

Healthy Communities Findings and Recommendations

The aging population is growing substantially. Between 2010 and 2040, there will be a 193% increase in the number of residents 65 and better in Clark County. By 2035, the United States will - for the first time ever - be a country that has more older adults than children. Knowing that these changes are coming down the road provides an opportunity for us to revisit and reevaluate how our local communities support healthy living for all ages.

We know that most people want to “age in place” in their homes and their communities and they want their homes and communities to meet their needs as they grow older. But many older adults are aging in suburban auto-dependent communities that lack many of the characteristics that contribute to healthy, independent living.

Older adults who practice good physical, psychological and social behaviors are more likely to remain healthy, live independently and incur fewer health-related costs. However, changes in our lifestyles over the past fifty years have led to negative impacts on our physical activity and health. From office jobs that replaced manual labor, to driving to meet most of our daily needs instead of walking, and increased television and computer use , to eating more processed foods - these changes have made substantial impacts on our health. Our social behavior has also been impacted. Our connection to others supports our mental and emotional wellbeing, however many adults face isolation as they age.

Healthy, livable communities are safe; have walkable streets; accessible housing and transportation options; provide access to needed services; and opportunities for residents of all ages to participate in community life.

Social isolation poses the same risk to one’s health as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.

If we continue to create places that inhibit, discourage or outright prevent older adults from interacting with others as they age — due to a loss of mobility, or even poor home design — we contribute to the pandemic of social isolation rather than solving for it.¹ (AARP)

Complete Neighborhoods

Research indicates that properly designed buildings, appropriate placement of structures, easy-to-reach parks and recreation opportunities, community spaces for social interaction, and access to healthy foods can have an extraordinary impact on people’s health both physically and emotionally. Nationally and locally, a growing number of older adults live in low-density urban areas that lack the components of a complete neighborhood where key services and amenities,

¹ Arigoni, Danielle, AARP Livable Communities: Preparing for an Aging Population

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such as parks, schools, libraries, shops and services are accessible within 20 minutes of your home by transit, walking, or rolling. Having convenient access to these places promotes physical activity and socialization, provides alternate modes of transportation (i.e. walking, bicycling, rolling) and can improve neighborhood safety.

Between 2000 and 2016, the share of older adults living in low-density tracts in 95 of the 100 largest US metros rose from 24 to 32 percent, an increase of almost 6 million adults.²

A complete neighborhood has a variety of housing options, grocery stores and other commercial services, quality public schools, public open spaces and recreational facilities, affordable active transportation options and civic amenities.

The most common function of zoning regulations is to separate uses, create individual zones for residential, commercial, and industrial uses. A complete neighborhood has a mix of uses within a neighborhood context, either through fine-grained zoning districts or mixed-use districts.

Interestingly, recent studies have shown that the preferences of the two largest generations – the baby boomers and the millennials – are converging. Many of the community characteristics older adults need and want are the same ones that attract younger adults and make communities more economically vibrant and successful. According to AARP, they both are attracted to places that offer a shorter commute, proximity to shops and services, a mix of homes, a mix of incomes, and robust public transit options.³

Recommendations:

Local governments should embrace complete neighborhoods as a concept and integrate it into planning policies, regulations, and plans. This would create neighborhoods where one has safe and convenient access to the goods and services needed in daily life. An important element of a complete neighborhood is that it is built at a walkable and bikeable human scale and meets the needs of people of all ages and abilities.

As local jurisdictions look to updating their comprehensive plans, zoning, and development regulations, consideration should be given regarding older adults and the design of complete neighborhoods. Some ideas for all local government could include:

- Plan for residential areas to have a variety of services and amenities, such as grocery stores and other commercial services; public open spaces and recreational facilities; transportation options; and healthcare services, near to people's homes
 - Review zoning maps to check for proximity of services to residential areas and consider possible adjustments
- Review and amend development code and long range plans (i.e. Comprehensive Plan, Parks Plan, etc.) to better address:
 - **Universal design** of parks, plazas and infrastructure (Call out box that has definition)

² Harvard

³ AARP, The Livability Economy: People, Places and Prosperity

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- Creation of more accessible, “visitable” housing development (Call out box that has definition)
- Providing benches/outdoor seating, lighting, public bathrooms in public spaces
- Ensuring facilities for safe walking, biking and rolling are provided with new construction and redevelopment
- Convenient transit service/access is available to more people

Parks and Recreation

Having access to parks and recreational opportunities can be particularly beneficial to older adults who may be at risk for social isolation and may have a higher risk than other age groups for deteriorating physical and mental health and sedentary lifestyles. Neighborhoods with more resources, such as parks, recreation centers, community centers, and libraries, may buffer residents’ cognitive decline by creating greater opportunities for social interaction and physical activity. However, not all county residents can easily access these facilities, due to transportation or mobility challenges. Having access to community green spaces, parks, walkways, and indoor recreation opportunities, provides a wealth of physical, mental and social benefits that not only benefit each individual but also improves community quality of life.

Recommendations:

There is a lot of potential to grow the park, trail, and recreation opportunities and network throughout the county. As jurisdiction’s update their parks plans, consider these ideas as ways of expanding these resources in the county.

- Develop detailed ordinances and regulations that help achieve the goals and vision of your parks plan and that helps to overcome transportation barriers to accessing parks, such as travel distances and aging and ability challenges.
- Local governments should consider using a tool like the City of Ridgefield’s Parks Flipbook. It provides descriptions and photographs of a variety of park styles and innovative ideas to help guide the development of new parks.
- Consider setting a goal for parks or open space. With every new development, a specific amount of land, determined by the local government, could be set aside for parks and open space (City of Ridgefield example).
- Ensure that parks are universally designed with amenities for both older adults and younger generations, and the interaction between the two.
- In appointing parks commissions and task forces, policy makers may want to consider cross-disciplinary approach, such as including a healthcare provider to better connect the health impacts of parks and recreation.
- Encourage the expansion of Rx Play to Clark County. The Oregon pilot program is a partnership between health care providers and Parks districts to connect children at risk of child obesity to parks and recreation programming and decrease barriers. The

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expanded program should focus on all ages, such as identifying older adults who need social connections.

- Specific to Clark County Council:

- i. Consider evaluating the concept of recreating the Clark-Vancouver metropolitan park district again.

- ii. Consider building a community center in the unincorporated Vancouver Urban Area.

Food Access and Health

Food insecurity is a growing threat to quality of life for many older adults. According to Clark County Public Health, only 17% of county residents live within a half-mile of a healthy food store, such as a supermarket or a farmer’s market, while approximately 41% of residents live within ½ mile of a fast food restaurant or convenience store. In rural areas, many live more than ten miles from a grocery store. A major component of a healthy community is the readily available, affordable and abundant selection of healthy eating options, such as conveniently located fresh produce markets, grocery stores, farmers’ markets or community gardens. While there are several farmers markets and grocery stores throughout the county, as well as multiple senior nutrition programs, there are still food insecurity challenges that our older adults face.

In the United States, the leading causes of death and largest sources of health care expenditure are linked to food and diet: diabetes, heart disease, stroke and some types of cancer (CHASUSA).⁴ (Call out box)

Recommendations:

Government agencies at the local, state, and federal level should prioritize the issue of inequitable food access in low-income, underserved areas. Policy interventions to increase access to healthy food in “food deserts” will help people eat a healthy diet, while contributing to community economic development.

- **Attract or develop grocery stores and supermarkets in underserved areas. (NEW)**
- Improve transportation access to healthy food options, such as grocery stores and farmers’ markets, for those with mobility challenges. Look for community partners and services for partnerships, such as the Human Services Council’s Volunteers in Motion transportation service.
- Establish policies and regulations on providing access to, and preservation of land to establish community gardens in urban areas.

⁴ Healthy Eating for Healthy Communities – chausa.org

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- Encourage the state legislative group focusing on food-related issues, to expand their work to address food concerns for seniors, such as their current initiative to address nursing facility food issues.
- The Local Strategies for Physical Activity and Nutrition (LSPAN) grant could be used to evaluate one of these initiatives for implementation (REVISED).

Urban Forestry

From lowering heating and cooling costs to improving air quality and promoting outdoor recreation and social interaction, urban forests enhance the quality of life to a growing aging population. Specifically related to the aging population, studies have documented that the experiences of urban trees, parks, and gardens can aide with attention restoration and stress reduction, contribute to positive emotions, and can promote social engagement and social support. For older adults, such outcomes are important for healthy lifestyles. Unfortunately, canopy loss is increasing in Clark County, primarily from development. For example, the City of Vancouver was estimated to have an urban tree canopy of 46% in 1972 but by 2010 it had declined to under 20%.

Some of the county's local governments are working towards reversing the loss of trees. For example, the City of Vancouver is working on an attainable goal to increase canopy citywide to 28% by the year 2030 through multiple restoration efforts. The City of Camas recently adopted an urban tree ordinance to increase the number of trees due to the impact new developments have on existing trees.

Recommendations

More local governments should be setting goals to increase Clark County's canopy as urban forests provide numerous economic, environmental, and social benefits to communities and their residents.

Clark County:

- Create a county urban forestry commission to address concerns about tree canopy loss with rapid urbanization of the Vancouver Urban Growth Area.

All local governments:

- Establish a tree canopy goal and policies in each local government's Comprehensive Plan.
 - Implement the goal and policies through development regulations (NEW).
- Establish a wider planting strip road standard, to allow for the planting of larger street trees. (This is a suggestion from staff.)

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Community-wide:

- Identify community partners who can help address increased need of people aging in place who will need help with tree and yard maintenance (i.e. cleaning gutters), such as neighborhood associations and community service providers.

Value of Engaging Older Adults

Transforming how we think about the value of an aging population and how communities position themselves to harness the tremendous resource older adults provide, will be beneficial for all. Social engagement contributes to greater physical, mental and emotional health and well-being in older adults avoiding the negative impacts of isolation. In addition, older adults who are socially engaged in their communities can share their knowledge, talent, skills, experience and wisdom, allowing them to contribute with a positive and powerful impact. We need to continue to encourage older adult volunteerism and employment opportunities within our communities.

It can also be economically beneficial to local businesses to engage with older adults and encourage their patronage as they are a diverse, fast-growing demographic that already controls 50% of discretionary spending in the U.S.⁵ Making changes that benefit older adults can help expand your customer base and increase your bottom line, but many businesses could be doing more to be welcoming to people of all ages.

Volunteers over the age of 55 contribute more than \$1 million annually to the economy in Southwest Washington (Human Services Council).

Recommendations

Older adults contribute dramatically to our communities both as volunteers and as consumers of local businesses. It will be beneficial to our communities to both support volunteerism and encourage businesses to become more “age-friendly.”

Community-wide:

- Increase volunteerism by replacing barriers with flexible hours, incentives and maximizing knowledge skills. Organizations that rely on volunteers should offer options that allow people to engage in different ways, at different times and at different levels of commitment. Informal volunteering should be valued and encouraged.
- Encourage “age-friendly” business practices. Encourage local business organizations to create a local business initiative, to provide educational materials on physical changes and practices businesses can implement to attract, serve, and retain older adults as customers and employees. Changes and practices could include:
 - i. Marketing practices that promote products, services, and business features that are good for older adults; websites and signage that uses large, clear fonts

⁵ Age Friendly NYC – Age-Friendly Business Resource Guide

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- ii. Ambiance: Have adequate lighting throughout; minimize excessively loud music and noise
- iii. Design: place products within reach on shelves or offer help reaching items; provide publicly accessible bathrooms; places to sit
- iv. Experience: Train staff to provide respectful and patient human contact and how to assist those with physical challenges
- v. Hiring practices: consider having flexible position responsibilities to accommodate employee needs and skills

Advance Care Planning

People are more likely to receive care that matches their goals and honors their wishes if they have participated in advance care planning. For instance, seventy percent of people prefer to spend their last days at home, however, seventy percent die in long-term care or a hospital. Advance care planning is your chance to make decisions about the care you want to receive at a time when you might be unable to speak for yourself. At any age, a medical crisis could leave you too ill to make your own healthcare decisions. Advance care planning involves learning about the types of decisions that might need to be made, considering those decisions ahead of time, and then letting others know—both your family and your healthcare providers—about your preferences. Currently, there is no nationwide or statewide directory accessible to healthcare professionals, so only those healthcare agents and hospitals that you provide it to, would have access to it.

Advance care directives and Physician Order for Life Sustaining Treatment (POLST) are two tools available in Washington state for advance care planning. An advance directive is a legal form that you fill out to describe the kinds of medical care you want to have if something happens to you and you can't speak for yourself. Medical providers in Washington are required to meet your wishes if the form has been notarized or witnessed by two people. Advance directives include identifying a healthcare agent who is the person you designate to make healthcare decisions on your behalf. If you do not designate a healthcare agent, there is a predetermined legal order of decision maker in Washington state. A Physician Order for Life Sustaining Treatment (POLST) is a different document than an advance directive. It is the only document emergency medical professionals can follow in the field. (Call out box)

Recommendations

Raise awareness of advanced care planning to help elevate this important tool so that more people receive the care that they want.

- Advocate for creation of a statewide Provider Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (POLST) and advance directive repository.
- Request county and city councilors to recognize April 16 as National Health Care Decisions Day, to inspire, educate and empower the public and providers about the importance of advance care planning.

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- For the healthcare community, increase POLST conversation training for **health care professionals** in the region.

Older adults and pets

Owning a pet can be physically and mentally beneficial for people of all ages. Animals can help reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and increase social interaction and physical activity. From companionship to security, pets can provide older adults a better quality of life and improve aging in place.

Recommendations

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