

NCIOM TASK FORCE ON HEALTHY AGING

Nationwide, the older adult population is growing at a rate faster than any other age group. North Carolina currently ranks 9th in the United States in the number of people aged 65 and older.¹ By 2028, 1 in 5 North Carolinians will be aged 65 and older, and by 2038 it is estimated that 95 out of 100 counties will have more people aged 60 and older than under 18 years.¹

Aging in a healthy way can help people maintain their independence, social engagement, and well-being. Healthy aging is centered around the ability to function mentally, physically, socially, and economically. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines healthy aging as “the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables wellbeing into older age,” which encompasses the ability to meet basic needs.^{2,3} According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, some of these basic needs include staying active, staying connected to the community, having good nutrition, and managing medications.⁴ Drivers of healthy aging also include physical activity, diet, social support and engagement, and independence.⁵

The growing aging population and the challenges for older adults demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for focused attention and action in our state. In May 2022, the North Carolina Institute of Medicine (NCIOM) launched the Task Force on Healthy Aging to develop recommendations to support North Carolinians to grow older in their homes and communities, also known as aging in place.

The task force was supported by funding from The Duke Endowment, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) Division of Aging and Adult Services (DAAS) and Division of Public Health, and AARP North Carolina. The task force focused on four key areas of aging in the community setting: falls prevention, mobility, nutrition, and social connections. Between May 2022 and April 2023, the full task force met 11 times; in addition, more than 35 topic-specific meetings or interviews were conducted. Dr. Tamara Baker, MA, PhD, professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine and Dennis Streets, MPH, MAT, retired, former Director of DAAS and former Executive Director of the Chatham County Council on Aging served as task force co-chairs. They helped guide over 60 task force members through insightful conversations that led to the creation of the recommendations in this report. Full text of all recommendations and strategies can be found throughout this report and in Appendix A.

On May 2, 2023, Governor Roy Cooper signed Executive Order Number 280 “directing action to continue the state’s commitment to building an age-friendly state.”^{6,7} DAAS is leading efforts to develop a multisector plan for aging in North Carolina called All Ages, All Stages.^A The discussions and recommendations of the NCIOM Task Force on Healthy Aging presented in this report complement and reinforce the state’s commitment to creating the conditions to help North Carolina’s residents age well.

SOCIAL & ECONOMIC FACTORS THAT AFFECT HOW WE EXPERIENCE AGING

Through task force meetings and discussions with leading experts, it became evident that the four key areas are closely interconnected. For example, poor nutrition may lead to increased falls risk, and poor mobility issues may decrease an older adult’s ability to connect with others in their community. There are also external factors that affect these four key areas, such as lack of transportation, unsafe environments for walking and daily activities, low income, and limited access to food. Many of these external factors faced by older adults can be addressed through thoughtful and coordinated action. The recommendations and strategies from the Task Force on Healthy Aging that are presented in Chapter 2 of this report seek to address some of the social and economic needs of those who are currently older adults and those who will age into older adulthood in the future. Meeting these needs is a necessary step toward ensuring that all people in North Carolina have an opportunity to experience healthy aging.

Chapter 2 of this report presents three recommendations and related strategies to address some of these factors that impact older adults’ ability to experience healthy aging:

Recommendation 1 - Help Older Adults Retain More Financial and Material Resources to Support Healthy Aging

Strategy 1 - Help More North Carolinians Plan and Save for Retirement

Strategy 2 - Increase Employment Opportunities for Older Adults

Strategy 3 - Update Tax Policy to Help Older Adults with Lower Incomes

Strategy 4 - Increase Uptake of Food and Nutrition Services

Strategy 5 - Reduce the Costs of Health Care Coverage

Strategy 6 - Increase Awareness and Protections from Fraud for Older Adults

Recommendation 2 - Ensure Safe and Affordable Housing for Older Adults

Strategy 7 - Ensure Statewide Focus on Housing Availability, Affordability, and Supports for Older Adults

Strategy 8 - Enhance Learning Opportunities Related to Housing Programs and Services

Recommendation 3 - Ensure Digital Equity for Older Adults

Strategy 9 - Increase Access to Broadband Internet across the State

Strategy 10 - Increase Digital Literacy for Older Adults

PROMOTING A CULTURE OF AGING ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

A life course perspective on aging recognizes that older adults are affected by the environments and stressors they experienced as children, adolescents, and young adults. The children, adolescents, and young adults of the present are the older adults of the future. Policy implications of life course perspectives on health often focus on what people need during childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood to promote well-being and prevent disease, disability, and mortality in later life.^{8,9} While this is an important goal, it does not directly

A “Multisector plan for aging is an umbrella term for a state-led, multi-year planning process that convenes cross-sector stakeholders to collaboratively address the needs of older adults and people with disabilities.”
<https://www.ncdhhs.gov/divisions/aging-and-adult-services/mpa-all-ages-all-stages-nc>



address the needs of older adults who are aging in their communities today. A “healthy aging” policy lens acknowledges that older adults are active members of their communities and seeks to understand the impact that policies may have on older adults and on the process of aging in the general population. Questions to consider include: How would these developments impact older adults presently? How would these developments impact families in the future as they age in place? What modifications can be made when designing cities or neighborhoods that take into account changing needs as community members age?

Ageism is the stereotyping, prejudice, and discriminatory actions or attitudes toward others due to chronological age.^{10,11} Ageism and predominant culture’s general fear of aging have been described as “prejudice against our feared future selves.”¹² This prejudice is often due to the incorrect assumption that aging inevitably results in reduced productivity, liveliness, and health. There are normal changes that occur in later adulthood, just as there are changes that occur throughout the entire life course. Policy and local planning for these changes can ensure that older adults are considered in the decisions that impact them and promote their full participation in public life. Chapter 3 of this report presents two recommendations and related strategies for doing that:

Recommendation 4 - Create a Community Culture that Supports Healthy Aging

Strategy 11 - Promote Aging in All Policies

Strategy 12 - Grow Age-Friendly Communities with Support from Local Government and Community-Based Organizations

Strategy 13 - Help Older Adults Improve or Maintain Their Physical Activity, Strength, Flexibility, and Balance

Recommendation 5 - Collaborate to Encourage Actions that Support Healthy Aging Across the Lifespan

Strategy 14 - Dedicate Resources to Answering Important Research Questions and Developing Data on Aging Services

Strategy 15 - Address Cultural Stigmas of Aging

Strategy 16 - Ensure Legislative Attention to Aging Issues

COMMUNITY SERVICES AND PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT AGING IN PLACE

There is a diverse array of experiences when it comes to aging. Some older adults may retire, reduce their working hours, or change careers. Others may begin their life as “empty nesters”—couples or individuals who live alone after raising children. Some may dedicate their time to lifelong interests and hobbies, and others may pursue brand new endeavors. Others take on family caregiving responsibilities. A common thread among many older adults, however, is the desire to stay in their homes or communities for as long as possible.^{13,14}

Many community services and programs already exist to meet the needs of older adults. However, funding for programs is limited and awareness of their availability can be a challenge for getting services to people who need them. As we strive to support our aging population, it is important to strengthen existing services and programs while further integrating aging into public health and health care. Chapter 4 of this report presents three recommendations and related strategies for doing that:

Recommendation 6 - Strengthen Existing Programs and Services

Strategy 17 - Strengthen North Carolina’s Local Senior Centers

Strategy 18 - Increase Access to the Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE)

Strategy 19 - Increase Knowledge about and Prevalence of Current Programs and Supports

Strategy 20 - Conduct Research and Evaluation on Current Programs to Increase Access to Services

Strategy 21 - Increase and Modernize the Home and Community Care Block Grant

Strategy 22 - Strengthen Adult Protective Services

Recommendation 7 - Include Aging in Local Public Health & Hospital Community Health Assessments

Strategy 23 - Ensure Integration of Age-Related Issues in Community Health Assessments and Action Planning

Recommendation 8 - Connect Health Care with Aging Issues

Strategy 24 - Identify and Address Health Issues Related to Getting Adequate Nutrition

Strategy 25 - Use Screening and Assessments to Identify Issues of Falls Risk, Fitness to Drive, and Social Isolation

WORKFORCE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF OLDER ADULTS

The experiences and preferences of older adults are varied in terms of living arrangements and supports that are needed, with some living with family caregivers and others living alone. Meeting the needs of the growing older adult population will require an assurance that there is adequate staffing of health care facilities, aging and adult services agencies, and other community-based organizations with a workforce that is prepared to serve a diverse aging population.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that about 70% of people aged 65 years and older will need some form of long-term services and supports (LTSS).¹⁵ Likewise, while many adults can live independently, the health and life changes that accompany the aging process necessitate reasonable accommodations and thoughtful action by community-based workers as they fulfill their everyday responsibilities. For instance, first responders may benefit from knowledge on falls prevention and response. Additionally, many older adults rely on informal caregiving from family, friends, or neighbors. A 2023 AARP report estimates that there are 1.28 million caregivers in North Carolina who provide over 1 billion hours of care per year.¹⁶

Chapter 5 of this report presents four recommendations and related strategies to address workforce needs for the older adult population:

Recommendation 9 - Ensure an Adequate Aging Network Workforce for the Future

Strategy 26 - Understand Current Aging Network Workforce Characteristics and Future Workforce Needs

Strategy 27 - Respond to Current and Future Needs for Aging Services and Aging Network Workforce

^B AARP’s report defines a family caregiver as “Any relative, partner, friend, or neighbor who has a significant personal relationship with, and who provides a broad range of assistance for, an older person or an adult with a chronic, disabling, or serious health condition.”

Recommendation 10 - Ensure a Strong Community Workforce to Serve Older Adults

Strategy 28 - Increase Knowledge and Awareness for Serving Older Adults in the Community

Recommendation 11 - Improve Ability of Community Health Workers to Address the Needs of Older Adults

Strategy 29 - Increase Awareness of, and Sustainable Payment for, Community Health Workers

Recommendation 12 - Support Family Caregivers

Strategy 30 - Increase Access to Employment and Well-Being Support for Family Caregivers

MOVING FORWARD

There is a wide array of responsible parties needed to take action to fulfill the recommendations and strategies from the NCIOM Task Force on Healthy Aging that are detailed in this report. State-level policymakers and local community leaders need to address the economic and social circumstances of those who are older adults now and those who will age to that status. These leaders are also important stewards of financial resources for programs that address many needs of older adults. Individuals and community leaders need to address ageism and create communities that help everyone have an opportunity to experience healthy aging. State leaders, program administrators, and many others need to ensure that the programs and services that serve older adults do so regardless of where they live, their economic background, or other aspects of their identities. State and local leaders also must ensure there is attention and action to address the workforce to serve older adults.

In addition to calling on the leaders identified in this report to take action, the task force is encouraged by the opportunity presented through the DAAS multisector plan for aging, known as All Ages, All Stages NC, and strongly supports their stated purpose:

“All Ages, All Stages NC: A Roadmap for Aging and Living Well’ is North Carolina’s groundbreaking multisector plan for aging (MPA). This comprehensive initiative aims to provide a strategic framework and practical guidelines to ensure that individuals of all ages and stages of life can thrive and age gracefully within the state. All Ages, All Stages NC recognizes the diverse needs and aspirations of North Carolina’s residents, offering a roadmap that promotes holistic well-being, equitable access to services, and vibrant community engagement. By fostering collaboration between government, communities, and individuals, NC’s MPA will create a future where every person can enjoy a fulfilling and empowered life, regardless of their age or circumstances.” – NCDHHS, Division of Aging and Adult Services, <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/divisions/aging-and-adult-services/mpa-all-ages-all-stages-nc>

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