the milestones for initiating and achieving membership in the network; provides examples for developing plans that are unique to a community's circumstances and environments; offers guidance for how to develop a framework that links back to an action plan; and identifies the necessary indicators and data sources that support the evaluation phases.

Improving the built environment and supporting multimodal transportation alternatives also makes a community more attractive to businesses who might want to locate there, which, in turn, boosts local job opportunities.

Better health outcomes are another important benefit of livable communities, as Andrew L. Dannenberg and his colleague point out in their 2011 book, Making Healthy Places: Designing and Building for Health, Well-Being, and Sustainability. The AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities is an affiliate of the World Health Organization's...
Age-Friendly Cities and Communities Program, an international effort launched in 2006 to help cities prepare for rapid population aging and the parallel trend of urbanization.

The AARP Livability Index, launched earlier this year, helps communities measure how well they are meeting the needs of residents in the areas that impact quality of life. The Livability Index scores communities on a broad range of community features and characteristics within seven categories: housing, transportation, neighborhood, environment, health, engagement, and opportunity.

The index (see Research You Can Use, July 2015) measures 40 metrics and 20 policies in every neighborhood and community across the country. The metrics tell a community’s story, giving a snapshot of current conditions, while policies show a community’s potential to improve its livability.

The index also illustrates the interconnection between the factors that together create a good quality of life. Health is one of the seven categories, but metrics related to it show up in several categories, including the number of walk trips in the transportation category and access to healthy food options in the neighborhood slot. This allows community stakeholders to use a holistic approach to address issues of health, housing, transportation, and so on.

How the index works

The Livability Index scores communities on a scale of 0 to 100, delivering an overall livability score that is an average of the category scores. Users can search any location by state, zip code, county, and city. Users can even search a neighborhood by inputting an address — this gets to a finer level of evaluation, at the census block group. However, wherever a community lands on the scale, it always has room for improvement. Even the highest scoring neighborhood — Mifflin West in Madison, Wisconsin — gets a 78, 22 points shy of a perfect score.

The overall livability score is important, but the key to understanding and using the index lies in how communities score within each category. The metrics for each category are averaged together, to calculate the score, and a bonus point is awarded for each policy in place.

More than just a celebration of good work, the category scores also help local stakeholders identify community characteristics that might hinder community livability, such as the high cost of housing or the lack of a complete-streets policy. The tool pairs well with locally collected data to determine the best course of action for meeting a community’s unique vision as a livable community.

Volunteers have used the index to assess how well their communities are prepared to meet the needs of people who want to age in place. It also serves as a precursor to walk audits, as well as a conversation starter in community meetings.
On the ground

**Macon-Bibb, Georgia, Tattnall Square Park**

**Livability Index Score: 49**

Once a grazing spot for livestock, Tattnall Square Park is now a favorite gathering place for people of all ages. As with many such green spaces, it took years of local effort for this 16-acre plot surrounded by the College Hill community and Mercer University in Macon to look and function as it does today.

After Macon-Bibb County expressed interest in becoming an Age-Friendly community, AARP volunteer Myrtle Habersham worked with AARP staff to convene discussions with government leaders. Both Mayor Robert Reichert and Samuel F. Hart, past chairman of the Bibb County Board of Commissioners, supported a focus on Tattnall Square Park because they thought the improvements would build momentum to make other community improvements. And indeed they have: The effort has enriched the quality of life for residents in Macon-Bibb County as well as College Hill, the neighborhood surrounding Tattnall Square Park. Macon-Bibb is in the midst of a major downtown transformation with its Second Street Corridor Project, which will provide transportation accessibility by connecting East Macon, Downtown Macon, Navicent Health, and Mercer University, which is adjacent to Tattnall Square Park.

Macon-Bibb County gets an overall score of 49 from the Livability Index. The county scores best in housing, where the indicators show bright spots in housing affordability. Monthly housing costs, at $751, are lower than the U.S. median of $999, and there are more subsidized units compared to the U.S. median.

The data revealed that the greatest challenge is in the opportunity category. Just above 50 percent of students are high school graduates, compared with 80 percent nationally. And the neighborhood and health categories each score 39, in part due to a high crime rate and lack of access to places to exercise.

In August, 2012 Macon-Bibb County held an AARP Active Living Workshop, a one-day event that involved both classroom-style sessions and a community walking audit led by Dan Burden, then of the Walkable and Livable Communities Institute, and the AARP Georgia state office. (Walk audits help residents and citizen activists identify where and how to improve the walkability of their communities. An AARP state office can organize and lead an audit, or a group of residents, or even an individual, can use AARP's tools to conduct a walk audit on their own.)

Community members recommended several new features in the Tattnall Square Park area to address some of the issues highlighted by the Livability Index. A new sidewalk and corner bump out improved pedestrian safety. A new garden, a foot bridge, and additional signage created a more inviting environment for people to exercise and spend time with friends and family, and older residents in particular are using the space. While there isn't local data yet, leaders hope that more activity in the park can also deter crime by putting more eyes on the street.

"Our score was a 49, and initially we had concerns about it," says Myrtle Habersham. Further analysis, meetings, and dialogue resulted in an action plan for Macon-Bibb County. AARP has reviewed the plan and has recommended that WHO approve it. (It can be found at aarp.org/livable in the Member list.) Meanwhile, city leaders continue to use the Livability Index to identify issues that need to be addressed in their community.
Fort Worth, Texas, Riverside Neighborhood

Livability Index Score: 49

Fort Worth, Texas, leaders identified the Riverside neighborhood as a designated urban village revitalization project, creating a master plan for the area. Riverside is also a focus of its AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities work. The city's goal is to link the available $6 million in funding for urban villages to the creation of vertical, mixed use, walkable development in Riverside. The community's desires include increasing personal safety and lowering crime rates; creating better connections to the Trinity River and downtown Fort Worth; calming traffic; and developing streets that are safe for pedestrians and cyclists.

Monnie Gilami, an AARP volunteer since 1986, got excited about the Age-Friendly work in 2014 after Carmel Snyder, an AARP Texas staff member, invited her to an Active Living Workshop. "It seemed that there was an intent and purpose to put something into action and not just talk about it," Gilliam says. "Anytime you ... really do something, I'm interested!"

Fort Worth received an overall livability score of 49. It scores highest in two categories: neighborhood and opportunity, both of which garnered a 55. Access to job opportunities, a variety of people and services in close proximity, and the number-of-jobs-per-worker (0.79) all exceed the median and are leading indicators in these categories. The lowest score, at 42, is in environment. The city has relatively high air pollution levels, with 20.7 unhealthy air-quality days compared to the U.S. median of eight days.

While the Livability Index provides an overview of the city's livability features and pinpoints areas that need attention — which sometimes surprise community members — the tool can also confirm what residents already know about their immediate needs. A group of Fort Worth volunteers focused on transportation, which has a score of 50. The data shows that people are walking and have good access to public transportation in certain areas, but there are some challenges.

Traffic congestion and fatal crash data show rates above the U.S. median. These point to the need for street improvements that improve safety and increase transportation options. Using walk audits, community members gathered data about unsafe street conditions for pedestrians, such as a 15-block stretch of road in the Riverside neighborhood without lights or crosswalks where drivers tend to speed.

"I use the Livability Index during the walk audits I coordinate in my community," says AARP volunteer Eva Bonilla. "I send the link as part of the tool kit and tell residents how to use it. . . . I encourage them to use it as a way to engage their communities and spark conversation."

One outcome is the Six Point Streetscape Plan, which focused on transportation facilities improvements for all transportation modes.

West Sacramento, California

Livability Index Score: 57

West Sacramento, California, is just beginning its journey toward age friendliness, but it has already made strides. The city's mayor, Christopher Cabaldon, is leading the effort. This year the city required agencies like transportation and parks and recreation to integrate issues of aging into their policies and programs. In a June forum Mayor Cabaldon and several agency department heads discussed their use of the Livability Index and have decided to use their analysis of neighborhood data to address the gaps between what their residents need and what the city has to offer. City officials will now use their findings to shape future agency planning, creating strategies and solutions to realize their vision for improving the lives of community residents of all ages.
"We want to be a place that is competitive," Mayor Calbodon says, "for folks who have lots to contribute to our community, our economy, our activities, and clubs: [People] in their 70s and 80s, and folks in their 30s and 40s who are looking ahead . . . [and asking] where do I want to plant my roots, potentially for the rest of my life?"

These three communities are, of course, among the hundreds of places that are using guiding principles, programs, and metrics to forge new policies — and more livable communities. The U.S. population is rapidly aging, and AARP's research shows that a majority of people age 65 and older want to remain in their homes and communities as they age. AARP wants to help planners and policy makers prepare to meet the range of needs that people want so they can stay active and engaged in community life.

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Resources

Image: By 2030, one of every five Americans will be 65-plus. The AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities and the Livability Index are helping communities meet the challenge. Debra Whitman, chief public policy officer of AARP, shares the details in this recorded plenary session from the 2015 National Planning Conference in Seattle: http://tinyurl.com/pwumdal

Fort Worth Tackles Walkability

AARP volunteers in Fort Worth, Texas, take stock of the challenges for pedestrians during their walking audit of a 15-block stretch in the Riverside/Six Point neighborhood, and discuss their findings. Drivers tend to speed through the area, making it difficult for pedestrians to cross the street. Randle Harwood, director of Fort Worth's planning and development department, says the walking audit changed how everyone felt about the safety of Sylvania Avenue and changed the discussion on redevelopment proposals. The Six Point Streetscape Plan focuses on transportation facilities improvements for all modes, including bike lanes, parking for cars and bikes, and curb bump-outs to shorten the distance for people crossing the street.
The National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (known as n4a) report, *Making Your Community Livable for All Ages: What’s Working!* provides communities with the tools to undertake the vital work of creating great places for all ages. The association’s members — 623 Area Agencies on Aging and 256 Title VI Native American aging programs located nationwide — plan for and provide a wide range of services and supports to help older adults age successfully and independently. The report highlights 10 key strategies that have been pivotal to the success of the group’s Livable Communities initiatives nationwide.

1. **Collaborate across traditional and nontraditional sectors.** Involve local government decision makers, planners, business and faith leaders, and academic professionals — to achieve "economies of scope" by generating single solutions that benefit multiple issues and populations.

2. **Celebrate racial and ethnic diversity.** Include the community’s diverse voices in the dialogue to tap rich cultural assets and to gain insight into the unique needs of each group.

3. **Build individual relationships.** Foster connections with people in each sector, such as a business person or a faith-based leader, who will assume the role of a Livable Communities champion by leveraging their networks to spread the word.
4. Honor your unique local community. Adopt a narrative that resonates by leveraging historic, cultural, or other unique attributes of your community that tend to unite people.

5. Revere older adults. Shift cultural perceptions of older adulthood by helping individuals embrace their own aging while also promoting a change in attitude on a community-wide basis by developing intergenerational programs and public awareness campaigns, among other efforts.

6. Embrace longevity as an opportunity. Leverage the social capital asset that older adults represent as a critical part of the solution to meeting the needs of your aging community. Solicit their input during the planning process.

7. Tackle the social factors that determine community wellness. Address social determinants of health, including social inclusion, economic well-being, adequate transportation options, a navigable built environment, appropriate housing choices, and access to services.

8. Seize opportunities to infuse age in everything. Embed an "age in everything" lens into all aspects of community decision making; educate key stakeholders about the needs and talents of older adults and integrate this knowledge into the process.

9. Send the right messages. An "aging" frame may not resonate with all stakeholders, so customize messages accordingly. For example, local governments might respond more positively to aging programs when there is recognition that there must be buy-in from community stakeholders to ensure their long-term success.

10. Leverage local dollars for livability. Make your efforts sustainable by identifying key staff and securing financial support from the community to keep their work going. Look to community foundations, private philanthropy, and in-kind donations.

Stephanie Firestone is the program director of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging’s Livable Communities Collaborative.