Making communities livable for residents of all ages

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By Adina Wingate For the Arizona Daily Star

Did you know?

Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) were established under the 1973 Older Americans Act (OAA) as the on-the-ground organizations charged with helping vulnerable older adults live with independence and dignity in their homes and communities.

About PCOA

Pima Council on Aging provides a gateway to services, assistance, advocacy and information and referrals. Established in 1967, PCOA is the designated Area Agency on Aging for the older residents and family caregivers of Pima County.

Contact information

Pima Council on Aging

8467 E. Broadway

Helpline: (520) 790-7262

www.pcoa.org

www.facebook.com/pimacouncilonaging

Coming up

Next month I will write about the Older Americans Act as it marks its 50th anniversary on July 14, 2015.

Every time I read another study about ‘best places’ to retire, I briefly entertain the fantasy of relocating.

But invariably realize there is no place like home for me. It’s here at the place that I have called home for over 40 years, surrounded by family and friends.
When I ask family and friends how to make a city, town or county more livable rather than lauding other places, there is a short list of characteristics. They include: affordability, access to services, ability to maintain mobility, and ways to stay connected to community and others.

Those characteristics are commonly sought by older and younger adults alike.

A new report by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging released last week, “Making Your Community Livable for All Ages: What’s Working?,” profiles six U.S. communities that are working to improve the quality of life in their towns and cities for older adults – and by extension, all their residents.

In the report are 10 strategies for improving access to housing, transportation, services and social activities, with a focus on the barriers sometimes faced by older adults.

Ultimately, the national group hopes that more cities and towns will be motivated to make places to “age in community,” a broader term than the home-focused “aging in place” phrase.

For me, a livable community is a good places to grow up and grow old.

What Makes a Community Livable?

The report defines a livable community as one that:

- Enables citizens to thrive across their lifespan.
- Ensures that social supports are in place so people can age there.
- Ensures that people have affordable housing choices that are appropriate for their needs at different ages and abilities.
- Enables people to get around by providing transportation options and by designing public spaces with ramps and level surfaces.
- Provides basic amenities like a grocer and pharmacy nearby, so residents don’t need to get in a car to meet their basic daily needs.
- Fosters social interaction and community involvement through the creation of intergenerational public spaces and opportunities for engagement.

Celebrating Older Americans

May also marks the annual observance of Older Americans Month. Tucson Mayor Jonathan Rothschild issued a proclamation urging us all to take time in May to celebrate older adults, and the people who serve and support them, as powerful and vital individuals who contribute to community well-being.

Some of us also get to witness rare community events where our oldest local residents gather to celebrate their long, storied lives. In fact, two weeks ago, Pima Council on Aging and TMC hosted the 28th Salute to Centenarians, an annual invitational celebration of the lives of our oldest local residents. It included readings of biographies and slide shows for each honoree plus entertainment and boxed lunches. There were 119 centenarians identified this year and 39 attended the annual celebration May 1.

With the longevity boom, today’s older adults desire and will likely have a very different aging experience than that of their parents and grandparents. Current trends indicate that fewer of them will move to traditional retirement communities or age-segregated housing. Instead, they wish to remain in the homes or in the communities where they have established roots – to “age in community.”

These new older adults intend to continue to be active in their communities. Many will remain in the paid or unpaid workforce, and they expect to be civically engaged and respected for their contributions.
Pima Council on Aging also has been at the forefront of fostering creative ways to promote aging in community.

An example is the network of 18 neighborhood-based volunteer groups where elder neighbors are provided assistance to help them remain in their homes.

This network of groups known as the Neighbors Care Alliance mobilizes over 1,300 volunteers to lend a hand to about 2,200 clients annually, with a value of $1.3 million a year in donated services, according to PCOA Neighbors Care Alliance. Through the Neighbors Care Alliance, PCOA is an active partner in our local community change efforts in our neighborhoods, cities, and county.

And PCOA is tasked with the responsibility for planning, coordinating and advocating for aging services at the community level, in its role as the designated Area Agency on Aging (AAA).

This month, take time to celebrate Older Americans Month by acknowledging older adults and the people who serve and support them in your life.

Adina Wingate is the director of marketing and public relations for the Pima Council on Aging. Contact her at awingate@pcoa.org.