



ROADMAP TO LIVABILITY

Strategies and solutions that make a community great for people of all ages



Community Listening Session Tool Kit

Book 2 in the **AARP** Roadmap to Livability Collection

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AARP *Roadmap to Livability Collection*

Strategies and solutions that make a community great for people of all ages

Book 1 **AARP** *Roadmap to Livability*

Book 2 **AARP** *Roadmap to Livability: Community Listening Session Tool Kit*

Book 3 **AARP** *Roadmap to Livability: Housing Workbook*

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A publication of
AARP Livable Communities
Community, State and National Affairs
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***"I remind myself every morning: Nothing I say this day will teach me anything.
So if I'm going to learn, I must do it by listening."***

— Larry King, TV and radio interviewer and host

Listening and Learning

“Surveys, focus groups and listening sessions can help identify preferences residents have for the types of changes to make and how to make them.”

— Book 1, **AARP Roadmap to Livability**

Focus groups and larger community listening sessions allow local leaders and livability teams to engage directly with residents and stakeholders to learn what they want and to identify and solve problems. Such gatherings enable the team to collect information from a cross-section of the community to guide planning and develop a broader base of support. Community listening sessions and focus groups can be conducted during any phase of a livability effort to:

- Explore local issues and learn about a community's thoughts, perceptions, and desires for tackling a livability issue
- Gather feedback from hard-to-reach populations
- Learn what does and doesn't work
- Develop a resource map with information about the strengths of the community around a particular livability issue
- Hear the stories behind data collected in a survey
- Introduce the broad goals for the project and get community feedback for action steps to meet those goals

Book 2's Collection Connection

The **AARP Roadmap to Livability: Community Listening Session Tool Kit** is the second title in the six-part **AARP Roadmap to Livability Collection**.

An important advantage of holding a listening session is that it builds trust between the livability team and members of the larger community. People are far more likely to support proposed changes when they have a voice in how change is made.

This tool kit was developed to gather public feedback in small group settings. The guidelines apply whether a livability team is holding a **focus group**, where 8 to 12 people are brought together to discuss a specific aspect of the work, or a larger **community listening session**, which is a well-publicized meeting that's open to community members who want to learn about the livability project and share their opinions.

The tool kit can be easily adapted and works well even in communities that don't have the resources or population size necessary for conducting a larger, more formal livability survey. Please use and customize this tool kit and its worksheets as needed.

Let's Get Started!

➤ A Bit of Background

Community-based organizations and municipalities use **listening sessions** to inform people about important issues, to build support for a cause, and to discuss potential solutions to problems facing their communities. On the other hand, a **focus group** is a useful tool for obtaining specific information or feedback, such as to gain clarity or further explore a topic discussed during a listening session. A few tips and techniques:

Finding the Right Participants

1. Invite representatives of key groups — such as neighborhood associations, businesses and community-based organizations.
2. If the team wants to find out whether there are feedback differences by neighborhood, host gatherings in each neighborhood or group of neighborhoods.
3. To hear the opinions of health care organizations, social service providers and municipal decision-makers, the team might want to have a focus group or listening session just for them.
4. Some livability teams host forums for residents by age to assess the needs and interests of people in different generations or life stages.
5. Reach out to faith-based organizations, government agencies and nonprofits, including those that work directly with minority or low-income individuals and families.
6. Be ready to go where the people are. Choose a meeting place that is convenient for people who walk, bicycle or depend on public transportation. (Some options: the library, town hall or community center; a church or membership organization; a museum or art gallery.)

Taking the Time

- A focus group should last no longer than 90 minutes. Since a listening session includes more participants, 2 hours is a suitable running time.
- That said, one of the challenges of running a focus group or listening session is making sure that one person doesn't dominate the conversation and that everyone participates. (See the script starting on page 13 for how to keep the discussion on track and on schedule.)

Taking Notes

- Assign one or more members of the livability team to take notes during the session.
- Ask that participants not use names or anything directly identifying when they speak about their personal experiences. Also ask that they not talk about other participants' responses outside of the discussion.
- It's helpful to video record or at least audio record the gathering. If you do so, absolutely tell people that they're being recorded and that all identifiable information will be excluded when a transcript is made of the recording.

Asking the Right Questions

- Limit the number of questions to be discussed.
- Prepare questions in advance but allow for flexibility during the discussion.
- To gather the most valuable responses, questions should be open-ended rather than “yes” or “no.”
- Start the session with questions that might be easier for participants to answer.
- The goal is to hear what people have to say about their experiences in the community — not to rush the group through the most questions that can be squeezed into the time.

A Successful Focus Group or Community Listening Session will ...

- Include broad participation by key individuals and stakeholders with an interest in the livability work
- Provide an opportunity for participants to define what is and isn't working well in the community
- Identify community assets that can contribute to solving problems
- Give all participants a chance to share their perspectives and state their preferences or the preferences of the people they represent
- Allocate time for any suggested solutions to be considered and discussed by the group

A focus group should include 8 to 12 people who represent the key organizations and people interested in or potentially impacted by your project.

A community listening session is a larger gathering with as many as 25 people.



Another Way to Ask Questions — and Get Answers

Unlike with a focus group or listening session, a survey doesn't do a great job of explaining why someone answered the way he or she did. However, surveys can be very effective at recording how many people share a concern or opinion. Use or adapt the **AARP Age-Friendly Community Survey** to ask residents about community features, services and needs: [AARP.org/Livable-Survey](https://www.aarp.org/Livable-Survey)

➤ The Timeline

This chart provides an overview of the action items associated with planning and conducting a focus group or listening session. The individuals tasked with facilitating a session should work with the appropriate livability team members on the action items that fall into their areas of responsibility.

Time (relative to the event date)	Action Item(s)	Notes
12 Weeks Before	☐ Secure a location (see the note below) ☐ Initiate the payment process, if necessary	Ensure that the location is accessible, has sufficient parking, and includes tables and chairs
8 Weeks Before	☐ Depending on the design and production schedule, if needed, begin or complete the creation of a promotional postcard or email invitation ☐ Arrange for a session facilitator and a recorder (aka: note-taker)	The invitations or announcements should be sent to the desired participants at least 2 weeks before the event
Event Week	☐ Gather all supply list materials ☐ Prepare the flip chart posters ☐ Secure refreshments	
Event Day	☐ Arrive at the location a minimum of 1 hour before the event	
After the Event (within 2 weeks)	☐ Conduct a postmortem (i.e. an after-event assessment discussion) with participating staff/volunteers ☐ Analyze the evaluation forms for constructive feedback ☐ Share the findings with the larger team	
After the Event (within 4 weeks)	☐ Send a session summary to the participants who provided a postal or email address	

Location, Location, Location!

The easiest way to find a suitable and available gathering space is to ask other groups that have hosted similar meetings. When a location is identified, make sure that the acoustics are good. People need to be able to hear the session leader and each other. (A portable microphone can be helpful.)

➤ The Supply List

- Sticky dots (or self-stick removable notes) for voting
- Flip chart paper (with a restickable, no-surface-damage backing for displaying the sheets on walls throughout the room) or poster boards and painter's tape
- Large (4" x 6") self-stick removable notes so participants can post their comments and questions
- Markers (buy the kind designed not to bleed through paper, or double up on the flip chart sheets to prevent any ink going through the paper and onto the walls)
- Pens
- Easels (if papers can't be placed on the walls)
- Agenda handouts
- Registration printouts
- Blank registration sheets
- Paper products for refreshments (if needed)
- A binder containing:
 - The session schedule
 - The facilitator notes and script
- A supply box containing:
 - Scissors
 - Glue
 - Painter's tape
 - Name tags
 - Other needed items



A Suggestion: Consider purchasing \$10 or \$20 gift cards to thank participants for their time. Another idea is to both distribute the gift cards *and* randomly select a winner for a larger gift card of \$30, \$50 or even more!

NOTES:

➤ The Flip Charts

Before the listening session begins, write the following headings on sheets of adhesive flip chart paper or poster boards for displaying in the room.

1. The Agenda (See the next page.)

2. How Today's Information Will Be Used

Comments will be summarized and used to inform community work.

3. Livable Community Definition

Create your own or copy the one used by AARP: *"A Livable Community is safe and secure, has affordable and appropriate housing and transportation options, and offers supportive community features and services. Once in place, those resources enhance personal independence, allow residents to age in place, and foster their engagement in the community's civic, economic and social life."*

4. Discussion Topics (Post each on its own sheet of paper.)

- **What do you love about your community?**
- **What's needed now — and in the future — in your community?**
- **What would add to the quality of life in your community?**

5. Group Agreements (Leave space for adding more.)

- Switch all electronic devices to silent or vibrate mode
- Be open to different opinions
- One person speaks at a time
- Be concise and use concrete examples whenever possible
- Encourage everyone to participate

6. On-Topic Postings (This is a heading only — the sheet will be used by participants to add comments or questions related to the listening session discussion.)

7. Parking Lot (This is a heading only — the sheet will be used by participants to post off-topic comments or questions to address later if time allows.)

8. Priority Issues (This is a heading only — the sheet will be used to compile topics and concerns at the end of the session.)

NOTES:

DATE: _____

LOCATION: _____

- 1. Welcome, Introductions and Context**
- 2. Purpose and Agenda**
- 3. Housekeeping**
- 4. Session Overview**
- 5. Group Agreements and Questions**
- 6. Discussion**
- 7. Priority Issues**
- 8. Closing and Next Steps**

NOTES:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

➤ The Schedule

Time Allotted	Agenda Items	Notes
5 minutes	Welcome, Introductions and Context	▪ Make brief introductions ▪ Give a brief overview of the livability initiative
2 minutes	Purpose and Agenda	▪ Explain that the purpose of the session is to hear directly from community members ▪ Explain how the information will be used (refer to the flip chart sheet or poster board) ▪ Review the agenda
1 minute	Housekeeping	▪ Note the location of the restrooms and refreshments ▪ Point out the location of the On-Topic Postings sheet for adding comments or questions
2 minutes	Session Overview	▪ Review the definition of a “livable community” (refer to the flip chart sheet or poster board) ▪ Explain the roles of the facilitator and recorder (aka: note-taker) ▪ Give an overview of the content and flow (refer to the flip chart sheet or poster board)
5 minutes	Group Agreements and Questions	▪ Review the suggested agreements (refer to the flip chart sheet or poster board) ▪ Resolve any disagreement and gain agreement from participants ▪ Answer any questions about the session ▪ Direct off-topic questions to the Parking Lot flip chart sheet or poster board
80 minutes	Discussion	▪ Move through the topics in order (refer to the script questions)
15 minutes	Priority Issues	▪ Compile a list of priority issues ▪ Let the participants vote ▪ Identify the groupings ▪ Discuss “why” the priorities were selected
5 minutes	Closing and Next Steps	▪ Hear the final comments of the participants ▪ Remind them how the information will be used ▪ Ask people to complete and submit the session evaluation form ▪ Thank the participants ▪ Present the gift cards (optional)

FACILITATOR NOTES

Introduce yourself as the facilitator. Provide a couple of brief sentences on your background.

Introductions should be brief.

If appropriate, model an introduction for others.

Pick someone in the group to start the introductions and determine how the process will continue throughout the room.

You may need to remind people to state their name, neighborhood and years in the community.

1. WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS and CONTEXT (5 minutes)

Good Evening/Afternoon

My name is _____ and I will be the facilitator for today's community listening session. *[Add a few sentences here about your background.]*

Thank you for joining us and for your interest in sharing your insights on how _____ *[community name]* can become more livable for everyone. We've scheduled two hours for this session and will end no later than _____ *[insert end time]*.

Before I provide you with context for today's session and review the agenda, let's take a moment for brief introductions. We'll go around the room and say our name, neighborhood and how long we've lived in the community.

----- *[Introductions]* -----

It's great to have you all here.

2. PURPOSE and AGENDA (2 minutes)

The purpose of this community listening session is to hear directly from community members.

We want to learn what you believe makes your community livable today and hear your ideas for making your community more livable in the future.

At the end of today's session, we will have learned your opinions and ideas about your community — what you love, what you need and what you would like to change.

This isn't to say that the livability initiative will solve the community concerns addressed today all by itself. Rather, this information will be summarized and used to inform the efforts undertaken by community leaders, local organizations, elected officials and residents to make the community more livable for everyone.

FACILITATOR NOTES

Gesture to the posted agenda.

You all should have received a copy of today's agenda at registration, but the agenda is also posted here *[point accordingly]* for your reference.

We'll spend the majority of today's session talking about the community, but please bear with me for a few minutes while we set the stage.

We've covered introductions and the purpose of this session.

Next we'll quickly review some housekeeping items and what our main discussion will look like. We'll establish agreements for how we'll interact and provide an opportunity for questions.

As I said, the majority of our time will be spent engaging in a discussion about the community. Following the main discussion, we'll identify some top priorities. We'll end with "next steps."

3. HOUSEKEEPING (1 minute)

Now for some quick housekeeping items.

1. There won't be a scheduled break, but participants are encouraged to take care of any needs they might have throughout the session.
2. Refreshments are located *[insert location]* and restrooms are located *[insert location]*.
3. I want to encourage anyone who might have difficulty seeing any of the posted charts or hearing the conversation to speak up so I can make adjustments.

----- *[Pause to assess needs]* -----

4. For anyone who wishes to leave a written question or comment, 4" x 6" sticky notes have been provided to capture them. You can stick them to the On-Topic Postings sheet at any time during the session or afterward.
5. For reference, I have posted a definition of the term "livable community."

Pause to offer people a chance to speak up.

Gesture to the On-Topic Postings sheet.

Gesture to the posted definition.

FACILITATOR NOTES

4. SESSION OVERVIEW (2 minutes)

Let me give you an overview of how we'll go about our session so we have a shared understanding of the content and flow.

After this overview we'll agree on how we want to interact today and then move into the main session — our discussion about _____

I'll be asking for your opinions and ideas about the community.

My role as the facilitator today is to guide the conversation, keep us on track and ensure that everyone has a chance to be heard.

I ask for your candid responses.

We are not taping this session. We have a person/people serving as the session's recorder(s), to capture your comments for a summary document — without including your name.

The recorder(s) will take down your responses to questions about the three main topics:

1. What do you love about your community?
2. What's needed now — and in the future — in your community?
3. What would add to the quality of life in your community?

5. GROUP AGREEMENTS and QUESTIONS (5 minutes)

Here is a list of suggested agreements on how we might work together during this session. Please review them with me:

1. Switch all electronic devices to silent or vibrate mode
2. Be open to different opinions
3. One person speaks at a time
4. Be concise and use concrete examples whenever possible
5. Encourage everyone to participate

Confirm agreements with the group.

Pause to offer people a chance to speak up.

FACILITATOR NOTES

If there is any disagreement, work to resolve it by:

1. Asking which agreement causes concern and why.

2. Proposing a modification or asking participants to propose a better one.

3. Confirming that the group agrees with any modification or addition.

4. Confirming the group agreements as a whole.

Pause and answer any pertinent questions.

The discussion topics should be posted for all to see.

Use the On-Topic Postings sheet for noting the discussion-related comments and questions.

Place off-topic questions or comments on the Parking Lot sheet.

The fifth agreement means that we want to hear all voices in the room, so if you have had ample chance to contribute, please leave space for others to participate.

Is there anything critical that should be added to this list?

Can everyone live with these agreements? Please say “Yes” if you agree.

Is there anyone who does not agree?

Great, let’s move on to questions.

Are there any questions about the process we’re going to follow?

Are there other questions related specifically to this session?

If you have a question or comment that’s off of our topic, please post it to the Parking Lot sheet to be addressed later if time allows.

We’ll now move to the main part of our session — a discussion about the community. Let’s begin.

6. DISCUSSION (80 minutes)

As I ask questions, please raise your hand to give your response. I’ll call on you for answers. Doing so will help our recorder(s) jot down your suggestions.

There are no right or wrong answers.

Topic 1: What do you love about your community?

a. What do you like most about living in [community name]?

In other words, what would you put a high priority on preserving in [community name] and, briefly, why?

----- [Discussion] -----

b. Can you provide some examples of community features you enjoy today that didn’t exist 5 to 10 years ago?

FACILITATOR NOTES

Keep track of time.

Request assistance if possible from a volunteer or attendee to help keep track of timing and to point out people you might not see who are trying to participate.

It is critically important for the facilitator to remain neutral throughout the entire process.

Do not show agreement or disagreement (via verbal comments or body language).

Seek clarity as appropriate by asking, "Tell me more about that ..."

Topic 2: What's needed now — and in the future — in your community?

Before I ask you the next set of questions, take a moment to close your eyes and visualize yourself 10 or 15 years from now. Go ahead, close your eyes.

The year is _____. Imagine yourself 10 or 15 years wiser than you are today. Now imagine yourself at home and in your community.

- a. Where would you like to live?** Say something about the neighborhood (e.g. urban, walkable, rural, remote, etc.) and housing type (e.g. single-family dwelling/multi-family apartment building)

----- [Discussion] -----

Remember — we're still 10 or 15 years in the future as you think about this next question.

- b. How will you get around?** Think about work, shopping, services and socializing. If you were unable to drive, what would you like to have for options to help keep you mobile?

----- [Discussion] -----

Let's move on to our third topic.

Topic 3: What would add to the quality of life in your community?

For the next set of questions I'm going to ask you to think both about today and the future.

- a. Do you feel safe being outside at most times of the day?**
Why/Why not?

----- [Discussion] -----

- b. What needs to work better in your community today?**

----- [Discussion] -----

- c. In the year _____, what will a typical day look like for you?**

FACILITATOR NOTES

If a volunteer or attendee is helping you keep track of attendees who want to make a comment, check in with him or her to make sure you haven't missed anyone.

Have the recorder list the issues on the flip chart.

Look for groupings and select a couple of issues to discuss further.

Manage the time by allotting no more than 4 minutes per issue.

----- [Discussion] -----

d. What resources, including community-based resources and services, will you need in the year _____?

----- [Discussion] -----

Thank you all for your thoughts and opinions. We're going to move to the next portion of our agenda.

7. PRIORITY ISSUES (15 minutes)

Now I'd like us to spend some time getting a sense of what you believe are the most important priorities we've discussed, both in terms of priorities for today and priorities for the future.

First, let's compile a list of the top issues you've identified during our discussion today.

What are some of the top issues? Please give just a brief headline such as "We need sidewalks."

----- [Compile list of issues] -----

Does this cover what you believe are the most important? Does anyone have a burning issue that hasn't been identified?

We're going to give you each two voting dots. Place one dot on the issue that is the most important issue to you now. And place the other dot on what you believe the most important issue is for the future — thinking ahead to, let's say, 2030.

I'll give you some time to decide and place your dots.

----- [Voting time] -----

It looks like we have a lot of folks who believe *[insert issues]* are the highest priorities today.

Will someone who voted for *[insert issue]* give me a brief statement on why that issue is most important to him or her?

Would anyone else like to share why he or she voted for *[insert issue]*?

How about *[insert second issue]*? Will someone who voted for it please share why?

FACILITATOR NOTES

Seek clarity as appropriate by asking, “Tell me more about that ...”

Review the On-Topic Postings and, if time allows, address some or all of the comments or questions on the Parking Lot sheet.

Gesture to the flip chart sheet labeled “How Today’s Information Will be Used.”

Optional: Present the gift cards.

Key to your team’s Roadmap to Livability travel is to learn what your community wants and needs to thrive, and how residents want to make those changes. Listening sessions and focus groups are great ways to collect that information.

Congratulations on facilitating a session!

Let’s take one more person on this issue. Who would like to share?

OK, let’s do a lightning round — which means we’re looking for extremely brief, high-level answers to my next question, which is: Who would like to share any major insights or takeaways from our discussion?

----- [Time for sharing] -----

Thank you all.

8. CLOSING and NEXT STEPS (5 minutes)

As we prepare to close out this session, are there any final comments or questions about what we’ve done?

Is there anything you would change about the process?

I’m going to quickly review our posting sheets to see if there are any questions or comments to address.

----- [Address any questions] -----

Please remember that the opinions and ideas you shared today will be summarized and used to inform the community’s livability efforts.

Everyone who provided a postal address or email address will receive a summary of this session within four weeks.

Before we wrap up I want to draw your attention to _____.

-- [Use the time to direct the participants to websites, printed materials, events, etc.] --

Also at the registration table is a card with our contact information on it if you have any questions or want to get in touch with us.

Optional: [Name person] will be at the registration table with your gift card, which is our thank you for your time.

We would also like to hear your thoughts about today’s listening session. Please take a moment to complete our brief evaluation form to share your ideas and how we can improve future sessions.

Optional: While you’re doing that, I am going to ask [name person] to randomly select the lucky winner of the [brand] gift card.

Thank you very much for your contributions! We really appreciate you sharing your time and wisdom. We wish you a safe journey home!

----- [The End] -----

➤ The Evaluation Form

Now ask participants for their feedback. As with other worksheets and guidelines in the *Roadmap to Livability* series, this questionnaire can be revised to better match a community and its livability project. The answers will improve not only the next listening session or focus group, but also your team's livability results.

1. How did you hear about the listening session?

- a. Mailed postcard
- b. Email invitation
- c. Family/friends
- d. Social media
- e. Other: _____

2. Overall, how satisfied are you with your experience today?

- a. Very satisfied
- b. Satisfied
- c. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- d. Dissatisfied
- e. Very dissatisfied

3. Based on your experience today, how likely are you to recommend future sessions to family/friends? (0-10 scale)

Not at all likely 0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Extremely likely 10	Not sure/ Don't know

4. How can we improve this session in the future? Circle all that apply.

- a. Different location
- b. Shorter session
- c. Longer session
- d. Better facilitation
- e. Provide more information
- f. Provide less information
- g. Nothing — it was great!
- h. Other: _____

5. Please provide any other comments about today's session.

Alternative questions depending on what the livability team wants to learn:

6. What did you like about today's session?

Circle all that apply.

- a. Sharing my thoughts on my community
- b. Listening to other participants
- c. Learning about livable communities
- d. Other: _____

7. How would you rate the facilitator's skill and knowledge?

- a. Excellent
- b. Very good
- c. Good
- d. Fair
- e. Not good

8. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: *"I am likely to share the information I learned from this event with friends and family."*

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

9. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: *"I learned something new from attending this event."*

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

10. Please rate your satisfaction with the overall event organization:

- a. Very satisfied
- b. Satisfied
- c. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- d. Dissatisfied
- e. Very dissatisfied

11. I'm interested in getting involved in or learning more about making my community more livable.

- a. Yes (Great! Please stop by the registration table and provide your name and the best way to contact you.)
- b. No thank you

Read, order or download the **AARP** *Roadmap to Livability: Community Listening Session Tool Kit* and other resources at AARP.org/Livable

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We want to hear about your community and its progress.
Complete the form at AARP.org/SharingLivableSolutions

Find the **AARP** state office near you at AARP.org/States

Email the **AARP** Livable Communities initiative at Livable@AARP.org

Contact **AARP** at 1-888-OUR-AARP

The *AARP Roadmap to Livability Collection* is a collaborative effort of AARP Livable Communities “Core Team” members
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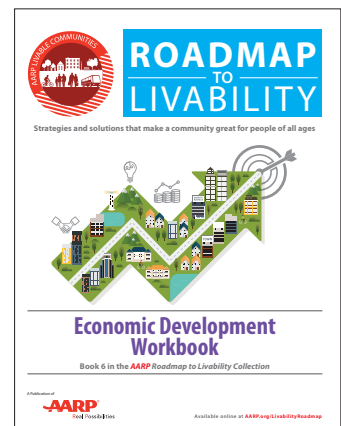
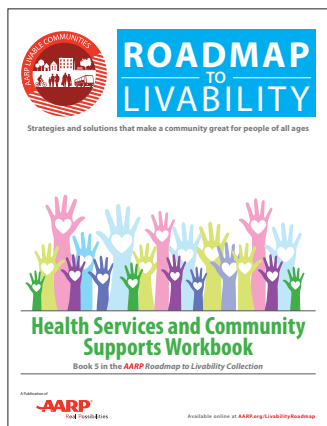
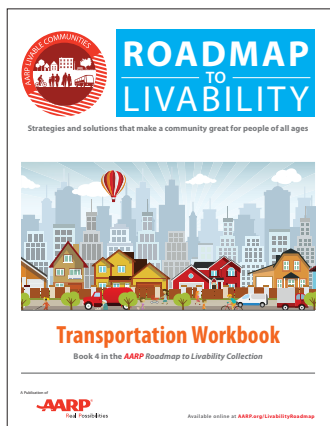
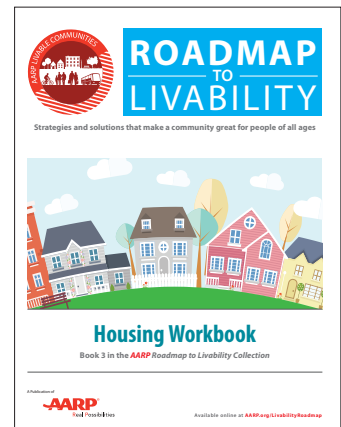
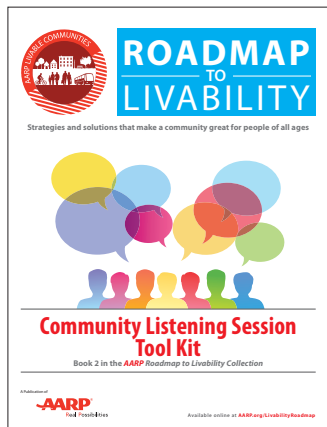
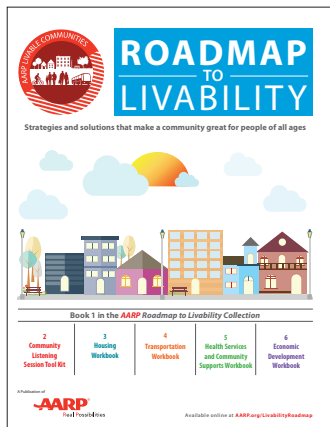
Roadmap to Livability: Community Listening Session Tool Kit Image 25524437

Roadmap to Livability: Housing Workbook Image 39788676

Roadmap to Livability: Transportation Workbook Image 23833327, 32509317

Roadmap to Livability: Health Services and Community Supports Workbook Image 14551235

Roadmap to Livability: Economic Development Workbook Image 45625568



Strategies and solutions that make a community great for people of all ages.

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