

Performance Partnerships: A Government-Community Partnership Model for Launching and Implementing Local Aging-Friendly Initiatives

A Pathway to Transformative Community-Wide Benefits



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Introduction

Creating more aging-friendly communities and improving those that are already on a strong path requires a local culture shift that centers community-wide aging-friendly thinking and action. The culture shift is accomplished through many incremental changes in the way community members and decision-makers think, act, prioritize, and spend their time and resources. Understanding the levers of change, and which players can work them, is critical for success. Aligning roles and creating synergistic partnerships between aging-friendly advocates and municipal leaders will accelerate local culture shift in communities across New Jersey.

There are a number of features of an aging-friendly community that can only be achieved through municipal action, including changes to local ordinances, institutionalization of aging-friendly planning and implementation frameworks, and development of public infrastructure. But municipal action can be of little value, or even detrimental, without inclusive community engagement to inform municipal direction and decisions. Implementation of substantive local government policy and program actions aimed at correcting major community issues can advance through concerted effort between government and community members. In addition to facilitating the types of actions that lead to community-wide transformation, a government-community partnership approach can also help make aging-friendly community-building accessible to a more diverse and widespread set of communities. Aligning aging-friendly actions with regular municipal operations can normalize the work and incentivize municipal involvement, better enabling communities without external funding or an existing active community group to initiate and sustain an aging-friendly program.

Although successes of aging-friendly community initiatives (AFCIs) have been demonstrated in the work accomplished by several communities in New Jersey, less is understood about how a community could self-start and maintain an initiative. Capacity and skills are needed to organize the initiative, assess the conditions and needs of the community, and sustain the program long-term. This paper aims to explore a government-community partnership approach as an aging-friendly community model for application in localities throughout New Jersey, with a focus on influencing municipal-controlled outcomes, particularly those involving issues of land use.

PART I.

Relationship Between Community Forces and Government Forces When Trying to Implement Aging-Friendly Initiatives at the Local Level

An obstacle to implementing any kind of social change can manifest as an obstructive tension between community advocates and government. One strategy to mitigate the potential for perceptions of adversarial interactions can be to work collaboratively to build a program from the ground up. When municipal decision-makers are confronted with an established agenda of a group advocating with a strong voice, they may very likely adopt defensive posturing that results in a potentially irreparable combative relationship. For example, this may have been a factor contributing to the ultimate rejection by decision-makers in a pair of north Jersey towns to commit to municipal actions involving transformative community change. In both cases the government decision-makers went against well supported analyses or plans that were developed through aging-friendly projects that had previously been supported.

The risk-averse nature of government necessitates building trust over time and recognizing political sensitivities. Even in cases where an advocacy group fosters a relationship with key individuals or entities representing the municipality, and given that government champions can help to advance initiatives,¹ those relationships may not be enough to actualize municipal commitment in decision-making scenarios,² and the relationships are vulnerable to changes in administration or staff turnover.

Notwithstanding, elected and appointed local officials are charged with improving overall quality of life in the community and are also community members who indirectly benefit from implementation of aging-friendly actions that improve overall community design and form, making them likely allies for supporting actions that translate into community-wide benefits. A partnership approach will likely be more

¹ Lehning, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnr089>

² Peterman, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44257822>

effective and efficient than a local advocacy program stemming from an AFCI group operating entirely independently of municipal support because aging-friendly community-building is not issue-specific and requires long-term visioning, commitment, and partnership between local government and community members. This is not to say that government agitation should never be a strategy in an aging-friendly initiative. The dynamics and political implications of how and when government is involved instead suggests approaching the initiative with the understanding that advocacy does not always benefit from being separate, oppositional, or confrontational, particularly in the beginning phases, and that the initial formation of the initiative should include or can originate from the municipality itself.

Municipal support can be an indicator of implementation,³ and a private-funded initiative may not be a sustainable model for AFCIs.⁴ Examples from other regions show that AFCIs motivated by smart growth development principles⁵ have successfully garnered the support and resources of local jurisdictions, which have integrated AFCI goals into comprehensive plans and policies.

An example is the New York State Health Across All Policies Initiative, which was launched in recognition “that a community’s greatest health challenges are complex and often linked with other societal issues that extend beyond healthcare and traditional public health activities.”⁶ The collaborative model for the NY initiative “is grounded in three overlapping frameworks: the New York State Prevention Agenda, the World Health Organization’s Eight Domains of Livability, and Smart Growth Principles...[to] target social determinants of health and other complex factors that are often the responsibility of non-health partners such as housing, transportation, education, environment, parks, and economic development.”⁷ For the program, counties were recruited to be “centers of excellence” and have been engaged in formulating aging-friendly action plans and strategies in their jurisdictions and integrating the three frameworks of the NYS Health Across All Policies Initiative into their policies. The focus of this program is on community features that can be modified by the local jurisdiction, which is a distinctive deviation from focusing on supports and services typically addressed in health and social service programs targeting older adults, and it has gained momentum to serve as a model for other regions.

³ Keyes & Benavidas, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26383387>

⁴ Scharlach, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12126-011-9140-1>

⁵ <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/what-is-smart-growth/>

⁶ https://health.ny.gov/prevention/prevention_agenda/health_across_all_policies/

⁷ <https://www.nyam.org/haaap/>

In the Kansas City region, the Communities for All Ages Initiative arose out of the Mid-America Regional Council (MARC), which is an association group consisting of the metropolitan planning organization and city and county governments. Through this initiative, local jurisdictions can enroll in a recognition program to pursue actions through three levels of recognition that follow a general planning process—awareness, assessment, and implementation—to advance aging-friendliness in their communities. The program is integrated with MARC’s Planning Sustainable Places initiative, which is a grant program assisting jurisdictions “to advance integrated local transportation and land use planning and project development actions that support: vibrant places that offer a mix of options for housing, jobs, services and recreation; connected places with a variety of transportation options; and green places that support healthy living and a healthy natural environment.”⁸ Communities in the MARC program are working to implement community-wide actions. For example, Grandview, MO updated its comprehensive plan and zoning ordinances to increase residential density and allow for accessory dwelling units (ADUs) and developed a plan for pedestrian and bicycle improvements based on the city’s commitment to aging-friendly development through the MARC program. The City of Raymore, MO developed a communities for all ages master plan to help them incorporate aging-friendly principles into decision-making. Actions completed based on the plan include a zoning change to allow ADUs on all residential lots, city funding for a shuttle bus, accessibility improvements to public sites, a partnership with a local builder to apply universal design in structures, and the formation of a “communities for all ages committee” to further advance the city’s aging-friendly goals.

In New Jersey, some municipalities are interested in supporting aging-friendly principles and seeking the resources and guidance for implementing them. Garfield, Englewood, Livingston, Pompton Lakes, South Orange, Maplewood, and Princeton are examples of New Jersey municipalities that have incorporated aging-friendly community-building in various ways and with varying points of focus or success in implementing substantive community-wide changes in the areas of housing, transportation, or community design. It would likely be informative to conduct a study comparing process, outcomes, and sustainability of AFCIs in New Jersey that operate through municipal involvement, versus those that are independent of local government, including in the comparisons and evaluations any effects that may be based on the municipal department under which the initiative is housed.

⁸ <https://www.marc.org/transportation/transportation-programs/planning-sustainable-places>

Although a clear set of best practices for establishing and sustaining an AFCI has not surfaced, and there is a lack of measured impact through formal evaluation of existing initiatives, a review of approaches shows that the most critical factors in achieving a beneficial aging-friendly initiative appear to be in the attention given to existing partnerships established by local jurisdictions, maintenance of ongoing political support, and broad-based collaboration.⁹ This would suggest for New Jersey communities that the municipality should play a major role in aging-friendly community-building initiatives that aim to change local policies and practices.

PART II.

Methods for Engaging Stakeholders Typically Excluded from or Not Involved in Local Land Use Planning or Decision-Making

There are a multitude of reasons individuals may not get involved in decision-making, and the goal of an AFCI need not be to ensure that every individual is engaged. However, land use affects all community members, making it imperative that there are opportunities for engagement by all members of the community throughout processes of designing, planning, or implementing actions and programs.

Engaging Stakeholders to Advance Land Use Change

A recent report characterizing the status of eight AFCIs participating in a grant-funded program in northern New Jersey shows that land use issues such as housing accessibility, aging-friendly businesses, parks and other outdoor spaces, and employment opportunities were all rated relatively low priority areas of action compared to areas such as communication, elevating visibility of older adults, social isolation, and social and health supports and services.¹⁰ This suggests that these and similar AFCIs are not fully integrating land use into their narratives or goals. Although the areas of transportation and pedestrian safety were rated high priority action areas by AFCI coordinators in the study, the main types of actions pursued

⁹ van Hoof et. al., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.buildenv.2021.107922>

¹⁰ Pestiine-Stevens, A., et. al. Age-Friendly Community Initiatives in Northern New Jersey: Four Years into Grant Funding. Rutgers School of Social Work.

for transportation typically tend to focus on providing transportation services rather than modification to land use policy or community form. Pedestrian safety actions also tend to be project-specific to focus on isolated intersections or problem areas identified through a walkability audit and do not necessarily aim to create an interconnected network of multimodal transportation options that would allow for community-wide mobility improvements.

Motivation, or lack thereof, for New Jersey AFCIs to focus on land use goals has not been studied. However, the descriptive studies that have been done, along with observations in the field, suggest that local champions may lack sufficient knowledge or contextual application of skills to effectively engage with local leadership regarding land use issues. In addition to residents or demographic groups of residents, stakeholders not involved in local land use planning or decision-making may also include the very same individuals who are working on AFCIs or projects that are primarily service- and health-oriented because they lack the knowledge or skills to focus on land use issues. This can make it difficult for them to engage with local decision-makers involving land use and built environment problems and solutions, even if they understand them in relation to their aging-friendly goals.

However, advocacy by AFCIs can effectively influence land use decisions.¹¹ It is therefore important to include self-awareness and leadership development in the growth of an AFCI, as well as ensure there is an inclusive community engagement program to strengthen the initiative. Although not all AFCIs strive to incorporate government involvement, particularly when there is a focus on the AFCI being “community-led,” it has been demonstrated that proactive government and urban planning involvement in an AFCI, coupled with multi-stakeholder collaboration and direct engagement with older adults in the community, are beneficial approaches for successful AFCIs.¹²

When focusing on the implementation of substantive local government policy and program actions aimed at correcting major community issues, an initiative needs to move beyond direct service to take the form of advocacy. However, community members engaged in aging-friendly community-building or AFCIs may not necessarily be familiar or comfortable with advocacy tactics or how to interact with government processes. They may not even identify as or understand their roles as local policy advocates. Leadership development can help to instill this knowledge

¹¹ Lehning, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnr089>

¹² Steels, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2015.02.004>

and foundation into the AFCI so its members can effectuate change at a deeper and wider level, or even transition to holding positions in local government, or regional or statewide initiatives.

Establishing a community group that operates independent of government is a beneficial component of an AFCI because such a group can engage in advocacy, and governments often respond to sufficient voicing of community values and needs.¹³ However, maintaining an aging-friendly steering committee composed of municipal and community leaders in partnership is still necessary to retain an established aging-friendly presence and priority in municipal operations, policies, and investments. Figure 1 demonstrates how an AFCI can partner with municipal leadership while maintaining autonomy. External and community member participation can fulfill advisory roles on the committee and/or in partnership with the committee. The dotted lines show that members of municipal government and the aging-friendly community group are also community members.

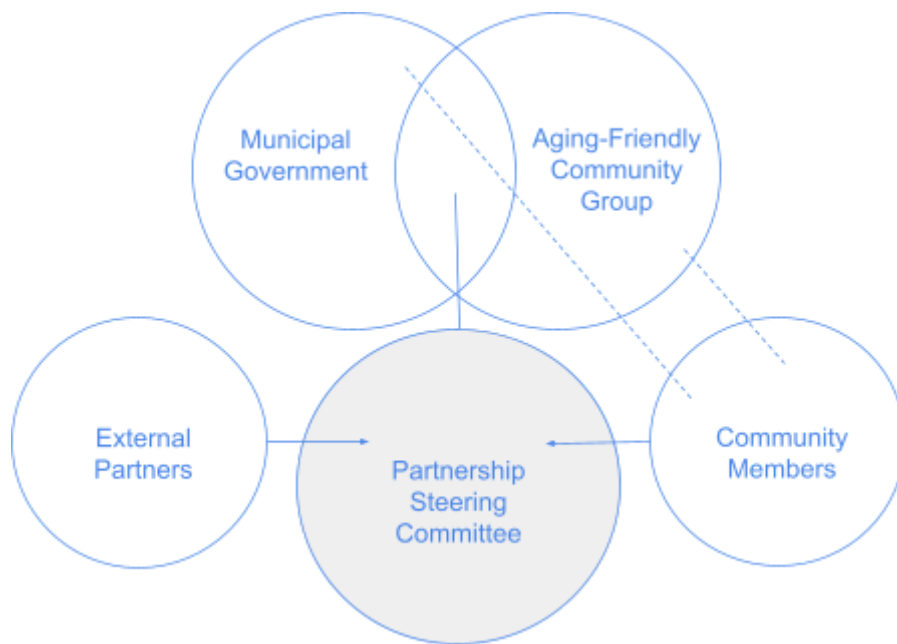


Figure 1. Community Partnership Structure for Municipal Action

¹³ Keyes & Benavidas, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26383387>

Engaging Stakeholders for Equitable Process and Outcomes

A criticism of the aging-friendly movement, including as it is unfolding in New Jersey, is the lack of overall diversity in leadership, participation, and community typology. Those typically excluded from or not involved in local government or advocacy also tend to be those with less personal capacity and resources. A local initiative will not be successful at meeting the needs of the community unless it identifies specific strategies to be inclusive and accessible for all community members. Inclusive community engagement should be a priority action item of a local AFCI in the initial and early stages of the initiative, as well as through ongoing effort.

Although encouraging and supporting direct participation of older adults and/or underrepresented populations is a desirable tenet of aging-friendly community-building methods,¹⁴ stakeholders should not necessarily have to contribute significant time or other limited resources in order to be considered in support of an initiative or benefit from the outcomes. Initiatives need to integrate meaningful and intentional engagement mechanisms to accommodate varying levels of participation into all aspects of their work, and the strategies will need to convey that the initiative belongs to the community, even when it may be largely driven by a relatively small group of highly dedicated individuals.

AFCI priorities should reflect the needs of the community members and be community-driven. Although there is wide sociodemographic diversity among the eight AFCIs in the northern New Jersey grant-funded program, they maintain similar priority action areas.¹⁵ This suggests that the initiatives may be driven by the perspectives of the broader aging-friendly discourse— which appears to be dominated by white, affluent, highly educated participants—rather than by the community members they represent. This is consistent with the recognition that AFCIs are not adequately addressing racial and economic disparities.¹⁶ There is a need to introduce AFCI leaders to varied tactics and best practices for inclusive community engagement in formulating and implementing their local approaches and action plans. There is also a need to advance leadership opportunities for

¹⁴ Steels, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2015.02.004>

¹⁵ Pestiine-Stevens, A., et. al., Age-Friendly Community Initiatives in Northern New Jersey: Four Years into Grant Funding. Rutgers School of Social Work.

¹⁶ Lehning, et. al., <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15588742.2015.1125331>

individuals representing varied ethnic, racial, and economic categories within local AFCIs and the networks that support them.

AFCIs and aging-friendly networks must be intentional in their inclusion of underrepresented groups in:

- Processes, including on steering committees, in local and network AFCI leadership roles, and through development of community engagement plans.
- Applying demographic and neighborhood measurement of impacts from AFCI outcomes and in analyses employed in community assessments.
- Determining resource allocation for funding or assistance programs.

PART III.

A Local Aging-Friendly Model of Organizing, Culture Shifting, and Action for Creating Great Places

To generate long-term momentum and normalize municipal engagement in aging-friendly community-building, a focus should be on making community-wide, transformative changes through an iterative process driven by community advocates in collaboration with municipal actions (Figure 2).

As illustrated in the center of Figure 2, initiation of an AFCI needs a champion to spark interest and action. That initiation can stem from the community, or it can originate within municipal government. There may be a perception that municipal motives do not adequately address community needs, or that the initiative will be less “grassroots” and too “top-down” if municipal representatives are leading the charge. However, transformative change does not happen in a community without some degree of municipal involvement, and having the support of decision-makers is a necessity for ultimately implementing substantive and long-term changes. It therefore can be beneficial if initiation of the program occurs within the government. That is to say, it is not necessary for the AFCI to be initiated by community advocates outside of local government for the initiative to be community-based.



Figure 2. Aging-Friendly Community-Building Partnership Organizational and Process Model

Following from initiation, (to 01 in the graphic of Figure 2), it is critical that there be collaboration from the beginning, and this can occur through establishment of an aging-friendly steering committee composed of municipal representatives and community members (See Figure 1). The steering committee would oversee municipal aging-friendly planning and implementation. Additionally (moving on to 02 in the graphic of Figure 2), an independent aging-friendly community group is invaluable for having a coordinated community effort that elevates the voice of the community and works with municipal partners to advance community goals. Furthermore, if the municipality is not delivering the kinds or extent of change needed or desired, the community group can activate to advocate for stronger commitments or actions.¹⁷

¹⁷ Peterman, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44257822>

Starting the AFCI from a partnership perspective rather than an independent, or potentially adversarial one, will foster greater collaboration and trust-building toward achieving goals, and fostering a strong independent community group ensures that the advocacy capacity is there when it is needed. As partners on the steering committee, the municipality and AFCI community representatives go through an assessment and planning process so they can prioritize actions and work together in alignment on direction and goals to implement changes (03 and 04 in the graphic of Figure 2). While there are many ways communities can organize themselves around doing aging-friendly actions, this model and the approach described in this paper are being presented as potentially effective for embedding aging-friendly principles into municipal plans, policies, and regulations. It is important to understand how this goal is distinct from goals to achieve incremental improvements or enhancements to programs or services for older adults. This paper recognizes the role of municipal government in achieving an aging-friendly place and articulates a strategic approach for doing so.

The following section will discuss how the framing of the narrative can affect aging-friendly land use policy and practice, particularly in the context of gaps experienced by AFCIs in achieving goals or sustaining initiatives—specifically that AFCIs tend to be inadequately resourced and oriented towards small-scale, short term successes that may be inequitably distributed within communities or targeted to only particular groups of older adults.

Framing Aging-Friendly Communities

When language centers on providing supports and services directly to older adults, it positions all older adults as burdensome, incapable, and uniquely privileged, and it shifts the focus away from making fundamental changes to environments to make them accessible and supportive for older adults.¹⁸ Although the aging-friendly communities movement is grounded in the World Health Organization’s (WHO) “Age-Friendly Cities Framework,” which was developed to help communities identify environmental barriers,¹⁹ AFCIs may exist today without any focus on the physical or built environment and can be grounded in the accessibility and quality of local services and supports for aging individuals in need of them rather than addressing physical or systemic barriers presented by the community’s form or

¹⁸ Joy, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2018.10.005>

¹⁹ <https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/age-friendly-cities-framework/>; Rudnicka et. al., [10.1016/j.maturitas.2020.05.018](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.maturitas.2020.05.018)

decision-making structure. The problem then becomes centered on aging, rather than on an ageist environment.²⁰

Another critique of AFCIs is that they often do not recognize the diversity of their communities or of older people in general, and they lack consideration of the dynamic nature of perceptions of older adults or sociodemographic characteristics of the communities they live in, particularly for non-metropolitan, rural areas or low-capacity jurisdictions.²¹ Perceptions of older adults about their environments can differ for reasons uncorrelated with demographic indicators.²² Furthermore, reporting outputs on AFCIs are too descriptive in nature to assess long-term sustainability, including the reporting for AFCIs in New Jersey.²³ Oversimplification in the discourse, for example by focusing on individual rights and responsibility,²⁴ can lead to inadequate approaches to achieving goals in the initiative and hinder sustainability of an AFCI.

Aging-friendly community-building conversations centered on making communities suitable environments where people can live and age well across varied spectrums of individual needs, including through modifications to social and health support system environments, can present a discourse more aligned with municipal responsibilities and practices. This framing not only makes it more appealing for allocating municipal resources; it also puts the onus on local jurisdictions to make substantive changes that will generate benefits for the entire community as well as older populations.²⁵ Additionally, this framing does not risk portraying all older adults in the community as in need of service delivery, constituting a cost-burden, or being a homogenous group.

Experts and advocates in the realm of social supports are significant partners in aging-friendly community-building, but the limits of the scope of their work should not limit the framing of the initiative. Such a limitation is likely to exclude relevant partners who would otherwise see a strong role for themselves, and could have the undesirable effect of perpetuating a damaging narrative that frames all older adults as in need of certain special resources devoted by the municipality or other levels of government.

²⁰ See: Leitch, Anne. *Generations Journal*; San Francisco Vol. 33, Iss. 2, (Summer 2009): 66-67

²¹ McCrillis et. al., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.10.053>

²² Black & Jester, [10.3390/ijerph17197056](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17197056)

²³ Colibaba et. al., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2020.100898>

²⁴ Scharlach, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12126-011-9140-1>

²⁵ Lehning, et. al., <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15588742.2015.1125331>

When adopted by an AFCI, the anti-ageist argument can have the perverse effect of eroding support for older adults based on a social acceptance of what it means to age.²⁶ If recognizing that vulnerability is inherent as individuals age into their “senior” years is equated with ageism, the narrative that older adults are equally capable and positioned in society to middle or younger adults can suggest an AFCI is serving to promote a “special interest” group, leaving the initiative susceptible to political rejection. This is an important consideration given that limited funding resources can pit one public investment against another.^{27,28} When aging-friendly recommendations were presented to the legislative body of one northern New Jersey municipality, for example, leadership reasoning to not adopt the aging-friendly implementation plan was based on anti-favoritism logic.

While different approaches can successfully direct attention to the needs of older adults, there are policy implications for framing AFCIs centered on changing individual health and wellness, which implies reducing the burdens inherent with age and diminishes the need for social programs, compared to centering the need for changes to “society and socially produced environments.”²⁹ For example, distinctions can be made between older adults wishing to “age in place” and those “stuck in place,” in order to understand implications for community-wide, transformative actions, because social programs are limited in ability to address geographic isolation.³⁰ Furthermore, the idea of “aging in place” may not even resonate with many older adults, since the notion of “home” often extends beyond a physical structure and into neighborhoods and networks.³¹

An AFCI narrative grounded in the need to make changes to social systems and built environments, with consideration of older adults as members of the broader community those changes would benefit, can help to support policy decisions based on AFCI goals. In that case, while political obstructions are lessened, municipal capacity can be the limiting factor in achieving implementation. In communities with low municipal capacity, the role and contribution of an aging-friendly community group becomes instrumental in filling the capacity gap.

²⁶ Joy, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2018.10.005>

²⁷ Lehning, et. al., <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15588742.2015.1125331>

²⁸ Black & Jester, [10.3390/ijerph17197056](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17197056)

²⁹ Joy, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2018.10.005>; Lehning, et. al., <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15588742.2015.1125331>.

³⁰ Colibaba et. al., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2020.100898> describes how aging-friendly initiatives do not affect those “stuck in place.”

³¹ Wiles, et. al., <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnr098>

To effectively advance aging-friendly goals through a collaborative effort, leaders involved with AFCIs need to embrace a multi-sectoral approach. In addressing aging-friendly communities and community livability, the role and expertise planners and built-environment professionals have should be accurately recognized. While one group of social work professionals advancing AFCIs in New Jersey and elsewhere has characterized all community planning approaches as applying a “top-down” model,³² that is not accurate. This assumption does not consider the potential for community-based or community-driven frameworks employed in the planning field, which can be highly effective at advancing substantive community goals, due in some part to models of partnership and collaboration between government, community members, and advocates.

PART IV.

Recommendations

Recommendations to Ensure Land Use is Central to Aging-Friendly Community-Building Initiatives

Although the physical features of a community play a large role in determining access to many of the elements outlined in the WHO and AARP aging-friendly communities guidance, and a focus on making environmental changes is generally understood to be the origin and a commonality among aging-friendly initiatives,³³ land use and the built environment are not central to the ACFI movement currently undergoing a strategic growth phase in New Jersey. Addressing both the physical environments and the social systems affecting older adults is a key factor in creating aging-friendly communities.³⁴ To advance government and public support for AFCIs as efforts to extend community-supporting benefits, aging-friendly land use should be at least as emphasized as any other of the components of aging-friendly livability in local, regional, and statewide initiatives. Centering the narrative on ageist environments, rather than limiting it to circumstances associated with aging, can appeal to a wider range of perspectives and agendas, helping to build collaboration to achieve mutual goals.

³² Greenfield, et. al., <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnv005>

³³ Lehning, et. al., <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15588742.2015.1125331>; Scharlach, Andrew E. *Generations Journal*; San Francisco Vol. 33, Iss. 2, (Summer 2009): 71-73.

³⁴ Steels, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2015.02.004>

The following strategies can help to embed aging-friendliness in local or broader government policies, programs, or regulations—particularly beyond the traditional context of providing social services to senior citizens in need or enrichment programs tailored to a certain notion of a typical “senior citizen.”

- Actively cultivate a knowledge-base of aging-friendly land use within the aging-friendly networks, collaboratives, and community initiatives operating in New Jersey, including an ability to articulate how built environments can be ageist and the policy changes needed to address that.
- Institute a policy of multi-sectoral leadership and facilitation in networks, collaboratives, and community initiatives.
- Include the elevation and demonstration of general and political land-use knowledge and engagement in funding programs for AFCIs so that land use goals are pursued and become a standard component of local initiatives.
- Normalize and promote a methodology for conducting community aging-friendly land use assessments that includes an evaluation of the physical features and community programs available, as well as the municipal plans, policies, and regulations that will determine future built-environment conditions. In doing so, it is also important to promote methodologies that will help identify appropriate strategies. For example, appropriate methodologies for identification of active aging places for development of municipal policies to plan and provide for public spaces and facilities that provide community support services to older adults in their communities is an emerging need for local governments³⁵ and can help address disparities in lived experiences.³⁶
- Incorporate aging-in-community into the aging-in-place narrative.³⁷ Providing individualized benefits to older adults wishing to remain in their current homes needs to be evaluated in the context of providing broader social benefits through changes to policies that perpetuate systems or conditions that can lead to environments non-supportive of older populations. For example, the lack of affordable and appropriate housing options or access to engagement opportunities, jobs, autonomy and independent living, or other aging-friendly elements represented across all domains of livability are not necessarily compatible with a scenario in which older adults are

³⁵ Dawidowicz et. al., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2019.102575>

³⁶ Ravi et. al., [10.1093/geronl/jgaa057.2463](https://doi.org/10.1093/geronl/jgaa057.2463)

³⁷ <https://generations.asaging.org/age-eco-friendly-climate-resilient-housing>

geographically isolated living in homes excessive in size, cost, or maintenance responsibilities. Grounding the premise in fundamental inadequacies exhibited by communities will help to center inaccessible built and social environments as the core issue to address in achieving livability, rather than highlighting a specific desire of a segment of older adults to remain in their current homes, regardless of how appropriate that home is for aging, as being universal and deserving of special attention above community-wide needs.³⁸

- Understand the policy implications of different framing narratives for advancing aging-friendly land-use goals at local, regional, and state levels. Research is needed to understand “roles, capacities, institutional contexts, and discursive practices of policy actors undertaking [aging-friendly] policy work.”³⁹
- Bring more of the community and diverse community representation into local AFCIs through funding provisions that include intentional implementation of inclusive engagement and leadership components based on quantitative and qualitative data.
- Identify targeted, direct, and attainable aging-friendly land-use actions for municipal and state governments to implement specific to New Jersey’s political landscape and applicable to all communities across the state, and support a targeted and strategic campaign to advance them as land use issues affecting older adults.

Recommendations for Achieving Substantive, Long-Term Aging-Friendly Land Use Goals in Communities With Local AFCIs

Recognizing the accomplishments and growth of AFCIs in New Jersey, there has been limited success in achieving desired outcomes related to the broader land-use issues plaguing municipalities across the state—vastly insufficient and unaffordable options for housing, barriers to physical access to community resources and facilities through adequate and varied transportation and mobility options, lack of opportunities for social engagement through planned or chance encounters in public

³⁸ Joy, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2018.10.005>

³⁹ Joy, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2018.10.005>

and outdoor spaces, and obstacles to autonomy in achieving daily tasks—all influenced by or consequential of built environments that are not aging-friendly.

The following recommendations are aimed at organizing AFCI practice through the guidance provided to them.

- Focus local AFCIs on “enabling spaces” to provide better opportunities for actualizing changes supporting active healthy aging. An environmental perspective may be a more effective approach to catalyzing change than those presented by the conventional healthcare system, and can help to address widespread lifestyle factors such as sedentariness, poor eating habits, and lack of physical and social activity⁴⁰ on a community scale. Goals that aim to provide or enhance direct support and services can still be pursued through an AFCI under this focus, and the recommendation is not intended to “replace” those efforts. Rather, the recommendation is to include a place-based approach.
- Promote strategies to implement a collaborative approach that integrates the expertise of urban planners, architects, and other land use professionals with health and social support practitioners and advocates in AFCIs. To create places that are aging-friendly and have livable environments that maximize aging well, collaborative leadership that includes built environment expertise should be embedded in the local AFCI from the start.
- Appeal to municipal needs and programs. There are existing initiatives with established pathways underway in municipalities that overlap with the goals and objectives of local AFCIs, particularly in the realms of health, sustainability, and vulnerable populations. For example, climate resilience and planning is at the forefront of municipal priorities, and there are links to be made between those efforts and aging-friendly planning.⁴¹ The connection between the Sustainable Jersey program and AFCIs is another example. By promoting areas of overlap with existing municipal planning and operational practices, rather than introducing an entirely new need, an AFCI can incentivize municipal action.
- Design a leadership development program to institute a common language and understanding among healthcare, land use, government, and community

⁴⁰ Chrysikou et. al., <http://dx.doi.org/10.1155/2016/6189349>

⁴¹ Guide to Expanding Mitigation: Making the Connection to Older Adults. FEMA and AARP. <https://www.fema.gov/node/making-connection-older-adults>; Krawchenko et. al., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jurstud.2015.12.013>.

partners for aging-friendly community indicators. A shared curriculum and learning experience to understand how the built environment affects older adults and solutions to improving livability of spaces and places would provide local AFCIs with the technical knowledge, tools, and multidisciplinary support needed to advocate for the kinds of changes needed to make substantive improvements to livability. Advancement of AFCIs has been stunted by the lack of clear indicators and measurability of aging-friendly communities.^{42,43} Promoting established indicators through a leadership development program would help to catalyze the movement in New Jersey by aligning it around a common direction.

- Promote community-wide benefits to integrate local AFCIs with public resource programs and pathways, helping to fill the funding and capacity gaps hindering community activation. It is not sustainable for AFCIs to rely on grant programs to initiate or sustain an aging-friendly community plan or planning process,⁴⁴ and oversimplified pathways of sustaining a local AFCI can neglect certain populations. A focus on the community's social and physical environments can align with other public initiatives aiming to improve quality of life within communities.
- Expect that different communities will come into the work in their own ways. Not all of them will start engaging with aging-friendly work through a designated coordinator. Municipalities will typically designate a coordinator to oversee implementation of a plan or program, which occurs after the assessment and some planning phases. While it makes sense for the grant program to require a coordinator to be responsible for managing the outcomes and outputs of a grant, from the perspective of a municipality, it may not make sense to make that kind of commitment until after the initiative has gained momentum and has clear direction. Funding schemes should consider whether there is a need for an aging-friendly coordinator to begin or at any point in the process. If a coordinator is required, a provision can be made to allow a time period for compliance, and support for initiatives can be delivered on a tiered approach aligned with municipal procedures or constraints. For example, a local AFCI could be required to designate an aging-friendly coordinator within three years to qualify for implementation funding in the next tier.

⁴² Chrysikou et. al., <http://dx.doi.org/10.1155/2016/6189349>

⁴³ van Hoof et. al., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.buildenv.2021.107922>

⁴⁴ Steels, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2015.02.004>

- Compile and analyze data to evaluate the effectiveness of local AFCI structures, processes, and outcomes across New Jersey. Measured outcomes are needed to demonstrate how AFCIs extend community benefits through municipal partnerships, and to enable informed decisions on approaches for any community representative starting or sustaining a local AFCI.^{45,46}

PART V.

Learnings from Community Aging-Friendly Land Use Projects

Working from the premise that certain key aging-friendly actions representing substantive changes to livability in a community will need to be implemented by the municipality, it is useful to explore the experiences of municipalities that initiate aging-friendly programs in their communities so that we can understand how to better incorporate municipal partnership into the aging-friendly movement in New Jersey.

Community Experience Profile—Pompton Lakes Borough

Like many locales, the community of Pompton Lakes had already been implementing aging-friendly actions in various ways but without the label of “aging-friendly.” Their efforts to intentionally engage in aging-friendly community-building in a more comprehensive manner initiated from within municipal leadership. Recognizing that aging-friendly land use principles aligned with their downtown redevelopment and revitalization goals, the Borough conducted an aging-friendly land use assessment facilitated by New Jersey Future and under the direction of a steering committee composed of municipal representatives, external partners, and community members and stakeholders. This experience further solidified the Borough’s commitment to undertaking specific actions that would improve the livability for older adults, and it provided a framework for leadership to apply aging-friendly principles of community design to land use policies and practices, as well as services and supports for its older population.

⁴⁵ Steels, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2015.02.004>

⁴⁶ van Hoof et. al., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.buildenv.2021.107922>

Next steps for the municipality are to operationalize aging-friendly actions in decision-making and to formalize a local aging-friendly initiative. Directly following the land use assessment, an Accessory Dwelling Unit ordinance was considered by the governing body, although it did not pass. Additionally, the land use boards discussed changes to zoning ordinances and the master plan in accordance with recommendations of the aging-friendly assessment, and continue to have those conversations as well as others related to their assessment. Without ongoing vocalization or engagement regarding aging-friendly actions, it is easy to lose momentum. The Borough recognizes this and is actively pursuing mechanisms to support an aging-friendly coordinator in the community.

Funding streams and grant requirements of multiple sources and initiatives are challenging to coordinate for maximum efficiency and effectiveness at the local level, and Pompton Lakes leadership is exploring ways to leverage an existing health and prevention coordinator position in the Borough, as well as a shared services agreement with the neighboring town of Wayne Township to support an aging-friendly coordinator position. At this phase in their process, without outside long-term funding, having an aging-friendly coordinator embedded in the municipality would not be an option. A more typical trajectory for that kind of commitment from a municipality would entail first assessment and planning, including financial and administrative planning for structuring the initiative, then acknowledgement of a direct need to coordinate implementation actions based on the assessment and planning. The aging-friendly coordinator position would be justified as a municipal expense if it were deemed necessary to coordinate implementation directed by the municipality, which would not be expected to occur until a later phase in the process.

It is understandably desirable from the perspective of a funding entity to optimize success and follow-through with the designation of an aging-friendly coordinator at the onset of the funding relationship, particularly if funding a fledgling group. However, municipalities are accustomed to grant managers, town administrators, or other staff fulfilling the role of meeting deliverables and coordinating a project, and as is the case in Pompton Lakes, there may not be a community champion readily available at the onset of the initiative to fulfill a coordinator role, neither as a volunteer nor a paid position. There are instances where the municipality may first need to do the background work in order to be able to either invest in a coordinator or solicit a volunteer coordinator from the community.

In the case of Pompton Lakes, they needed additional resources to support a coordinator position or continued technical assistance to follow through with recommendations derived from their aging-friendly land use assessment, but they also needed guidance on how to structure an aging-friendly initiative within local government.

Community Experience Profile—Passaic City

The City of Passaic sought to pair its existing community-building and economic revitalization efforts with a consideration of aging-friendly design and public engagement. The community's initial aging-friendly project—to conduct a land use assessment and implementation planning—originated within the municipality and was assigned to the project manager of the Passaic Enterprise Zone, demonstrating the city's desire to incorporate aging-friendliness into the broader effort of redevelopment. New Jersey Future provided grant-funded technical assistance for the city to initiate an aging-friendly effort through a land use assessment and community engagement.

It was very challenging to secure capacity for the project. Passaic City is an economically distressed locale with a population disproportionately impacted by social determinants of health, and there are other pressing priorities for the municipality to address with limited resources. It took approximately six months to secure an agreement with the municipality and establish a small project team, which is about twice the typical amount of time needed to complete that task. It was made very clear from the beginning that the merits of an age-friendly initiative would need to be demonstrated before city resources could be allocated to any implementation, including the designation of an aging-friendly coordinator within the municipality, regardless of whether the position were paid or unpaid. Furthermore, the city was unable to recommend community groups or members that might be suitable for bringing an aging-friendly initiative into community conversations and spaces during the project.

Although the city receives funding through programs aimed at supporting economic development in overburdened communities, it does not have the capacity to organize a community-building effort. Their main need was for technical assistance to compile and evaluate all of the city's planning efforts and existing policies and regulations to advance redevelopment and neighborhood revitalization, and they desired to do that in the context of aging-friendly principles. The level of community engagement needed to initiate an AFCI was not sufficient due to the lack of capacity

by the city or the technical assistance needed to carry out all aspects of both community engagement and technical evaluation of municipal plans, policies, and regulations. Communities with less capacity to devote municipal staff or resources, combined with the inability to identify well-resourced community members to engage in community-building activities, may need considerably more assistance, which is a relevant consideration for grant-making structures aimed at advancing equity in the aging-friendly movement in New Jersey.

Community Experience Profile—Livingston

Livingston Township, which is a highly resourced municipality relative to Pompton Lakes and very much so relative to Passaic City, was able to devote considerable and robust support to development of a local AFCI. The municipality was able to provide staff resources from multiple departments, has an existing facility dedicated to community and senior use, and is connected with multiple community groups led by devoted community members. A core of highly active volunteers from the community partnered with municipal staff and leadership with the specific goal of conducting a needs assessment and developing an action plan for application to the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities. The municipality received funding to secure technical assistance from New Jersey Future to help the community conduct the needs assessment, develop an action plan, apply to the network, and develop an administrative structure for an ongoing AFCI.

In the case of Livingston, technical assistance appeared to be most effective for facilitating the process and providing guidance on best practices in aging-friendly community-building, and particularly on the topic of aging-friendly land use. The community already provides an abundance of amenities to older adults through services, supports, and programs. A significant outcome of the initiative was that the municipality adopted an ordinance to create an aging-friendly committee with direct connection to the legislative body. This will help to embed aging-friendly principles in municipal decision-making and provide a mechanism for action plan implementation.

The technical assistance Livingston received provided a context for reframing the narrative of the needs of older adults in the community from one focused on providing social supports for “elderly” individuals incapable of meeting their own needs, or “seniors” who need age-specific programming within existing community activity or enrichment programs, to a broader understanding of features that support aging-friendly communities as places where anyone can access social and

physical supports and amenities as they age. It also helped initiate a community conversation about inclusion and equity through targeted outreach and comparative evaluation of survey results, which revealed differences in perceptions correlated with ethnicity, neighborhood, and retirement status.

The AFCI developed through this effort in Livingston also provides an ongoing framework and opportunity that did not previously exist for community members to engage with municipal leadership on issues of housing, transportation, and public spaces. In the case of this well-resourced community, there is a need for technical assistance to advance implementation of actions pertaining to transformative community changes and guidance on promoting inclusive community participation and engagement between the designated steering committee and individual volunteers, an organized community group serving as an AFCI, and the broader public.

PART VI.

Key Takeaways

Ageing-friendly communities are places characterized by physical and social environments that are not ageist. They are created by implementing transformative changes that require municipal government action that is driven or guided by inclusive community participation and needs. A government-community partnership model applied at the onset of an initiative, coupled with an independent advocacy component, can potentially generate and sustain a strong local AFCI. Intentional efforts to advance AFCIs that are equitable and accurately identifying and implementing the needs of older adults in the communities they represent in New Jersey are lacking and needed. A common understanding and narrative to convey ageing-friendly community principles as public benefits with political and social appeal is also lacking, and education is needed within the ageing-friendly leadership community to provide guidance for AFCIs to effectively engage with local governments and to sufficiently center land use and the built environment in local AFCIs.