

VTech Guest Article

Make Your Community Age-Friendly

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If you were asked what attributes make your community a great place to live, what would you answer? In 2006, the World Health Organization (WHO) asked that question of 35 countries as part of its Global Age-Friendly Cities Project. The objective was to find characteristics that set communities apart for successful aging.

WHO identified eight characteristics that make countries healthy, convenient, affordable and fun places to grow old:

1. Walkable outdoor spaces and public buildings
2. Accessible transportation
3. Affordable housing
4. Community support and health services
5. Opportunities for social participation
6. Respect and social inclusion,
7. Opportunities for civic participation and employment,
8. Communication and information on issues of aging and services

Four out of the eight age-friendly traits are conduits to socialization, inclusion in the community, and intergenerational connections. The other four relate to infrastructure and healthcare. And even the infrastructure traits, such as walkability and access to public spaces, are part of the mechanics of staying connected.

The message for social developers is that there must be an ambiance of inclusion for all of us. Older adults must have a voice in political and policy, be valued by commercial enterprises, be welcome in the work place when qualified, and be recognized for their volunteerism. A community must tackle the public images that they display, and the way they deliver social services to avoid patronizing and diminishing people just because they are older.

If you would like your community to get on the age-friendly "A" List, start with a coalition between residents, community, politicians, nonprofits and the media.

Once there is a grassroots or a governmental agenda (or both) to look at age-friendly factors, there is plenty of help out there: The AARP will organize a strategic planning session and/or a "walkability" study in your community which can become a community event in itself. Local senior centers and libraries can lead the way with intergenerational programs and family events that depart from solely age-based endeavors.

Consider working with your local school board on an age-friendly curriculum. Respect, appreciation and even happy anticipation of growing older adults can be cultivated in our schools, so that future community builders will see that being age-friendly can be a continuing goal. Just as we have school curriculums that are sensitive to different gender and ethnics groups, so too, we can weave education on aging into standard classes, such as the biology of aging in biology class, biographies of older heroes in history class, and the works of older musicians and artists in music and art class.

If you want to create an age-friendly neighborhood, and not tackle the whole county, city or state, consider founding a “village.”In 2002, residents of the Beacon Hill area of Boston launched the “village” concept so that people could continue to live in their homes as they grew older. Since then, more than 70 villages have opened throughout the country and many more around the globe. The concept includes transportation sharing, house renovation by reliable contractors, healthcare sharing and much more. Individuals pay dues to belong to the village; without which their neighborhood would not be age-friendly.

As you become active in building your age-friendly community be prepared for push back from those concerned that implementing your suggestions will divert scarce public resources away from young people and young families. Remind naysayers that we all age, and will all benefit eventually from age-friendly facilities and design. But, more importantly, most age-friendly community features are for everyone, such as open spaces, walkability, and good health care.

As for fostering a positive attitude about aging, that costs nothing and solves nearly everything. By making your community, city, state or county a haven for joyous and successful aging, you make it available for joyous and successful living for all.

Resources to Create Age-Friendly Communities

Grants may be available through your state government

American Society on Aging: Offers courses and conferences,
www.asaging.org, www.leadingage.org

Creating Aging Friendly Communities: A consortium of professionals in the field of aging participate in an ongoing information exchange,
<http://AgingFriendly.org>

Global Age-friendly Cities: A Guide: The WHO reports of what makes a city age-friendly, http://www.who.int/ageing/age_friendly_cities_guide/en/