Why Are There So Few Age-Friendly Cities?

Aside from New York and Portland, Ore., the list is small

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August 12, 2015
Next Avenue Blogger

I recently participated in the Age Boom Academy program, Global Aging: Danger Ahead? run by Columbia University’s Robert N. Butler Columbia Aging Center. While there, I heard a lot about New York City’s impressive efforts to be an “age-friendly” city.

That got me wondering: Why are a few communities, like New York and Portland, Ore., working to become more age-friendly for their residents but so many others aren’t? Is it due to political leadership and canniness (or a lack of it)? Do the age of the residents, the workforce and the local customers have an effect? Does it come down to whether there’s money in a city’s budget?

Consider:

- There are only 60 U.S. communities in the AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities
- Mayors in just 136 of the nation’s 19,000 cities signed the Milken Institute’s 2014 Best Cities for Successful Aging Mayor’s Pledge, “committing to make their cities work better for older adults and to enable older adults to strengthen their cities and improve lives for all generations through purposeful work and volunteerism”
- The World Health Organization’s (WHO) Global Age-friendly Cities and Communities list has merely 258 cities and communities in 30 cities around the world
- The National League of Cities 2015: State of the Cities Report is silent about efforts to make cities more age-friendly

Aging Nation, But Few Age-Friendly Communities
Clearly, there aren’t many age-friendly places at a time when the United States is looking at a doubling of its older population in the next 20 to 25 years. The Milken Institute’s Successful Aging report said overall progress “remains too slow” fostering age-friendly policies and practices in the U.S.

“The aging community is at fault as much as anyone,” says John Feather, Chief Executive Officer of Grantmakers in Aging, whose Community AGEnda Initiative with the Pfizer Foundation has made over $4 million in grants to five age-friendly projects in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Indiana and the greater Kansas City area. “We have not done enough to make clear that aging is not about old people. If we make it about the frail old, we are not going to be successful to get age-friendly communities and will never get the political will,” notes Feather.

Lisa Warth, who oversees WHO’s Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities, looks to the communities themselves. “Cities and communities, their infrastructures and services are still predominantly oriented at the needs and schedules of the able-bodied working population,” she told me “and are only slowly adapting to the diverse capacities, realities, needs and preferences of their residents.”

Paul Irving, Chairman for the Future of Aging at the Milken Institute, says some cities “benefit by a collection of infrastructure characteristics” that make them more age-friendly than others, such as a vibrant mass transit system. But, Irving adds, “I think a lot of it has to do with leadership.”

How Bloomberg’s Team Did It

Former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg has garnered praise for making age-friendliness a municipal priority during his administration. In 2010, NYC became the first member of the World Health Organization’s Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities. Bloomberg’s administration beefed up the number of benches at city bus stops, created senior hours at city pools and more.

Ruth Finkelstein, Associate Director of the Columbia Aging Center, who directed the Age-Friendly New York City Initiative, explained why such changes happened. “It was the first time it became an effort overtly with government partners and with an explicitly city-wide focus,” Finkelstein recalled. In other words, this wasn’t about, say, the New York City Parks Department deciding to make parks better for older residents. Every agency was instructed to consider the city’s aging population in its policies and programs.

Bloomberg instructed his department heads: “I’m not going to set up another program. Tell me how we can better serve older people using the resources you have in a better way,” says Feather.

“Becoming an age-friendly city,” says Finkelstein, “is about saying every time we renovate or build a new subway station, it will be accessible and its signage will be intelligible across all ages.”

It’s why you see age-friendliness in Portland, Ore., says Feather. “They’ve been working on this for 30 years,” he adds. “It turns out that most of the things old people need are good for the rest of the community, too.”

What’s Happening in Iowa City

That’s the thinking in Iowa City, Iowa, too — the “best small city” for successful aging in the Milken Institute’s 2014 Best Places for Successful Aging list. The irony is, Iowa City is typically thought of as a college town, with the University of Iowa there. Just 8 percent of its residents are 65+. “We’re not Boca Raton,” laughs Mayor Matthew Hayek, who’s been in charge there since 2010.
Hayek was a panelist at the recent White House Conference on Aging due to his city’s exemplary efforts. A humble guy (“Iowa City has been committed to successful aging and senior issues for three and a half decades”), he says: “We try to look at as much of our programming and capital decisions and budgeting through the lens of our senior population, but not to the exclusion of our other constituencies.”

Iowa City offers builders bonuses for new construction aimed at seniors; tries to locate services near where residents live; just approved Iowa’s first inter-generational co-housing project; provides door-to-door transit service for the disabled and has a dedicated senior center commission advising the city on senior issues.

“Our overall intent is to promote purposeful aging,” says Hayek. “We want our senior population to not be isolated, but to be engaged.”

Interestingly, Iowa City isn’t one of AARP’s Age-friendly communities. Mayor Hayek told me he wasn’t familiar with that list.

The AARP Age-friendly List

About that list: AARP essentially took the World Health Organization’s concept and ran with it stateside about three years ago. “The idea was to connect [WHO’s list] to our efforts to create more livable communities,” says Rodney Harrell, Director of the AARP Livable Communities program. “We want to get cities to the point where they work for people of all ages.”

Harrell says he’s found that age-friendly places are sometimes “cases of a community facing a large number of adults and want to figure out how to deal with it.” Sometimes, he adds, they’re “communities with strong leadership on making advances for older adults.”

What’s key, says Harrell, is that the community has “the support of people who can implement those changes.” It’s not enough to just have a plan, he notes.

When I asked Harrell why more U.S. communities aren’t on AARP’s list, he said “there’s a little bit of a barrier to entry.” He’s referring to AARP’s serious application and assessment process, which can take a few years.

“It’s not as easy as signing a pledge or saying you’re going to do something,” says Harrell. “A community has to have the capacity to actually do this.”

And why don’t cities — or at least the National League of Cities — see becoming age-friendly as, if not a priority, then at least a consideration? “We have more work to do,” says Harrell. “So do the folks who run the leadership of cities.”

Transformations In the Shadows

One thing I’ve learned looking into the age-friendly business: Some communities are making strides to become better places for older residents but just aren’t drawing attention to themselves or showing up on lists.

“I know there are places doing great stuff that don’t have a designation and aren’t even seeking it,” says Finkelstein. Adds Warth: “Many cities and communities around the world have dedicated policies and services aimed at improving the quality of life of seniors without being connected to one of the networks or initiatives promoting age-friendly cities and communities.”
For instance, the *Making Your Community Livable for All Ages* report from the National Area Agencies on Aging cited places like York County, Pa., which had an “Embracing Aging” campaign, and Miami Gardens, Fla., which created a home repair and maintenance program to help older adults age in place. Last week, the Denver Regional Council of Governments held a summit discussing challenges facing older residents of Denver and solutions to them.

Feather says the communities that Grantmakers in Aging and the Pfizer Foundation are assisting have completely different projects from each other. Each is raising an amount equal to a third of the grant money they’re receiving and, Feather notes, they all share one goal: “To make it a great place to grow up and grow old.”

**The Future for Age-Friendly Cities**

What’s the future hold for age-friendly cities?

Irving, of the Center for the Future on Aging, is optimistic.

“I have a sense this conversation about how cities can serve this new era of aging is more of a subject of discussion than it ever has been and is likely to accelerate,” he says. However, he adds, “The process of becoming age-friendly is not one of a year or two or three; it’s a generational process. It’s not flipping a switch; transforming cities takes a long time.”

Feather agrees. “Bloomberg used to say: ‘It takes 50 years to be an age-friendly city, but if we don’t start today, in 50 years, we still won’t be one.’ Grantmakers in Aging’s next project: making rural communities more age-friendly.

Iowa City’s Hayek expects we’ll see the age-friendly communities trend grow as the population ages — and for the cities’ self-preservation.

“I have to think it will continue to increase due to the sheer number of boomers and the increasing lifespans that people will enjoy,” he said. “Most cities don’t want to lose population.”