

Age-Friendly Rural Planning

Even modest efforts from volunteers and their partner organizations can make rural communities more livable for older residents.

By Jeffrey Spivak



Officials scrapped plans for Western-themed benches made of elk antlers in favor of benches designed to accommodate seniors — with rounded armrests, slightly angled backrests, and no sharp edges — in downtown Jackson Hole, Wyoming's Town Square. Photo by Ivan Sebborn/Alamy Stock Photo.

As Candy Eaton and her husband approached the end of their working careers, they grappled with a decision faced by many older adults: where to live in retirement. They owned a 19th-century farmhouse in Maine, but for several years their jobs allowed them to winter in the warmth of Florida. There, they could take walks, go to art shows, volunteer at community events — basically lead a full and healthy life.

The Eatons found themselves homesick and returned to Maine to live year-round in 2017, but their rural town of Sullivan, population 1,200, felt quiet and empty during the winter. There wasn't much going on when the snow piled up. And there weren't many places for retirees to visit with friends even if they wanted to brave the cold.

"I saw what people had access to in Florida, and we didn't have that here," Eaton says.

So she decided to do something about it.

In 2018, Sullivan joined a national network of age-friendly communities. Becoming an officially designated age-friendly community involves a comprehensive planning process resulting in policies and programs that make communities more livable so older residents remain connected and independent.

Deep Dive

[AARP's 8 Domains of Livability](#)

This framework can be used to organize communities' efforts to become more livable for older residents and people of all ages.

So far across the U.S., age-friendly actions have taken many forms, such as planning new senior centers, making park enhancements, adding appropriate transit routes, and even working with planners on housing solutions like accessory dwelling units (ADUs). In rural areas, though, age-friendly efforts tend to start as grassroots planning, producing results that may appear modest but which still make a difference in small communities. In Sullivan's case, actions have included building a community garden, recruiting seniors to serve on community boards such as a planning committee, and launching a wellness fair — actions designed to develop and maintain social connections.

"It's been a good way to keep people engaged and in touch," Eaton says. "That's critical for a rural community."

The network of age-friendly communities was started in the U.S. by AARP in 2012, and it's affiliated with the World Health Organization's global network. It has now grown in the U.S. to about 500 communities, with participants doubling in recent years. The network is dominated by bigger cities and suburbs, places that tend to have more resources for community improvements. For rural communities, age-friendly planning often relies on volunteers, with fundraising sometimes involving passing the hat. So age-friendly solutions often involve things the townspeople can do themselves.

But how rural communities approach age-friendly planning can still lead to some key outcomes — with lessons to share, even for bigger, denser places. To highlight some of rural America's proactive actions to improve their age-friendly livability, *Planning* magazine identified four rural communities in different parts of the country that have focused their plans in different ways.

These rural communities have also embraced some ideals set out in *Lessons in New Ruralism*. The fall 2020 report is an initiative of APA's Northern New England Chapter and APA's Small Town and Rural Planning Division. It highlights a "blossoming renaissance" of rural planning, with towns welcoming new ideas to "invest in social sustainability" along with "fostering community" and "strengthening their safety net," among other things — all crucial to creating communities that work for everybody.

"What's important for age-friendly planning is understanding options," says Scott Ball, a principal with Commons Planning, an Atlanta-based firm that plans and designs age-friendly communities. "It's not a one-size-fits-all fix. It's about expanding your options and offering a variety of options that fit a community's needs and challenges."

A Focus on Functionable Ability



The World Health Organization defines healthy aging as "the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables well-being in older age," including the ability to be mobile; to learn, grow, and make decisions; to meet basic needs; to build and maintain relationships; and to contribute.

Driven by demographics

There's no mystery about what's driving the growing interest in age-friendly planning: demographics. The number of Americans aged 65 and older has already doubled since 1980 and has grown more than 50 percent since 2000. Every day another 10,000 Americans celebrate their 65th birthday, and one of every five Americans will be 65 or older by 2030. With baby boomers joining the greatest generation in retirement, the U.S. Census Bureau predicts that by 2034 more people will be aged 65 and older than aged 18 and younger.

"The more that we talk about the coming demographic changes, the more that communities naturally look for something to do about it," says Danielle Arigoni, director of the AARP Livable Communities initiative, which includes the age-friendly network.

However, communities today aren't always well suited for older adults, especially the elderly. A sprawling landscape requires driving to access necessities like groceries and amenities such as parks. A lack of transportation options complicates matters for those who don't drive or can't. And a housing stock dominated by single-family homes doesn't offer many alternatives for older adults, who no longer want a large space or yard. All these issues are exacerbated in smaller cities and rural areas.

"This model doesn't work for most of us as we get older," declared the age-friendly action plan for Maple Grove, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis.

But for places that do try to adapt for their aging populations, the benefits are numerous. Research has shown the social and economic cases for cities retaining and attracting older adults. A Washington State University study this year found older people are more likely to live longer in neighborhoods that are highly walkable. Meanwhile, a forecasting model done by the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) determined that its metro economy would benefit more by attracting new retirees to the region than by adding the same number of younger adults.

"Seniors are a critical part of our economic competitiveness," ARC concluded.

Becoming officially designated as "age-friendly" is a five-year process overseen by AARP involving a multistep planning program that includes a community needs assessment, an action plan, implementation, and follow-up evaluation. The recommended actions are explored in eight livability categories, or what AARP calls "domains."

In rural towns, older adult volunteers usually lead the process, but they also rely on partnerships and collaborations with community organizations and government agencies, including planning departments. That coordination proved important this year with the COVID-19 pandemic, which shut down some senior centers and programs. The established age-friendly network of volunteers and partners adapted by increasing their outreach to seniors in different ways, such as get-togethers via Zoom.

Senior service advocates hope that age-friendly planning doesn't end just with AARP's five-year process. Already, one outgrowth of the age-friendly effort has been the inclusion of senior-oriented elements in state and local housing, transportation, or comprehensive plans. Ohio's rural Clinton County, for instance, is exploring the inclusion of accessory dwelling units in the current update of its comprehensive plan. County planners foresee ADUs not only increasing the affordable housing supply but also possibly serving as an additional income source for seniors to "help them age in place in our community," says Taylor Stuckert, AICP, executive director of the county's Regional Planning Commission.

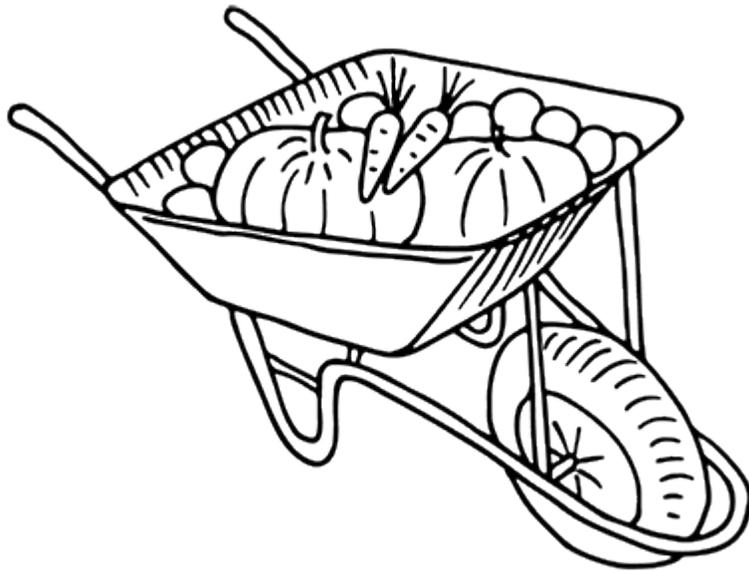
Emily Long, the associate director of the Regional Planning Commission, adds: "We want to build an age-friendly lens into our next decade of planning, so it's embedded and sustainable. That's not something we've done before."

Sullivan, Maine

Bring people together

Maine has the nation's oldest population, ranking first nationally in residents' median age, at 45 years old. It also ranks first in the percentage of residents aged 65 and older, at 21 percent, according to census data. So it's not surprising that Maine has the most localities (71) in AARP's age-friendly network.

"We're an older demographic, and this is home, this is where we want to be," says Jane Lafleur, a planning consultant who directs the Community Heart & Soul program for the Orton Family Foundations and serves on the board of the Maine Association of Planners. "People get motivated to take charge of their own future and make their communities a better place."



Sullivan, Maine

A community garden is one of the new gathering spots created for seniors. See the [Age-Friendly Sullivan Action Plan](#).

That's certainly the case in Sullivan along the state's southern coast. Candy Eaton's initial effort to gather a group of friends to brainstorm how to make their town more livable for seniors has resulted in an age-friendly action plan, released earlier this year. Many of the actions are aimed at lessening the homebound isolation of older adults and bringing them together more often.

New gathering spots have been created for seniors, including a community garden on town-donated land; the renovation of a room at the library for card games, knitting groups, and the like; and the launching of a "Bone Builders" class for strength and balance training. Plus, seniors have been encouraged to get more involved in the community, leading to several older adults winning election to the school and library boards and others volunteering for a committee advising a new town comprehensive plan.

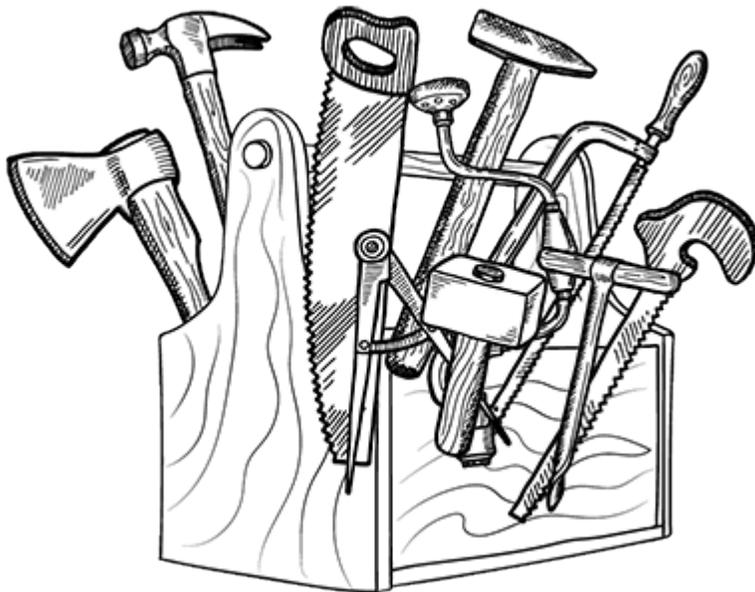
"I think people feel more connected with each other today," Eaton says.

Alexandria, Minnesota

Prioritize housing, new and old

This town of 13,000 people is nearly surrounded by lakes in the west-central part of the state, making it a recreation mecca. A 2016 survey of older adults found that it's also where people want to stay and age in place — 90 percent said so. The survey also revealed some challenges to that desire, namely when it comes to the housing stock. For one thing, homes typically had narrow hallways and doors and steep stairs, and companies that offer rehab services were in short supply.

In response, Age-Friendly Alexandria forged a grant-supported partnership with Habitat for Humanity to offer low-cost upgrades for residents aged 65 and older. A nurse visits with homeowners to determine their needs, such as grab bars, railings, widened doorways, and better lighting, and then the partnership helps pair the resident with a contractor. What started as a pilot project with five homes in 2017 is expected to expand to 20 next year, and even more in the years ahead.



Alexandria, Minnesota

Older residents wanted to stay in their homes. A [partnership with Habitat for Humanity](#) helps that happen.

"People are signing up for it like mad," says Dian Lopez, a retired university professor and cochair of Age-Friendly Alexandria.

The volunteer efforts launched with Age-Friendly Alexandria have led to changes in the community's comprehensive plan. *Alexandria 2040*, adopted in January 2020, directly addresses senior housing needs, calling for nearly 100 new units of senior housing options, including independent living and assisted living. Already, one newly approved project and another in the works could combine to meet most of the 100-unit goal, according to Mike Weber, Alexandria's community development director.

"The senior demographic is discussed throughout *Alexandria 2040*, since 52 percent of greater Alexandria households are headed by a person aged 55 or older," he says. "So the plan recommends designating 20 percent or more of conventional rental development as age-designated."

Carlsbad, New Mexico

Emphasize outreach, then build on it

Carlsbad has been known for decades as an idyllic retirement community, a place with warm weather, affordable housing, and a small-town vibe. Its chamber of commerce even has a director of retirement. So it was hardly surprising that Carlsbad become the first community in the state to join AARP's network in 2014, when it had 26,000 people, almost half of them Hispanic. But the age-friendly committee had no funding or budget, so one of its initiatives focused on simply improving communications to seniors about programs and activities available — a common aspect of rural age-friendly plans.



Carlsbad, New Mexico

Age-Friendly Carlsbad made better communication with seniors a priority. The city is also trying to incorporate age-friendly planning into its development specs; a new master-planned community includes senior housing.

A community events calendar with senior activities was created and added to local government websites. Facebook campaigns further publicized and educated seniors about opportunities ranging from health screenings to volunteer work, and local radio and television programs also promoted existing community resources for seniors.

"We felt we needed to get the word out more about issues that were important to seniors," says Stella Davis, who chairs Carlsbad's Age-Friendly Community Council.

Then the mid-decade oil boom in the New Mexico-Texas Permian Basin upended the town, bringing in a surge of oil-field workers that more than doubled Carlsbad's population. Housing became scarce, and home prices and rents soared so much that some seniors were priced out of town.

With some experience reaching out to older residents and in making sure that the needs of that demographic were being addressed in community programming, Carlsbad saw supporting senior's housing needs as critical. The planning department incorporated age-friendly planning into its activities, adding senior housing provisions in some new developments.

For instance, last year when the 1,300-acre Carlston Ranch master planned community was approved, it included 185 acres set aside for senior housing.

"We're now making an effort to incorporate age-friendly planning into our development specifications," says Jeff Patterson, Carlsbad's planning department director.

Jackson Hole, Wyoming

Make downtown more walkable

Teton County and the Town of Jackson sit in an area commonly referred to as "Jackson Hole," the well-known ski resort destination. The county of 10,000 people is considered one of the wealthiest in the country and the healthiest in Wyoming. As a result, when age-friendly volunteers assessed community needs, they didn't find it lacked many important necessities, like access to health care. Instead, meetings with seniors uncovered complaints about walkability.

More pedestrian seating was needed around town. Sidewalks needed to be cleared more in winter. Crosswalks needed to be safer. Parks needed to be more accessible.

In the last few years, Age Friendly Jackson Hole has worked toward fulfilling most of those pedestrian-related needs, with the help of some partnerships.

First, volunteers tackled downtown crosswalks, which became icy in winter and also obstructed by packed chunks of snow left by the curb from snowplows. Age-friendly volunteers came up with the idea of putting ski poles at crosswalks to help seniors stay balanced. Poles were donated and their handles wrapped in florescent green tape so they're visible. It has since been expanded to 10 intersections.

Meanwhile, the Town of Jackson was embarking on a downtown beautification project, and Age Friendly Jackson Hole worked with town officials to get new pedestrian benches designed to accommodate seniors — with rounded armrests, slightly angled backrests, and no sharp edges — rather than the Western-themed design made of antlers that the town had been considering.

"There's been a willingness on the town's part to seek out our input, and that by itself is a success," says Becky Zaist, cochair of Age Friendly Jackson Hole, who's also executive director of the town's senior center. "We realize more and more how partnerships are invaluable to get things done."

That's an insightful lesson for any rural age-friendly initiative.

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Resources

Unplugged: The Paradigm of Aging-Friendly Communities: Aging-friendly communities are crucial, and policy makers are grappling to stay ahead of the demographic curve. [In this APA Learn course](#), identify community-based policies and quick-action projects that can help, and see how higher education can play a role.

AARP's 8 Domains of Livability

This framework is used by many of the towns, cities, counties, and states in the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities to organize their efforts to become more livable for older residents and people of all ages. (Adapted from [AARP's article](#).)

- 1. OUTDOOR SPACES AND BUILDINGS.** People need public places to gather — indoors and out. Green spaces, seating, and accessible buildings (elevators, zero-step entrances, staircases with railings) can be used and enjoyed by people of all ages.
- 2. TRANSPORTATION.** Driving shouldn't be the only way to get around. Pedestrians need sidewalks and safe, crossable streets. Dedicated bicycle lanes benefit nondrivers and drivers alike. Public transit options can range from trains, buses, and light rail to taxis, shuttles, or ride-share services.
- 3. HOUSING.** AARP surveys consistently find that the vast majority of older adults want to reside in their current home or community for as long as possible. Doing so is possible if a home is designed or modified for aging in place, or if a community has housing options that are suitable for differing incomes, ages, and life stages.
- 4. SOCIAL PARTICIPATION.** Loneliness is often as debilitating a health condition as having a chronic illness or disease. Sadness and isolation can be combated by having opportunities to socialize and the availability of accessible, affordable, and fun social activities.
- 5. RESPECT AND SOCIAL INCLUSION.** Everyone wants to feel valued. Intergenerational gatherings and activities are a great way for young and older people to learn from one another, honor what each has to offer, and, at the same time, feel good about themselves.
- 6. WORK AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.** Why does work need to be an all-or-nothing experience? An age-friendly community encourages older people to be actively engaged in community life and has opportunities for residents to work for pay or volunteer their skills.
- 7. COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION.** Age-friendly communities recognize that information needs to be shared through a variety of methods since not everyone is tech-savvy, and not everyone has a smartphone or home-based access to the internet.
- 8. COMMUNITY AND HEALTH SERVICES.** At some point, every person of every age gets hurt, becomes ill, or simply needs some help. It's essential that residents are able to access and afford the services required.