

# AARP's Age-Friendly Network: Catalyzing State and Local Leadership for a More Livable Future for All

By Danielle Arigoni

Recognizing the demographic shifts underway, and the opportunity they present to create more age-friendly communities, in 2012 AARP created a US-based affiliate of WHO's Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities (GNAFCC). The GNAFCC invites cities around the world to use a foundation of eight "domains" to assess community needs and then develop a course of action over a five-year process to create a more age-friendly future for their communities.

AARP's decision sparked a new direction in our broader effort to make communities more livable, and in our ongoing work to support older adults to live their best lives at every age. It also ensured that AARP was moving in tandem with leading thinkers on the social determinants of health by creating what could serve as a potent guiding framework to effect local change — in health, well-being, and engagement — all through changes to the built environment as well as social supports. It also created conditions in several hundreds of communities that allowed them to quickly respond to many of the challenges presented by the COVID-19 global pandemic, particularly those related to older adults' ability to secure food, access information, and remain engaged in civic and social life.

AARP's Network of Age-friendly States and Communities has enrolled more than 500 communities. That is a remarkable number, considering that communities in the United States now represent approximately half of the global network's members. It's also remarkable that the model, originally envisioned for localities (note the Cities and Communities in the GNAFCC name), now includes states — a change driven by state governments' desire to take action as well. In fact, the change even required advocacy at the WHO level to expand that organization's eligibility criteria to include subnational levels of government. But mostly the number is remarkable for the sheer impact it represents — the impact felt in the communities and states that have committed to become more age-friendly through actions made possible by the AARP Network process.

Even before the pandemic hit, the value of pursuing a more "age-friendly future" was evident. A 2019 survey of AARP's Network

members revealed that 60 percent of enrolled communities in the later stages of their multi-year effort reported having achieved a change in public policy — most frequently in housing, transportation, outdoor spaces and buildings, and health and community services. The same survey revealed that 34 percent achieved a private-sector investment or action, and 85 percent described other successes, such as integrating an age-friendly lens into strategic planning and increasing collaboration within the community. As for on-the-ground, concrete examples, several communities of various sizes have shown the promise and potential of their AARP age-friendly network commitment, both in their pandemic response and in their ongoing efforts to create places that work for all ages:

- **Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, Pennsylvania** (population 1.2 million, joined in 2015) adapted their existing paratransit system to primarily deliver food and supplies — rather than people (except for essential medical appointments, like dialysis) — to keep residents safe at home during the pandemic. They also created new online "virtual senior academies" to engage community members in classes on health and wellness, arts and music, and more.
- The **city of Berkeley** (population 120,000, enrolled in 2016) morphed its 'friendly visitor' program into a 'friendly caller' program during the pandemic to check-in on residents, arrange for grocery and food delivery for the food insecure, and conduct informal wellness checks.
- **Sarasota County, Florida** (population 415,000, enrolled in 2015) quickly implemented a COVID-19 resource website and set up text alerts for area residents, as well as developed a multi-agency feeding plan for vulnerable populations which outlines tiered activation levels based on service thresholds, and action steps to be taken once those thresholds are met.
- **Eastport, Maine** (population 1,300; enrolled in 2016) has developed a plan that commits to making outdoor spaces more easily

reachable and usable by older residents, with accessible natural trails and better sidewalks.

- **Ridgewood, New Jersey** (population 29,000; enrolled in 2019), in response to residents' concerns about housing affordability, has committed to educating residents about property tax relief, property tax freeze, and financial assistance for housing and utility costs. The borough also hosts events to educate residents about reverse mortgages, home improvements, and universal design.
- **Grayson County, Virginia** (population 15,000; enrolled in 2017) has responded to the severe lack of high-speed Internet connectivity among its residents and the surrounding rural region by leveraging state investments to expand broadband to rural communities.

These examples represent just a fraction of the types of locally driven solutions that emerge through the AARP Network process; nevertheless, they are indicators of the importance of an age-friendly focus – both in times of crisis, and with an eye towards long-term change in community. From 2013 through the end of 2019, the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities grew more than tenfold, from fewer than 20 communities to, as mentioned, nearly 500. What is behind the rapid growth? The reasons are many, but in part it is attributable to the long-time trends of worsening housing affordability and decreasing access to services — trends that are particularly affecting older adults. The expanding network further reflects a growing level of concern about isolation and loneliness – a threat which intensified during stay-at-home orders resulting from the pandemic — and the role that community design and social programs can play in stemming those troubling trends for all, and particularly for seniors. Finally, the growth is indicative of how state and local leaders' awareness of demographic trends — and the fast-approaching future in which older adults outnumber children for the first time in US history — can catalyze them into action. It is easy to imagine that communities, as they emerge from pandemic response, will have a more acute understanding of the vulnerabilities of older adults

in crisis, and more commitment to ensuring the communities work for all ages, in all conditions.

AARP will continue to monitor the growth of the program, and develop materials and resources that respond to the evolving needs of both AARP Network members and other state and local government leaders interested in preparing for a more age-friendly future. At present, resources available for free to any local leader include first-person stories from age-friendly leaders about how they responded to COVID-19; the AARP Roadmap to Livability series, a set of six workbooks that help community leaders implement community listening efforts, and better incorporate an aging lens into planning in areas including housing, transportation, community health, and economic development; self-directed “audit” tools to evaluate walkability, and to what extent a community's parks are intergenerational; free “how-to” guides to expand use of accessory dwelling units and implement temporary “place-making” techniques that re-imagine public spaces so they work better for all; and more.

As new challenges emerge from communities of all sizes – big and small, state and local – AARP will continue working to support them with information, tools, resources and best practices that can help them respond to their own demographic changes in a manner that improves the quality of life for all. To learn more about AARP's Age-Friendly Network and Livable-Communities resources, sign up for a free practitioner-focused weekly eNewsletter, available at [aarp.org/Livable-Subscribe](http://aarp.org/Livable-Subscribe), or via our program's homepage at [aarp.org/livable](http://aarp.org/livable). ●



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