

Age-Friendly Status Check

AGE-FRIENDLY INTEGRATION

SEPTEMBER 2021



AGE-FRIENDLY MINNESOTA

Age-Friendly Integration

Background

This document is one of eight briefs that explore current approaches and impact of the Minnesota Board on Aging, Minnesota's aging network¹ and Department of Human Services. A better understanding of the foundation provided by our existing work will guide us as we develop strategies for Age-Friendly Minnesota. We aim to stretch our thinking about what aging can and should mean for all Minnesotans—creating policies, communities, and services that see age in everything and empower us with what we need to live with dignity and autonomy at every stage.

The briefs are not exhaustive but aim to capture major ideas, prompt needed questions and discussions, and help us identify priority opportunities for greater impact and better outcomes. All briefs are available at the Age-Friendly Minnesota website.

Overview

The State of Minnesota is preparing to integrate age-friendly practices into its work at a new level. That is, becoming more inclusive and equitable by incorporating older adult concerns into all aspects of its work—going beyond the usual and predictable places and approaches and bringing a lifespan lens to everything we do. However, in some important regards, the State—particularly the Minnesota Board on Aging (MBA) and the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS)—has been advancing an age-friendly approach for years.

Some of the most significant examples are:

- **Early action to recognize and prepare for the aging population.** This began in 1997 with the launch of Project 2030, an expansive effort to understand demographic trends and how those trends would impact our communities and our futures as older Minnesotans. Project 2030 was the first effort of its kind. No other state had looked closely at the demographic realities and the implications of these trends. Project 2030 helped begin to “turn the ship” and establish a strong foundation for what has evolved into Age-Friendly Minnesota.
- **Making systemic changes that help keep people living at home and in the community.** For 20 years, the State has led a steady shift toward older people living and receiving supportive services at home and in the community rather than in nursing homes. This is the result of a concerted effort to strengthen and expand home- and community-based services (HCBS) that keep people at home or in the community—where most prefer to be—and conserve public dollars. In 2000, about 60 percent of older Minnesotans on Medical Assistance received supportive services in nursing homes, and 40 percent received them at home. By 2016, those

¹ The Older Americans Act of 1965 established a national network of federal, state, and local agencies to plan and provide services that help older adults, including American Indian and Alaska Native elders, to live independently in their homes and communities. This interconnected structure of agencies is known as the aging network.

numbers had more than flipped, with greater than 70 percent receiving HCBS, and 30 percent receiving services in nursing homes.

As the aging network, overseen by MBA, and DHS prepare to bring their work into the age-friendly framework, specifically that of the World Health Organization and AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities,² it can learn from current aspects of its own work as well as identify new approaches.

Current strategies that are advancing age-friendly work

An analysis of recent plans, goals, grants, and strategies within the aging network and beyond—including Area Agencies on Aging (AAA), the Eldercare Development Partnership (EDP), Live Well at Home® grants, Gaps Analysis, MBA Dementia Grants, Senior LinkAge Line, Adult Protective Services, and Office of Ombudsmen for Long-Term Care, among other areas—reveals many areas of strength to build on as well as opportunities for new, more integrated strategies.

This section describes ways that the aging network, MBA, and key divisions of DHS are already advancing more expansive, inclusive, and connected approaches to helping all older Minnesotans—of today and tomorrow—live well and age well.

Lead or actively participate in collaborative, cross-sector age-friendly efforts.

As of summer 2021, ten Minnesota cities and counties had joined the AARP age-friendly network, and many others are taking steps to do so. (There are more than 550 member communities, and nine states, in the U.S.) Other communities—cities, counties, universities, and more—have launched initiatives that are independent from the network but similar in their scope and goals. All of these efforts are rich with partnership opportunities which the State can both contribute to and learn from. It is already doing so.

Age-friendly community initiatives usually involve cross-sector partners, committed volunteers, and/or city and county staff who know the community well and may offer new or additional insights or connections that can deepen understanding of community needs and opportunities. Partnering with age-friendly communities also can help the aging network and DHS identify and respond to service gaps.

Numerous AAAs and EDPs are actively engaged in this type of work, lending their experience, knowledge of priority and emerging issues, connections to other partner organizations, and capacity to convene cross-sector groups.

Assist and support emerging age-friendly communities initiatives.

The aging network, especially the AAAs and EDPs, is a knowledgeable and trusted resource for communities that are interested in undertaking an age-friendly initiative. For example, AAAs both encourage and educate stakeholders about age-friendly work, and respond and provide resources and information to interested communities.

² The [AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities](#) is a national program linked to the World Health Organization's Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities. Communities that enroll commit to taking steps to become better places to grow older, using the network's framework as a guide.

AAAs' work in this area includes:

- Partnering with regional foundations on age-friendly efforts
- Assisting communities that are actively pursuing joining the AARP age-friendly network
- Meeting with cities to share results of the AARP MN age-friendly survey and information about the Governor's Age-Friendly MN Council
- Fielding inquiries and offering support related to communities and other entities—such as a health system—becoming age-friendly.

Educate and encourage action from community leaders.

The aging network, MBA, and DHS can play leadership roles in communicating the opportunity and value of age-friendly communities to many key partners and decision-makers. It is an opportunity to shift and (re)frame the dialogue around aging and discuss fundamental values associated with the work, such as inclusion and equity. They can also gather data and information from municipal and other leaders about their age-friendly planning and barriers to the work.

This work is already happening. For example, AAAs are:

- Working to ensure that older adults are included as a priority focus of counties' Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNA) and Community Health Improvement Plans (CHIP)
- Developing and conducting surveys with city governments regarding whether and how they are including aging in their planning processes
- Presenting on age-friendly transportation at a transportation conference.

Additionally, through an MBA Dementia Grant, the Barnesville Area HELPERS are increasing awareness of dementia by providing dementia friendly information sessions to local businesses, students, clergy, and the police, fire, and ambulance crews, as well as planning an intervention to assist the local bank to provide age-friendly policies and practices.

Bring the aging lens to efforts that are relevant to—but not solely focused on—aging.

A core feature of age-friendly communities is the integration of a lifespan approach into many facets of community life and planning, not only those that center on aging. The aging network can participate in a variety of city, county, and regional initiatives and ensure that the perspective and concerns of older adults are highlighted and considered in planning and decisions.

AAAs are already engaged in this work by:

- Serving on regional, cross-sector boards related to community-wide initiatives
- Participating in an area bike-friendly planning effort
- Participating in regional labor force development groups
- Sitting on Regional Transportation Coordinating Councils.

However, one consideration is limits in staff capacity. The ultimate value and impact of bringing an aging lens to the table must be worth the time and effort of staff's participation in these collaborative efforts. Simply attending meetings may not warrant the time it takes to do so; participation should result in meaningful integration of older adult concerns.

Develop greater internal capacity to assist age-friendly communities work

Boosting staff knowledge about key aspects of age-friendly communities—such as issues and strategies related to housing, transportation, parks, and workforce, among others—can maximize the degree to which they can influence stakeholders and help affect change.

Examples of how this work is already happening include the following:

- One AAA partnered with AARP MN to offer several presentations explaining the age-friendly initiative and process to the statewide EDP group.
- Another AAA established and implemented a professional development plan for at least two staff members to develop in-house expertise on life-cycle housing.
- Several AAAs are involved in age-friendly communities initiatives in their regions, where they both lend expertise to and learn from those efforts.

Partner with funders to support age-friendly communities efforts.

Foundations and other philanthropic organizations hold major potential for advancing age-friendly communities. They can produce change by funding and shepherding both quick projects and more long-term systemic efforts. MBA can cultivate foundations' support of age-friendly work by raising awareness of the model; the community-wide and all-ages benefit of the approach; and the potential for systemic change in which so many funders are interested.

There are several examples of how this work is already happening.

- Two AAAs are already collaborating with funders. One is actively involved with a regional foundation's Rural Aging Initiative to identify strategic and innovative funding ideas. This partnership included the AAA offering a regional age-friendly workshop in April 2021.
- Another AAA (as part of Eldercare Development Partnership) has worked with a regional foundation on the foundation's awarding of seven age-friendly communities grants in last three years. The grants have resulted in community-wide benefits, exceeding expectations for their impact. Five grants supported accessibility improvements, including handicapped accessible doors, a new sidewalk in a key location, and accessible restrooms in a community center. Others supported an intergenerational coordinator to support key activities, e.g., planting a community garden; and movie equipment for indoor or outdoor movies and other activities for older adults.

Linking up with Gaps Analysis

The strategies discussed above align with themes that have emerged from DHS' [Gaps Analysis](#), an ongoing process to understand and improve access to services systems for older adults; people with disabilities; and children, youth and adults living with mental health conditions in Minnesota. The most recent gaps analysis identified four key service access issues: shortages in crisis services, housing, transportation, and workforce.

In addition to identifying gaps themselves, DHS highlights grantees using promising practices to help fill those gaps, and shares that information with other service providers and the public.

Key themes that have emerged from those promising practices include the following, which reinforce and complement strategies described above:

- **Importance of partnership, coordination, and collaboration**

This theme is raised each of the four gap areas. Many examples of partnership, coordination, and collaboration can be found in this document and throughout the other documents in this series. AAAs, in particular, utilize this strategy as they seek to create system-level changes and sustainable improvements to services.

- **Creativity is helpful in overcoming barriers and challenges.**

As evidenced in examples presented in other documents in this series, one important role MBA and DHS play is funding providers to test creative and innovative approaches to improving services. For instance, a Live Well at Home® grant allowed Prairie Five to repurpose a transit bus to serve as a Mobile Community Center to bring community-based services to older adults in more than 30 communities in rural western Minnesota.

- **Outreach and person-centered approaches are needed to effectively serve cultural and ethnic communities.**

While this particular lesson was tied to a housing initiative for older African and African-American men, the lesson can be applied across all service areas. Again, many examples exist of how Minnesota's aging network continues to expand and strengthen its support of older Minnesotans who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color. This requires ongoing staff training, investment, and relationship building grounded in respect and humility.

- **Identifying and coordinating financial resources across partners for the work, and then using those resources to support the coordinated efforts.**

As more collaborative initiatives are formed—as we have learned is happening with AAAs and EDP throughout the state—the issue of how such work is funded must be a core part of an initiative. While MBA often plays the role of funder, that is not always the case, and it is important to piece together the funding puzzle to understand which partner can fund which dimension of an effort.

Where We Go from Here

In addition to expanding their use of strategies already described, the following recommendations may help MBA and DHS identify additional ways to integrate age considerations in new places and in new ways, increase coordination between partners, and make systems improvements that benefit older Minnesotans. This list is not comprehensive, but rather an important starting point.

- Ensure that all work part of Age-Friendly Minnesota is deliberately inclusive of Minnesotans whose race, ethnicity, culture, geography, sexual orientation, abilities, and other characteristics reflect the full population of the state.
- A defining characteristic of age-friendly work is that it lives beyond the usual realms of aging and services. MBA should work in concert with the Governor's Council on an Age-Friendly Minnesota to ensure that State agencies and departments across the board are actively engaged in assessing and understanding their own work through an aging lens, and developing their plans and policies accordingly.
- To a large extent, age-friendliness just requires a well-functioning system that is coordinated to maximum effect and where people don't fall through the cracks. Improvements to internal coordination will allow systems to work better together and, therefore, more effectively serve older Minnesotans. However, this work takes time and energy. With staff already stretched, necessary time must be allotted to identifying intersections across divisions and programs and developing new ways of operating. This could include several things, such as the following:
 - Potential exists for greater collaboration across divisions within the MBA and DHS, with one of the major goals and benefits being an even stronger safety net that helps catch people before reaching a point of crisis. For example, Adult Protective Services (APS) can better collaborate with Policy Integration. Often, issues show up in APS because they have not been addressed or solved elsewhere earlier. In these cases, where the primary issue is a person's lack of resources or preventive-type services "upstream," there is great opportunity to help people before a situation escalates and family members call APS.
 - EDP and Senior LinkAge Line could do more work together at planning stages rather than information being passed from one to the other after the fact. Work and expectations of this nature could be specified in the State Plan.
 - Providers out in the field need better support—in the form of better wages as well as technical assistance related to things like navigating the Elderly Waiver system, which can feel daunting and complicated. More time and capacity would allow opportunities to make these connections between MBA staff and providers.

This might also involve other funders who support the same providers, helping them adopt a more lifespan or whole-family approach. This is particularly important for providers within communities who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color to help them build capacity to serve members of their communities.

- Can AAAs be more consistently involved in age-friendly communities initiatives across regions? Is there capacity to do so, and how could this happen? Currently, they are involved in some efforts, to varying extents, but not all. As a major resource and stakeholder in this work, how could AAAs be more uniformly involved in more communities that are part of the age-friendly network (as well as comparable initiatives not part of the network)?
- Similarly, consider opportunities to integrate EDP and AAAs' Area Plan goals into the needs assessments and action plans undertaken by communities when they join the AARP age-friendly network.
- Ensure that Adult Protective Services and Office of Ombudsmen for Long-Term Care are consistently engaged in and integrated into Age-Friendly Minnesota planning. Many opportunities exist within those realms to improve older Minnesotans' well-being and autonomy; a number of these are addressed in the other briefs that are part of this series.
- Continue to expand the degree to which data and information on older adults (of all ages, races/ethnicities, income, and need levels) are gathered and reported as part of other community needs assessments, such as counties' and health systems' community health needs assessments. This may help fill information gaps about younger-older adults and those who do not (yet) qualify for certain levels of public assistance. Further, because these needs assessments happen regularly already, it makes sense to maximize their potential to gather information about older residents, and to ensure that these needs assessments are at least utilized by—and ideally coordinated with—age-friendly community initiatives.
- As state-level age-friendly work builds speed across the country, connect with and learn from other states undertaking similar work—California being a prominent example.

Thank you to Minnesota's seven Area Agencies on Aging, Eldercare Development Partnership, Live Well at Home® grantees, and MBA Dementia grantees for the examples of work highlighted in this brief.