



Elements for Successfully Creating Aging Friendly Communities – Ten Best Practices

Adapted from *Building a Collaborative Community Response to Aging in Place; A Guide to Creating an Age Friendly Maine One Community at a Time* (2013, Kimball, Maurer, Parham). Research of best practices reveals the following 10 elements are necessary in the development of aging friendly communities:

1. Define community by geographic boundaries.

The definition of “community” varies by geography, population and culture. Communities should define for themselves the geographic boundaries of the community within which they will work. This may be a neighborhood, a town, an island, a series of towns or a county. However a community defines itself, its boundaries should be clear from the start.

2. Create a forum for key aging in place stakeholders to share information and develop a consensual approach to creating an aging friendly community.

Local elected officials and/or agency heads often play the role of conveners. The stakeholders should represent both traditional leaders on aging issues and representatives of other agencies, organizations, and industry sectors that affect residents’ ability to age in place successfully, (such as land use planning, architecture, transportation policy, and community development). Public, civic, business and nonprofit leaders must be involved from the start. As a starting place, identify opportunities to integrate aging in place issues within existing programs and initiatives.

3. Involve older adults in all steps of the planning, assessment, implementation and evaluation processes.

Older adults representing diverse demographic backgrounds must be at the table from the beginning. Best practices reflect a model of participatory, collaborative governance that involves older people in a meaningful and authentic way in governance and leadership, rather than consulting with them individually or in focus groups.

4. Assess the community needs of older adults and identify the assets of the community.

A successful aging friendly initiative is tailored to meet the unique needs of its community by mobilizing its available assets. Communities have conducted telephone surveys, focus groups, interviews, and/or summits. The common element is the authentic and diverse participation of older adults in these processes. Successful initiatives have focused on the strengths, assets and aspirations of its older adults and of the community itself, rather than just on the needs or deficits of its population or community. Survey tools are readily available.

5. Conduct aging friendly community readiness surveys.

Successful initiatives have conducted aging friendly readiness surveys to help them devise a plan based on a set of common indicators of “aging friendliness.” Successful communities have either developed their own tool, or adapted or used in its entirety one of the series of readiness tools available. It is

important to note that much of the information needed for an aging friendly community readiness survey may have already been collected and is easily available. The challenge is pulling it together and reviewing and analyzing it in relation to the goal.

6. Use Strong visioning and planning sessions.

Successful initiatives have followed their research with a strong visioning and planning effort, in which various community partners (the Team) have come together to establish clear priorities and boundaries for the project and agree on what success will look like. From there, the work diverges quite broadly, focusing on a whole range of topics or issues of particular interest to the community. Strategic plans that result in short and long term goals are critical to both “getting things done” on a day-to-day basis, and ensuring a plan for long term viability. Engaging seasoned strategic planners or meeting facilitators is a success factor for many initiatives.

7. Created focused action plans.

Successful initiatives took the time to create focused actionable items that would yield early (within 6 months) successes and could be easily measureable. Early victories were publicized with the general public to earn credibility for the Team, garner additional resources and participants, and motivate participants to carry on. Action items could include anything from the creation of a comprehensive strategic plan, to mounting an awareness campaign, to designing a new transportation system.

8. Allocate staff time for coordination.

Successful initiatives recognize the importance of allocating resources to manage the coordination of the aging friendly community development process. For some groups, this meant hiring staff, for others, it meant reallocated resources to allow existing staff to designate time to the project. In either case, the team understands that the work requires focused coordination to keep the process moving.

9. Bring private and public funders to the table early.

Successful initiatives recognized that building an aging friendly community is not a short term project or a quick fix. “Staying power” received equal amounts of attention as the start up. Bringing funders to the table – both private and public – early was important to addressing sustainability. Researchers suggest that to improve the chances for sustainability, special focus must be put on planning, funding diversification and long-term partnership.

10. Utilize resources and support from aging friendly community networks.

There are a number of organizations nationally and within states that can provide critical support to the development of aging friendly communities. Successful initiatives capitalized on these existing resources rather than re-inventing the wheel and working on strategies in isolation from others already engaged in this work.