

STRATEGY 12

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

- a. Local governments should support and fund the development of age-friendly communities by:
 - i. Working directly with community leaders and residents of communities to identify opportunities for intergenerational community connections; opportunities to celebrate aging and the contributions of older adults; and opportunities to maximize the experience, talents, and interests of older adults.
 - ii. Including perspectives and representation from older adults most affected, including older adults who represent the racial and economic diversity of communities and advocates for people with disabilities, in aging planning processes.
 - iii. Ensuring a “healthy aging ambassador” is responsible for applying the “Aging in All Policies” approach to county- and municipal-level policymaking, planning, and program development.
- b. AARP NC, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Hometown Strong, and the UNC School of Government, and other units of the UNC system should collaborate to:
 - i. Develop educational opportunities for local government officials—especially city, county, and regional planners—to learn about the “Aging in All Policies” framework and best practices in age-friendly community development with considerations for issues such as pedestrian safety, transportation, zoning, etc.
 - ii. Identify an entity to host a learning collaborative of communities working to be designated as age-friendly to discuss best practices, lessons learned, and opportunities for sharing their experiences with other communities interested in becoming age-friendly.
 - iii. Identify funding needs and potential sources of funding for this work.

Desired Result – North Carolina communities will be places where everyone has access to infrastructure and services to make healthy aging at home possible.

Why does the task force recommend this strategy? – Policy and infrastructure at the community level are key determining factors in whether older adults can age in their homes and still have access to the things they need to maintain their health and well-being. Access to transportation, physical activity, and social connections are just some of the features of a community that can impact how a person can safely age at home. Community leaders set policies and priorities that can create an age-friendly culture and environment.

Context – As of August 2023, the state of North Carolina, eight counties, and eight cities are members of the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities.⁴⁰ The elected leadership of these communities have committed to “actively work toward making their town, city, county or state a great place to live for people of all ages.”⁴¹ Counties and cities that are part of the network develop an action plan based on community surveys identifying needs within the 8 Domains of Livability: 1) Housing, 2) Outdoor Spaces and Buildings, 3) Transportation, 4) Civic Participation and Employment, 5) Communication and Information, 6) Respect and Social Inclusion, 7) Social Participation, and 8) Health Services and Community Support (See Figure 1, Page 15).²⁶

The Blue Zones Project is another initiative that is working to make communities better places for everyone to age. Brevard, North Carolina, has participated in this project. Based on research about the places in the world where people live the longest and experience health into older age, this model focuses on supporting nine lifestyle habits related to belonging, eating wisely, physical movement, and outlook on life.⁴² According to the Blue Zones Project, this translates into “improv[ing] or optimiz[ing] city streets (smoking policies, bike lanes, sidewalks), public spaces (parks, lakes, walking paths), schools (cafeterias, safe walking paths to school), restaurants, grocery stores, employers, faith-based organizations, and community involvement.”⁴³

“Healthy Aging Ambassador”

The concept of a “healthy aging ambassador” was supported by the task force to encourage communities to identify an individual or group that could be accountable for applying the “Aging in All Policies” lens on the local level (See Strategy 11, Page 59). This role may already exist in some places and would

naturally look different depending on local needs and structures. This role would be responsible for increasing awareness and action toward developing an age-friendly community and would be connected to the community members, aging services providers, and community-based organizations that can represent the perspectives and needs of older adults.

Partners

Two of the partners identified in this strategy are Hometown Strong and the UNC Chapel Hill School of Government. These organizations serve important statewide leadership roles for North Carolina communities.

First, Hometown Strong’s mission is to “empower rural communities by providing resources and support to improve the quality of life for residents.... [through] economic development, education, healthcare, and community engagement.”⁴⁴ Like the aging initiatives discussed above, Hometown Strong “work[s] closely with local leaders and organizations to identify the specific needs of each community and develop customized solutions.” One of its priorities is Age My Way NC, a “collaborative effort between the State of North Carolina and AARP NC to help identify priorities for making our neighborhoods, towns, cities, and rural areas great places for people of all ages.”

Second, the UNC Chapel Hill School of Government is home to the Center for Public Leadership and Governance, which “equips public officials with the knowledge and skills they need to lead and govern their organizations and communities.”⁴⁵ The center offers dozens of courses for public officials to learn about their role, best practices, and leadership techniques.⁴⁶ This direct connection with North Carolina’s local public officials is a potential resource to connect those leaders with education about developing age-friendly communities.

How would this impact the health of older adults?



Local leadership and community engagement to create age-friendly culture, policies, and infrastructure will help older adults have access to the housing, transportation, food, social connections, and other resources they need to retain their health and well-being.

A AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities North Carolina members are Archdale, Jamestown, Cary, Durham, Kinston, Leland, Matthews, and Mt. Airy as well as Buncombe, Orange, Durham, Forsyth, Lenoir, Mecklenburg, and Wake, counties. <https://states.aarp.org/north-carolina/governor-roy-cooper-commits-the-state-to-improvements-that-benefit-all-ages>. See Chapter 1, Page 15 for more information about the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities.