Making Cities and Towns Livable for All Ages

Creative ways some places are helping residents "age in community"

posted by Liza Kaufman Hogan, May 11, 2015

A message to combat ageism in York County, Pennsylvania
Courtesy: National Association of Area Agencies on Aging

Every time I see one of those Best Places to Live lists, I think something like, "Well sure, I'd love to live in Irvine, California but my family, friends and home are all here, 2,000 miles away."

But what if we reversed the process and asked how to make a city, town or county more livable rather than lauding the places that already have their act together?

This is what the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a) is doing with the fascinating report the group released this week, "Making Your Community Livable for All Ages: What's Working?"

In it, n4a profiles six U.S. communities working to boost the quality of life in their towns and cities for older adults — and by extension — all residents. The report also identifies 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 Association of Area Agencies on Aging hopes that more cities and towns will be
inspired to make themselves places to "age in community," a broader term than the home-focused "age in place" phrase.

“The value of the report is that it is drawn from the experiences of local communities and can be used as an engagement tool (with) real-world guidance for communities,” said Stephanie Firestone, program director for n4a's Livable Communities program.

What Makes a Community Livable?

In the report, n4a 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 into a car to meet their daily needs
- fosters social interaction and community involvement through the creation of intergenerational public spaces and opportunities for engagement

Six communities identified as Livable Community Collaboratives are piloting programs to achieve these goals by engaging local government, businesses, developers, nonprofits and faith-based organizations and other groups.

Educating Candidates and Transit Users

For example, in Larimer County, Colo., The Partnership for Age Friendly Communities organized a nonpartisan candidates’ forum focused on aging issues for its November 2014 election. Lynda Meyer, director of Larimer's Area Agency on Aging (whose organization helped organize the event) said several candidates told her they were thankful to be better educated on the issues raised, not just because they hoped the attendees would vote for them but because they'd need the information to legislate on them.
Larimer County also developed a “Try Transit” campaign to show those accustomed to driving or being driven how to use Fort Collins’ MAX rapid bus system to visit local businesses. Participants received a discounted lunch and did some shopping before taking the bus back.

For both projects, the partnership enlisted the help of boomers through “self-directed volunteer teams” who organized and executed the programs. Meyers said this was very effective since her Area Agency on Aging has found that boomer volunteers prefer to take charge of a project from start to finish rather than show up for a few hours a week to do work that someone else has organized.

**Tackling Ageism First**

In York County, Pa., the Livable Community Collaborative made its top goal increasing the number of residents indicating they had a positive attitude about older adults and their own aging. Cathy Bollinger, managing director of Embracing Aging for the York County Community Foundation, said the goal floated to the top when the group realized it couldn’t achieve other goals, such as improving transportation and housing, without tackling ageism.

“At the community foundation we are all about [building] a vibrant community, and we can’t do that if we don’t respect and revere older adults,” Bollinger said.

To counter negative views of older people, York County’s collaborative is rolling out a “You See/I See” media campaign contrasting how some people view older adults versus how older adults view themselves. York County is also using self-directed volunteer teams to lead training to combat ageism.

**Ideas for Better Transit, Housing and Understanding**
The four other communities highlighted in the report are:

- Miami Gardens, Fla., which is working on a home-maintenance program for fixed-income seniors and creating an age-friendly business initiative
- Monroe County, N.Y., which is engaging public and private partners to address the transportation needs of those over 60 and people with disabilities through a ride-share program and better coordinated services
- Santa Fe, N.M., which has developed a toolkit to guide neighborhood conversations about the cultural needs of a diverse community
- Wichita, Kansas, which is organizing a “complete streets” initiative to promote a safer walking and bicycling environment

Firestone hopes the report will spur other cities, counties and towns to try new approaches to meet the transportation, housing and health needs of residents, so people who want to stay in their communities can and will.

To see how your town rates for livability, the report recommends using the AARP Livability Index and checking the Milken Institute’s Best Cities for Successful Aging, which rates 352 metropolitan areas on the services and opportunities provided for residents as they age.