**Optimal Living: Promising Strategies**

### Preparing for Change

Change is transforming the United States, and the big question is how well we are preparing for it. By 2030, one in five of us will be aged 65 or older. Realistically, we will not meet the needs of this growing population by focusing only on programs and services. We need a coordinated push for healthier and more supportive environments that will enable increasing numbers of older adults to age well and live to the fullest.

City officials may be unaware of the changes in store for their communities. Urban planners may be alert to the need for more integrated transportation, but fail to see the long-term problems arising from development that ignores inclusive home design. Public health may be so focused on other emergent issues that little planning time is spent on healthy aging.

We need greater focus on practice and policy change to create the kind of environments that will support healthy and vital aging. Sound planning and decision-making processes must take into account people's entire lifespan. Together we must plan, design, and build environments that allow older adults, persons with disabling conditions, and those with functional vulnerabilities to remain engaged in their communities and able to enjoy the highest quality of life possible.

### Actions to Support Change for Healthy Aging

- Envision good design solutions for roadways, walkways, homes, and neighborhoods that meet the needs of older adults.
- Work with professionals from public health, architecture, aging, universal design, planning, recreation, transportation, and engineering.
- Build public-private partnerships, and work with organizations with related, but different, interests and specialties.
- Integrate planning and decision making about community design, safety, housing, transportation, and environmental protection.
- Know what effective policies are, how they are created, and what steps are necessary to get them implemented.

### What Is Healthy Aging?

Healthy aging is the development and maintenance of optimal physical, mental, and social well-being and function in older adults. It is most likely to be achieved when physical environments and communities are safe and support the adoption and maintenance by individuals of attitudes and behaviors known to promote health and well-being.

—CDC Healthy Aging Research Network
Since 2007, New York City, along with Portland, Oregon, has been part of the World Health Organization’s Global Age-Friendly Cities project.

Following an extensive assessment process, NYC created Aging Improvement Districts to address identified issues, such as improving access to recreation, cultural resources, transportation and shopping, and remediing barriers facing older pedestrians.

The Age-friendly Business initiative helps businesses become more aware of older patrons, educating stores on how to be age-friendly, and how to retain older employees.

Additional initiatives focus on preparing professionals and educational institutions to better serve older adults, as well as to make technology more accessible and useful to older adults.

In addition, all city departments are working to improve the way they integrate and serve older adults in their daily business.

The Age-Friendly New York City Web site includes a number of tools and resources that may be useful to other communities.

www.agefriendlynyc.org

Promising Approaches

**Smart growth**, with a focus on appealing, walkable communities, includes planning principles relevant to healthy aging and addresses environmental concerns, such as greenhouse gas emissions and the health effects of air and water pollution.

**Universal design** promotes design of structures, products, and neighborhoods that work well for everyone, including people with functional challenges, such as low vision.

**Complete Streets** strategies create better pedestrian, driver, and cyclist environments, and transportation systems that work together.

The livable or **lifelong community** concept emphasizes a broad range of housing options and mobility alternatives (both active and passenger transportation) suitable for all ages.

Promising Strategies

- **Expand partnerships.** When planning policy or built environment change, cross-sector and public-private partnerships with builders and developers, for example, are essential.

- **Choose the best solutions.** Policy solutions can be effective at many levels — national, regional, state, local, and organizational. We must consider readiness, resources, reach, and potential effects of any solution. Many of the problems that face us demand more than incremental or voluntary approaches. Bold approaches are often needed.

- **Integrate broader environmental considerations.** The focus on the built environment needs to include broader environmental issues such as air and water pollution that affect neighborhood safety and human health. Learn what environmental hazards are present in your community and what plans and procedures are in place for dealing with them.

- **Engage older adults.** Older adults can be part of the solution, lending their considerable skills and energy to improve the environment for all. The ENCorps environmental leadership program at the University of Maine (www.encoreleaders.org) has successfully engaged older adults in environmental stewardship.

- **Expand initiatives.** Successful initiatives, such as those of the Atlanta Regional Commission and Age-Friendly New York, are in progress across the country. Policy change, dissemination of strategies and lessons learned, and private sector engagement are crucial for these and other successful initiatives to become widely adapted.

- **Innovate.** Many of the problems we face are unprecedented, without clear solutions. We need creative approaches to resolve them.
Promising Targets for Action

Neighborhood Design and Safety
- Require attention to age-sensitive issues, such as accessible housing, pedestrian countdown signals that account for slower walking speeds, and benches or other places to rest.
- Upgrade older neighborhoods and suburban and rural communities.
- Provide tax incentives for incorporating lifelong community concepts.
- Improve selected senior-friendly routes and provide walking guides to safe routes.

Housing
- Use tax incentives and ordinances to increase the amount of housing stock with universal design features.
- Change zoning to allow use of accessory dwelling units.
- Educate builders, developers, realtors, and consumers about inclusive home design features.
- Provide tax incentives and recognize exemplary practices in retrofitting older homes and creating new models of supportive housing.

Transportation and Mobility
- Invest transportation dollars in a full range of mobility alternatives, including public transportation that is responsive to the needs of older adults and specialized transport programs and systems that serve rural communities.
- Improve roadway design to aid older drivers; for example, increase the number of lower speed routes and reduce intersection width.
- Provide training in aging issues to engineers and transportation planners.

Protection from Environmental Hazards
- Endorse policies that foster green building, infill development, and reduced automobile use.
- Develop clear plans to mitigate hazards that may be especially problematic for some older adults, for example, poor air quality for people with pulmonary disease.

The Atlanta Regional Commission Lifelong Communities Initiative (LLC) brings together citizens and stakeholders from diverse sectors, such as planning, engineering, private development, public health, and aging services, to plan for Atlanta’s growing older adult population.

Facing sprawl, uncontrolled and rapid development, and poor pedestrian and transportation infrastructure, the LLC conducted a comprehensive charrette process in 2009 to “reimagine” future development as well as target change to existing neighborhoods. It developed a toolkit for community planners and identified policy solutions.

The next challenge will be taking Atlanta’s LLC approach statewide. Despite limited resources, the LLC has created a climate where consideration of aging issues is routine, and its comprehensive approach has now been embraced by the state in its Georgia for a Lifetime campaign.

www.atlantaregional.com/aging-resources/lifelong-communities-llc
Why Environments Matter for Healthy Aging

- **Neighborhoods.** Problems such as high noise levels, heavy traffic, and poor lighting make it less likely that older residents will remain active and maintain a high level of functioning.

- **Neighborhood design.** More walking and social activity happen in areas with high housing density, attractive destinations, and green spaces.

- **Safety.** Older adults are concerned about crime, falling, being struck by a motor vehicle or bicycle, or having places to rest while out walking, especially if they have poor health or difficulty getting around.

- **Housing and transportation.** People whose homes lack universal design features may have to move if they become ill or disabled. Limited access to public transit that is accessible and timely also presents a barrier to getting around.

- **Environmental hazards.** Air and water pollution and toxicants such as polychlorinated biphenyls have health effects that become evident in late life. Climate change, and changing patterns of disease, food insecurity, and extreme weather events pose huge risks to older adults.

Resources

AARP Public Policy Institute  
www.aarp.org/research/ppi/

Active Living By Design  
www.activelivingbydesign.org


Growing Smarter, Living Healthier: A Guide to Smart Growth and Active Aging  

Guide to Community Preventive Services  
www.thecommunityguide.org/index.html

Partnership for Sustainable Communities  

Smart Growth Principles  
www.smartgrowth.org/about/principles/default.asp

Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Promote Healthy Homes  

US Environmental Protection Agency  
www.epa.gov/aging

Working with Elected Officials to Promote Healthy Land Use Planning and Community Design. National Association of City and County Health Officials  