

Prioritizing Actions for Age-friendly Communities

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Across America, communities are contending with unprecedented growth of their older populations and seeking to increase their opportunities to age successfully, that is, to avoid disease and disability, maintain high mental and physical functioning, and to keep actively engaged in life.

Research suggests that older adults prefer to age in place in their current homes and communities, even as their ability to live independently is threatened by declines in their functional abilities. However, environmental gerontologists argue that if we create more livable dwelling and community environments, older people can cope more effectively with their limitations.

The World Health Organization's Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities and the AARP Network of Livable Communities represent global and national efforts designed to create such supportive social and physical environments. Their goal is to promote active, healthy and engaged living for persons throughout their life course and to foster their social, civic, and economic participation. The age-friendly model addresses eight domains of livability including housing. Communities taking part in the network undertake a two-year planning phase in which residents needs and aspirations are identified and then undergo a three-year implementation phase in which strategies are enacted to meet to meet the community's goals. These Age-Friendly initiatives, however, do not attempt to prioritize which of their multiple planning goals are more important than others.

This symposium will overview two broad categories of actionable strategies that are both designed to increase the aging in place opportunities for older people. The first set of strategies examines the potential of implementing universal design principles in the dwellings and communities of older people. Mixed methodological findings from Florida's first global age-friendly community will be presented to reveal the perceptions of their residents regarding the importance of these efforts. It will examine both the business and government adaptations needed to put these principles into practice.

The second set of strategies emphasizes how the independent living arrangements of older people are enhanced by insuring that they are connected to needed goods, services, and care resources in their communities. It will explore the desirability of alternative and substitutable ways—transportation, internet technologies, homesharing, and smart home technologies—that older people can access their everyday needs. These strategies are rooted in the paradigm that an enabling built environment is a crucial variable and rationale for creating successful age-friendly communities.