Agency looks for ways to make Larimer County age-friendly

The Larimer County Summit on Aging earlier this month focused on four priority areas

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What will make Larimer County a more age-friendly community is the main question asked earlier this month during the 2015 Larimer County Summit on Aging.

The question was first considered five years ago by looking at the services already in place, then the Summit on Aging: Creating Age-Friendly Communities on May 7 focused on four priority areas to look toward the future. Those areas include housing, mobility, health and wellness, and the culture of aging.

"First of all, it's awareness of why it's important that we consider building livable communities, and the other goal was to bring people in one room from different sectors of the community," said Bonnie Shetler, chairwoman of the Partnership for Age-Friendly Communities in Larimer County's hearing committee.

Day-Long Summit

The partnership sponsored the day-long summit, which was at the Fort Collins Senior Center, to educate and engage business, government and community leaders, service providers and others on the issues surrounding major growth in the aging population. Over the next 20 years, the population age 65 and older in Larimer County is predicted to grow by 140 percent, making the Fort Collins-Loveland region the 12th fastest-growing metro region in the nation.

"It's growing and living and aging in place," said Linda Aron, a member of the Loveland Senior Advisory Board, about defining age-friendly communities as having multiple housing options and amenities nearby. "We need to engage younger people, everybody really, to try to develop more age-friendly communities and activities."

The 2010 summit had a turnout of 120 people, many of them seniors, while the 2015 summit brought in 230 people that included stakeholders, leaders and members of the community.

The Larimer County Office on Aging and the Foundation on Aging put on the first Summit on Aging in 2010, but decided achieving an age-friendly community should involve more community organizations for future initiatives, projects and summits. The two agencies formed
PAFC two years ago to represent a variety of organizations and initiatives intended to improve livability for seniors in the county.

Four Working Groups

To do this, the partnership formed working groups to look at the four priority areas for the Larimer County Livable Communities Project, with the Foundation on Aging serving as the lead agency and the Larimer County Office on Aging and the Fort Collins Human Relations Commission as partner leads. PAFC

The effort received a technical assistance grant from the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging for 2013 and 2014 to put on workshops, including one in February, and form the working groups. The county was one of six communities to receive the grant.

The working groups, consisting of approximately eight volunteers per group ages 50 and older, established a mission and short- and long-range goals and had to complete at least one project in a short amount of time as a self-directed volunteer team. The groups were initially directed by the priority groups consisting of stakeholder members.

The working groups and their projects included:

• Housing: surveying creative housing options and identifying current housing opportunities for seniors, including the lack of affordable housing and lack of affordable assisted living.

• Mobility: increasing use of transit and other transportation options.

• Health and wellness: identifying barriers to walking.

• Culture of aging: writing monthly media articles and hosting a candidates forum for the 2014 election on the issues that impacted the quality of life for seniors.

Next Steps

The 2015 summit looked at how to move the four priority issues forward to help seniors become more independent, active and connected to the community, Shetler said.

The summit focused on a broader level on what makes communities livable for all age groups as they age and what's already working. The topics included creating age-friendly communities, the demographics of aging, the economics of aging and the importance of housing. The summit started with several speakers and audience discussions and ended with small group discussions.

The next step is for each priority group to come up with a project, amenable for the working groups, Shetler said.

"We really think that the grass-roots effort that's supported by these volunteer teams can be accomplished with minimal additional resources," Shetler said. "The (PAFC) steering committee is waiting for the groups to tell them what they need."
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