
Joining Strength to Strength: Realizing the Potential of an Aging Community

Creating Community for a Lifetime
Phase II Briefing

Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan
Grand Rapids Community Foundation
www.community4alifetime.org

Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us,

Eyes will light up as we enter,

Voices will celebrate with us

whenever we come into our own power.

Community means strength that joins our strength

to do the work that needs to be done.

Arms to hold us when we falter.

A circle of healing.

A circle of friends.

Someplace where we can be free.

Starhawk, Dreaming the Dark

Realizing the Potential of an Aging Community

Between now and 2030, Kent County will experience the most profound age shift in its history. While one in ten county residents today is 65+, that number is expected to double as baby boomers approach retirement. The 75+ population is tripling, and the 85+ is quadrupling.

This age shift will affect every aspect of our life as a community—housing, economic growth, transportation, health and social systems, land-use planning, education and many others. Most likely, aging boomers will even influence how we *think* about many topics, including the issue of aging itself and the role of older people in our society.

Some predict intergenerational conflict over ever-constricting resources. Others see in the age shift the potential for community renewal and transformation. What happens in Kent County will reflect the personal and collective decisions we make in the next few years.

How will Kent County meet the challenge of an aging community?

To help point the way, hundreds of local residents have been involved in community learning, data gathering and analysis, and dialogue through the Creating Community for a Lifetime (CCFL) initiative. In this report, CCFL offers a vision for the future of Kent County and a roadmap to guide us along the way.

A New View of Aging

Creating Community for a Lifetime recognizes that we are on the cusp of a demographic revolution, a period when nearly a third of our population is approaching 65. As with any stage of life, aging brings a host of physical, intellectual, psychological, spiritual and emotional challenges—as well as opportunities for growth and fulfillment.

Unfortunately, our society tends to overemphasize aging *difficulties*—disability, disease, decline, and dependency—as well as the perceived burden an aging population places on our health care, social services and other systems. Clearly, we must attend to the needs of the “frail fraction” of our older residents who face isolation, poverty, health and other issues. We recognize that finding ways to ensure that we include this expanding population in our community’s “circle of healing” will challenge the best talents of each of us.

Communities can do much simply by paving the way for older people to remain actively involved. Research shows the majority of older people of today are healthier, wealthier, and better educated on average than the elderly of any previous generation. They *want* to be engaged in their communities in meaningful ways. And such engagement promotes healthy aging, minimizing the health care and social costs often associated with an aging population.

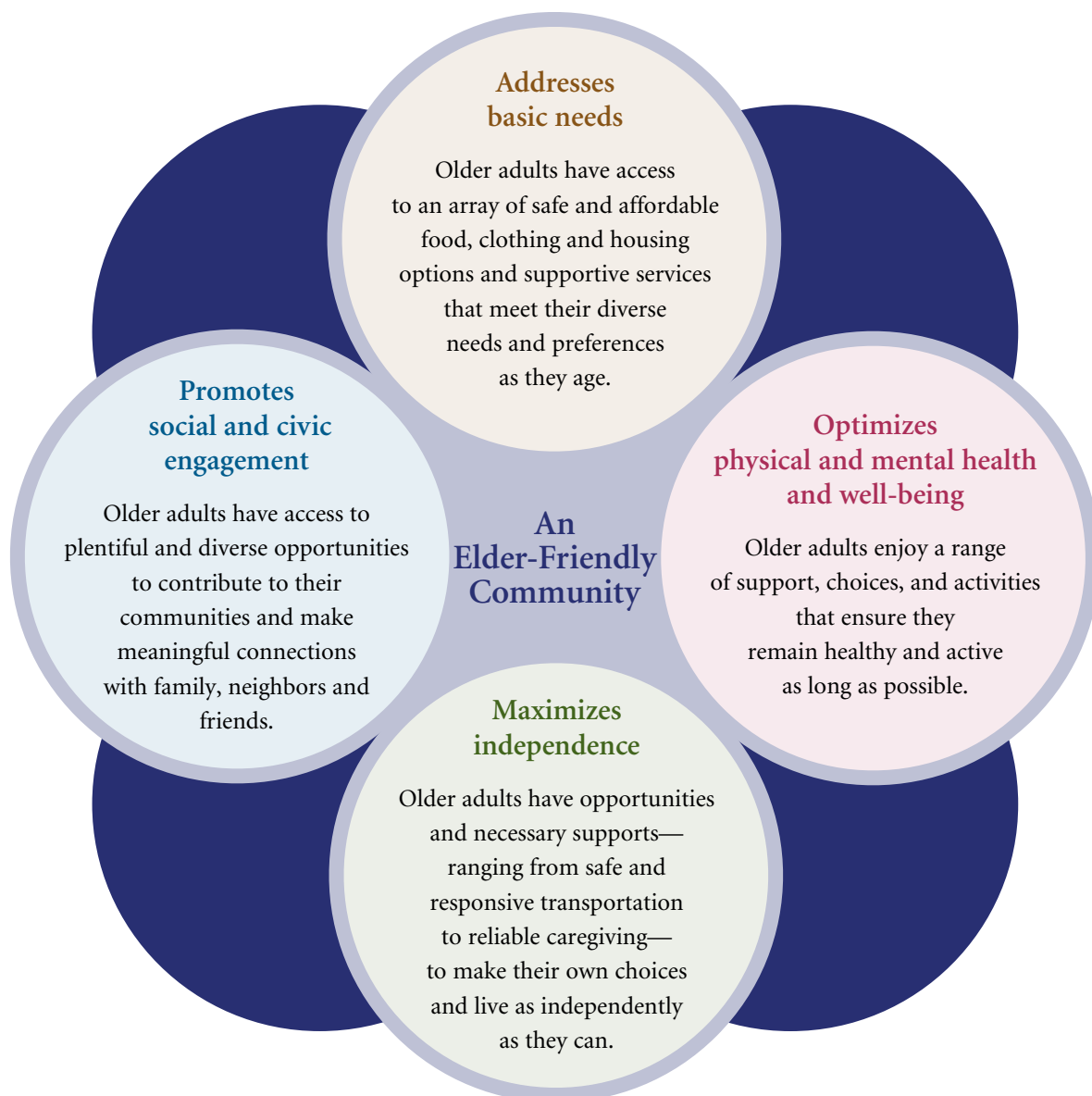
If we can overcome our outdated, ageist views, we can learn to leverage the intellectual capacity, talent, skills and commitment of older residents to help solve issues for all ages in our community. We can create a community that joins strength to strength to do the work that needs to be done. That’s what we mean by creating community for a lifetime.

Our Vision for Kent County

As a community for a lifetime, what is the vision that we seek to create? We envision a Kent County in which:

- All older adults have the opportunity to live to their fullest potential.
- The community works together to make it a safe, comfortable and productive place for people of all ages and abilities to live.

In the words of the national AdvantAge Initiative¹, we seek to create an **elder-friendly community**—a community that **addresses basic needs**, **optimizes physical and mental health and well-being**, **maximizes independence** and **promotes social and civic engagement** of all of its older residents.



¹ This model for articulating our vision in terms of the four broad categories that comprise an elder friendly community is derived from the work of The AdvantAge Initiative, the Center for Home Care Policy and Research, Visiting Nurse Service of New York, www.vnsny.org/advantage/.

Creating a Roadmap

Work Groups

To point the way to fulfilling our vision for Kent County, Creating Community for a Lifetime identified eight critical issue areas for further study. More than 100 community members participated in work groups to address key questions related to each issue area.

Issue Areas / Work Groups	Key Questions
Basic Needs	
Awareness of Services	How can we be sure all older adults—especially the marginalized—know how to find the information and resources they need?
Housing*	What kind of housing options do we need? How can we ensure access to home design and home modifications services to meet people’s changing needs as they age?
Health	
Physical Activity and Nutrition	How can we help older adults live healthy and active lives as long as they can?
Access to Affordable Health Care	What kinds of education, prevention, treatment and support services do we need?
Independence	
Transportation*	What kinds of transportation systems and services will we need?
Community-Based Services	How can we ensure that older adults who need assistance with daily tasks have access to services in their homes?
Caregiving*	How can we mobilize and support family, friend and other caregivers?
Engagement	
Social and Civic Engagement	How can we mobilize older adults to participate actively in our community—through paid employment or community service?

* These work groups were integrated with existing community coalitions.

Our Roadmap

Recommended Outcomes and Goals

CCFL work groups studied Kent County data, reviewed current research and best practices, and developed recommendations in eight issue areas that will guide the community toward our vision of creating a community for all ages. These recommendations comprise a roadmap for Kent County¹.

	Addresses Basic Needs	Housing	Access to Affordable Health Care	Physical Activity and Nutrition
Outcomes	<p>Awareness of Services</p> <p>Older adults are linked to supportive services in the community to accommodate their changing needs.</p>	<p>All parts of Kent County offer an array of safe and affordable housing options that meet the diverse needs and preferences of individuals as they age.</p>	<p>Older adults can access affordable mental and physical health services, including medication.</p>	<p>Older adults enjoy a range of support, choices, and activities that ensure they remain healthy and active as long as possible.</p>
Goals	<p>Access</p> <p>Goal 1: Increase the number of older adults and their families who are aware of and have access to appropriate cultural- and age-sensitive information that enables them to make informed choices about community programs and services.</p> <p>Communication and Promotion</p> <p>Goal 2: Increase awareness among all parts of our community of the value and contributions of older adults as well as the services for older adults.</p> <p>Goal 3: Strengthen aging and health service provider capacity to receive and share information that is useful for diverse client populations.</p> <p>Empowerment</p> <p>Goal 4: Encourage community-wide recognition of the value of older adults.</p>	<p>Home Design and Modification</p> <p>Goal 1: Promote the design and modification of homes to meet the physical needs of individuals as they age.</p> <p>Housing Options</p> <p>Goal 2: Increase the range of housing options in all parts of Kent County—from community-based intergenerational options to age-segregated congregate facilities—that are available to individuals as they age.</p> <p>Affordability</p> <p>Goal 3: Increase older adults’ access to an array of affordable housing options.</p> <p>Support and Services</p> <p>Goal 4: Establish an infrastructure for providing the necessary information and services to enable older adults to take advantage of an array of housing options.</p>	<p>Access</p> <p>Goal 1: Increase collaboration and integration of health care and social services in order to improve access.</p> <p>Elder Care Expertise</p> <p>Goal 2: Increase health care providers’ expertise in elder care issues.</p> <p>Goal 3: Increase family and friend caregivers’ knowledge, skills and support.</p> <p>Advocacy</p> <p>Goal 4: Increase community expertise and support advocacy efforts on issues related to health care and the expanding older population.</p> <p>Goal 5: Support efforts that educate and empower older adults to practice healthy behaviors.</p>	<p>Capacity-Building and Accountability</p> <p>Goal 1: Increase community capacity to deliver affordable, effective, and culturally appropriate health and wellness programs for older adults.</p> <p>Goal 2: Increase funding for planning and effective prevention programs.</p> <p>Goal 3: Improve program effectiveness through appropriate evaluation, utilizing professionals with expertise in prevention, community intervention and evaluation.</p> <p>Access</p> <p>Goal 4: Preserve independence through increased access to effective, evidence-based health and wellness programs targeted to meet the needs of people across the continuum of strength and frailty.</p> <p>Outreach</p> <p>Goal 5: Create a culture and environment that supports healthy choices.</p>

¹ For a detailed discussion of each of these goals, see the full Creating Community for a Lifetime Phase II Report at www.community4alifetime.org.

Maximizes Independence

Promotes Social and Civic Engagement

Transportation

Older adults have an array of transportation options that are safe and responsive to their needs and preferences.

Access

Goal 1:

Increase use of public fixed-route transportation.

Goal 2:

Improve usability and availability of specialized, point-to-point service programs such as the Go!Bus and other specialized and volunteer transportation programs.

Goal 3:

Support informal transportation options.

Partnership and Advocacy

Goal 4:

Improve transportation options through partnerships and advocacy.

Driver's Safety

Goal 5:

Protect older adults and the community from driving injuries and accidents.

Community-Based Services

Older adults have opportunities and necessary supports to make choices and live independently.

User-Friendly Service System

Goal 1:

Increase collaboration and integration of health care and social services in order to improve access for customers and formal and informal caregivers.

Adequate, Sustainable and Diverse Funding

Goal 2:

Assure adequate resources directed to maintaining quality of life for long term living.

Customer Choice

Goal 3:

Preserve independence through development of a service system that supports self-determination and provides customer education, autonomy and informed choice.

Evidence-Based Practices

Goal 4:

Provide effective services, particularly prevention services, through use of scientifically-tested practices that have evidence-based support.

Caregiving

Personal, community and cultural supports for successful caregiving are strengthened.

Outreach and Access

Goal 1:

Increase the number of caregivers who have access to and receive appropriate caregiver information and support.

Advocacy

Goal 2:

Encourage community-wide recognition of the contributions of family caregivers and advocate for enhanced support.

Caregiver Services, Choices and Convenience

Goal 3:

Increase the number of caregivers who utilize caregiver education and support services.

Social and Civic Engagement

Plentiful and diverse opportunities are available for older adults to remain fully engaged and make meaningful contributions to their communities.

Connections and Contributions

Goal 1:

Increase the number of older adults involved in formal and informal volunteer activities.

Goal 2:

Increase civic involvement of older adults in efforts to improve the quality of life in Kent County.

Goal 3:

Develop a social marketing campaign/communication plan that confronts aging stereotypes and promotes a culture of engagement, vitality and activity based on contributions of older adults.

Goal 4:

Foster meaningful connections with family, neighbors and friends and increase awareness of mutual assistance that occurs between generations.

Lifelong Learning

Goal 5:

Increase learning opportunities for older adults.

Goal 6:

Increase collaboration among existing providers of older adult education.

Employment

Goal 7:

Provide opportunities for meaningful work for older adults.

Goal 8:

Increase older adults' work-related skills through training.

What Would an Elder-Friendly Community Look Like?

If we were to achieve our vision for Kent County, what would life be like for older adults? These stories provide a few vignettes from other communities.

Safe at Home in Baltimore

A retired nurse's aide, Ann is approaching 75. She has lived for 20 years in a modest two-story home in a stable urban neighborhood. Recently, some chronic health issues have begun to catch up with her, and she isn't able to get out as much as she used to. In fact, she's finding it increasingly difficult to climb the stairs to reach her second-floor bathroom.

As much as she loves her home and the neighbors who are always there to help, Ann just doesn't know how much longer she can remain there. Increasingly, she feels lethargic and refuses offers to accompany neighbors to local events. Her neighbors wonder if Ann has grown depressed, and suggest she call the local "Safe at Home" program.

Through "Safe at Home," Ann meets with a social worker and occupational therapist—and together they discuss what might make life better for Ann. They develop an affordable plan to install a down-stairs bathroom and other minor modifications, arranging for a local rehab group to oversee the work and provide a home safety orientation for her. The team also links Ann to an in-home meals program, a disease self-management program, and other services.

Ann now realizes that there are many resources in her community that are there to help her "age in place" and feels confident that additional ones will be there when she needs them. She is pleased that the "Safe at Home" folks plan to check in with her periodically to see if her needs have changed. She now brags to her neighbors that she plans to outlive them all—right there, in her own neighborhood.

A Safe at Home program like the one described here is offered to people over 55 with incomes below \$25,000 who live in southeast Baltimore. Safe at Home is a public/private partnership administered through the South East Senior Housing Initiative (SESHI). For more information, see www.seshi.org.

An Exercise Program for All Ages, at All Levels of Fitness

This program is my life line. I came here on the recommendation of physical therapy while undergoing treatment for knee problems, a broken ankle and arthritis. The improvement has been remarkable. I can once again walk two to three miles with no difficulty...in fact, I am in better shape than some of my friends who are 15 years younger.

These words sum up the experience of a 69-year-old participant in EnhanceFitness, an award-winning exercise program designed by Senior Services of Seattle/King County. Developed in the early 1990's through a partnership with the Health Promotion Research Center at the University of Washington and the Group Health Cooperative, a Seattle-based non-profit health care system, EnhanceFitness is based on solid research and tested at over 92 sites around the country.

Designed as a low-cost, low-tech program, EnhanceFitness group classes focus on stretching, flexibility, balance, low impact aerobics, and strength training—everything health professionals say that

people need to maintain health and function as they grow older. Progress is measured on a number of factors, including “get up and go,” or the time it takes someone to rise from a chair.

Evaluations have shown that seniors who participated in EnhanceFitness gained strength and energy and felt their state of mind improved. In 1997, the Seattle program partners began to share EnhanceFitness, forming partnerships with the Centers for Disease Control Prevention Research Centers in other states, where researchers are studying the intervention in new settings and for new applications, such as arthritis relief.

Senior Services of Seattle/King County administers the licensing of EnhanceFitness, which includes instructor training, in communities throughout the U.S. In 2004, the National Council on Aging selected EnhanceFitness as a Best Practice in Health Promotion, and in 2005, the program was awarded an Innovation in Prevention Award from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

For more information about EnhanceFitness, go to www.projectenhance.org.

Older Adults As Part of the Solution

Ask Experience Corps members what struggling students need more of to succeed and they speak with one voice: parental involvement. So in recent months, groups of Experience Corps members have taken the initiative to design parent outreach programs that complement and bolster their work as tutors.

Mason, a Cleveland third grader, is glad they did. For the past few months, Mason has been meeting regularly with Experience Corps member Jackie Griffey, a retired teacher, and Griffey has been sending notes home about his progress. Mason brings the notes home, has a parent sign them, then brings them back to Griffey, who shares the notes with Mason’s teacher.

“You should see the look of utter pride on Mason’s face when he brings the notes back to me,” Griffey says.

The exchange is part of a simple program launched this fall by Experience Corps members in Cleveland to communicate with the parents of tutored students about their children’s academic development. There’s an incentive built in for student and parents—for successfully delivering five notes, Mason gets a small prize.

The result of this outreach? There’s regular communication between parents, teacher, and tutor—without adding to teachers’ long list of responsibilities—and, as researchers have long noted, kids do better.

“Children’s chances for success in school and in life increase dramatically when their families are involved,” says Experience Corps CEO John S. Gomperts. “Experience Corps members have the time, leadership skills, creativity, connections, and desire to build bridges between parents and schools. It’s just one more way they can help kids achieve and strengthen the community.”

Experience Corps, a national service program for Americans over 55, works to show that older adults are an untapped national resource and can be engaged to help solve serious social problems, including illiteracy. More than 1,800 Experience Corps members serve as tutors and mentors to children in urban public schools in 14 cities. Experience Corps is a signature program of Civic Ventures (www.civicventures.org).

Next Steps

Creating Community for a Lifetime has built community consensus around a vision for an elder-friendly community and a roadmap for moving forward to achieve the vision. What will it take to move from recommendations to implementation—to turn ideas into reality?

Critical next steps include

- **Advocacy and education** to build individual and organizational awareness of and support for the overall vision for an elder-friendly community and the recommendations for achieving the vision
- **A planning infrastructure**—with older people taking the lead—to guide the community’s work, providing a way for individuals, neighborhoods, formal and informal networks, government, businesses and other organizations to coordinate their efforts in creating an elder-friendly community
- **Systems change** to move from the current situation—a system that many find fragmented and difficult to understand and access—to a cohesive, user-friendly system. This will require fresh ways of thinking and acting, collaborations across systems and sectors, respect for research-based practices, a willingness to experiment, and much more, always keeping in the forefront the best interests of older adults and the community.

Creating an elder-friendly community will require organizations from throughout the community to identify their niches—the resources and competencies they can leverage to contribute to this important work. Equally important will be the energy, talent, and commitment of individuals of all ages and from all sectors of the community.

Joining organizational and individual strengths, we can build a system that supports the successful aging of all older adults, from the frail and isolated to the active, healthy and mobile. In doing so, we will minimize the human and financial costs of aging while maximizing the potential for addressing broad community issues—thereby creating a true community for a lifetime.

To learn more about Creating Community for a Lifetime and the role you can play, check the initiative website, www.community4alifetime.org, or contact the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan at (616) 456-5664 or Grand Rapids Community Foundation at (616) 454-1751.

About Creating Community for a Lifetime

Mission

Creating Community for a Lifetime seeks to develop a community that promotes quality of life, independence and choice for older persons and all residents of Kent County through collaborative planning and community action.

Vision

Kent County will be an elder-friendly community that addresses basic needs, optimizes physical and mental health and well-being, maximizes independence, and promotes social and civic engagement.

Guiding Principles

We promote a holistic, successful aging perspective in the community. We increase community capacity for successful aging through an empowerment model. We support continuous community learning regarding successful aging.

Role

Creating Community for a Lifetime (CCFL) is an independent coalition convened in 2004 to explore ideas about what constitutes an elder-friendly community and to articulate a shared vision for Kent County. The role of the CCFL initiative is to

- Mobilize civic leadership
- Leverage resources to support improvements
- Support research and development of best practices
- Advocate for policy change with key local, state and federal policymakers
- Facilitate a community agenda for addressing an aging community
- Convene potential partners working on CCFL strategies and recommendations
- Monitor community progress in becoming more elder-friendly
- Review progress on each strategy.

Phase I:

Community Learning and Information-Gathering and Analysis

CCFL participants explored their own attitudes toward aging, new learning about aging, and opportunities the aging boom presents. They studied national data, learned about innovative programs in other communities, and examined best practices in building elder-friendly communities.

In 2004 CCFL sponsored a comprehensive survey of older adults in Kent County. The survey, conducted in collaboration with the national AdvantAge Initiative, provides a data snapshot of how well older adults are faring in their communities. Two reports—*Creating Community for a Lifetime: Planning for an Elder-Friendly Community in Kent County* and *Kent County AdvantAge Initiative: 2004 Survey Results* (www.community4alifetime.org/researchandreports.php) — summarize the results.

Phase II:

Creating the Vision and Roadmap

Based on the survey findings, work groups were formed in 2005 to develop recommendations in each of eight issue areas, including:

- Access to affordable health care
- Awareness of services
- Caregiving
- Community-based services
- Housing
- Physical activity and nutrition
- Social and civic engagement
- Transportation

Together, the work group recommendations form the vision for an elder-friendly community and the roadmap for moving forward to achieve that vision.

Leadership Partners

Creating Community for a Lifetime is led by a partnership of the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan and the Grand Rapids Community Foundation.



The Source for Seniors

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Our Circle of Friends

The Creating Community for a Lifetime partners would like to express our gratitude to the members of the CCFL Core Council and Work Groups for their dedication to doing the hard work of translating research and data into fresh insights and a clear direction. Over the past two years, through their willingness to participate in meetings, to gain new perspectives on aging issues, to dialogue and offer feedback, they have crafted a detailed roadmap for making Kent County a true community for a lifetime.

For a complete list of Work Group members, see the full Phase II Report at www.community4alifetime.org.

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