



BUILDING GREAT COMMUNITIES

Consider an Age-Friendly Community Assessment

The goal of Funders for Age-Friendly Communities is to mobilize funders across the country to create sustainable age-friendly communities through collaborations with local government, regional planning organizations, and federated funders like United Way and Jewish Federation. To help make communities work better for older adults, Funders for Age-Friendly Communities provides resources like this document as well as other “how-to” materials and learning opportunities. An initiative of Grantmakers in Aging, Funders for Age-Friendly Communities is generously supported by Pfizer Foundation and United Way Worldwide.

Grantmakers In Aging is an inclusive and responsive membership organization that is a national catalyst for philanthropy, with a common dedication to improving the experience of aging. Grantmakers In Aging provides its members with a personal connection to key people, high-quality resources, and state-of-the-art ideas about aging and all issues related to aging. Dedicated to promoting and strengthening grantmaking for an aging society, GIA is the only international professional organization of grantmakers active in the field.

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CONSIDER AN AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

As a funder, assessing the age-friendliness of your community can provide information that will guide future action. Also, an assessment can be a tool to engage stakeholders in efforts to make your community work better for older people.



The assessment tools selected for use by your community will likely be based on:

- information desired
- the methodology of the assessment tool
- the financial and human resources available to conduct the assessment
- the timeframe required to do the assessment

Fortunately, there are many different assessment tools available. The six that follow have been reviewed by members of Grantmakers In Aging who believe these assessment tools would be useful to funders.

A few important steps will maximize the value of any age-friendly community assessment undertaken.

1. Determine the community to be addressed. Will it be a neighborhood, a municipality, a county, a region?
2. Form an advisory team based on the identified community, and decide who will convene the team. The team should include well-connected leaders from business, nonprofit organizations, and the public/government sector. Consider including some of the stakeholders indicated in the Stakeholders section that follows. Be sure older adult leaders are among those on the team.
3. Before any assessment is chosen, the advisory team should answer these questions:
 - What kind of information do we need to help us make our community more age- friendly?

- How are we going to use the information once we have it?
- Who are the key stakeholders who could take action on the findings of the assessment?
- Can the assessment be focused on areas/topics for which your community has stakeholders able to take action?
- What is the plan for data analysis and for sharing the findings with identified community stakeholders?
- What will be the role of older people in the assessment?
- Which community assessment tool(s) and methods will provide the information that will be relevant to the identified community stakeholders?
- How will the assessment be done, who will conduct it, who will analyze it, what is the timeline, and how much will it cost?

4. Begin by gleaning existing information about older adults in your community. Obtain Census Bureau information, which can include data at the community block level. Check with the community's United Way, Jewish Federation, area agency on aging, local health department, transportation department, planning department, and other local government agencies that routinely collect demographic and other data that is sorted by age group. Local colleges and universities, particularly those with sociology or gerontology departments or social work and public health schools, also are sources for data. (A college or university in your community may be able to assist with your assessment process.) This basic information may be all that is needed to launch a small age-friendly community project, or it could contribute to a more comprehensive community assessment.

Data That Leads to Action

As you consider a survey or assessment, remember that no one tool is perfect; no one tool can tell you everything about aging in the community. It's advisable to use a variety of methods to gather different perspectives about the community. For example, doing a community "audit" with a tool such as the AARP Evaluation Guide can help identify and rate community features (e.g., sidewalks, traffic safety, availability of affordable housing). Holding discussions (interviews or focus groups) with older adults about these features brings in experiences and opinions, which may provide a fuller understanding of how well the community works for older adults.

Collecting information through assessment tools is only part of the story. Doing something with it is the other part. Some tools focus more on methods of collecting data than on translating that data into information that can be understood by the average person and used to drive action. This can be a difficult process, but if it is not done, chances are that the data will end up unused, sitting on a shelf. A possible barrier to translating the data and using the information to drive action could be the sheer volume of data—too much information can sometimes be as bad as having no information. In this case, it may be best to focus only on one or two key pieces of information at a time—perhaps those pieces of information that interest people most, are a high priority, or can lead to quick action. Another possible barrier could simply be that the people involved in interpreting the information don't have much experience working with data, and they may not be sure how to proceed. In this case, a consultant with the appropriate experience may be needed.

Stakeholders

Be sure to keep key stakeholders engaged, since they will be critical to action steps that result from your assessment and reporting on the age-friendliness of your community. Stakeholders could include: elected officials, key city/county agency staff; local or regional planners; the area agency on aging; libraries; park districts; chambers of commerce; civic groups (Rotary, Junior

League, etc.); hospitals; YMCA and others engaged in fitness; major nonprofit organizations; community foundations; United Way; Jewish Federation; arts organizations, schools, colleges and universities; local pedestrian, bike, environmental and smart growth groups; and AARP and other older adult leaders.

Community Assessment Tools

Following are some assessment tools that Grantmakers In Aging believes could be useful to funders who wish to help their community be more age-friendly. As you consider these Age-Friendly Community Assessment Tools, please note:

- Most of the tools/reports listed are free. However there will likely be personnel and/or convening costs associated with using these tools (e.g., a staff member to get the data/information and someone to aggregate and analyze it). With the AdvantAge Initiative, which does have cost, a funder or nonprofit organization contracts with the AdvantAge Initiative to conduct the survey and provide reports and technical assistance. Costs vary depending on the survey method and the buyer's needs.
- Except Milken Institute's Best Cities for Successful Aging, all the included Age-Friendly Community Assessment Tools may be adapted by adding or deleting questions or sections.
- In areas where transportation or distances are challenging, convening older people for planning, discussion, or focus groups might not be advisable unless there are natural places or events at which older adults gather.
- While it is tempting to compare communities—especially in the Milken Institute's Best Cities for Successful Aging, as that is the website's key feature—comparisons should be done cautiously. Communities—even contiguous ones—can be very different from one another in fundamental ways, such as history, population, resources, priorities, and so on. That can make comparisons between them misleading. It is better to compare to national "averages" or "benchmarks."

SELECTED AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT TOOLS FOR FUNDERS

ADVANTAGE INITIATIVE

Developed by: Center for Home Care Policy and Research, Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNSNY)
www.advantageinitiative.org



OVERVIEW

Surveys are used to measure older adults' perceptions and experiences in their communities as a starting point to determine unmet needs and plan actions to improve communities for older adults and their families.

This is both a tool and a process that is conducted by the staff of AdvantAge Initiative.



INDICATORS/ TOOLS

The "Essential Elements of an Elder Friendly Community" includes the four domains, under which there are 17 dimensions, and 33 indicators.

The four domains are

1. Basic Needs
2. Physical and Mental Health and Well-Being
3. Independence for the Frail and Disabled
4. Social and Civic Engagement

The survey may be conducted by

- Telephone (a random survey by a survey research company)
- Online (by computer or paper)



TOOL COST

This is a proprietary product.

Cost ranges from \$10K (on-line survey) to \$100K, and includes conducting and compiling the survey, a report of survey results, and technical assistance.



PROS

AdvantAge Initiative conducts the survey, compiles the results and creates the report.

Technical assistance by the AdvantAge team is available, including how to use the survey data for planning and action.

The AdvantAge survey tool is customizable to fit community or organizational needs.

More than 50 communities across the U.S. have used the AdvantAge Initiative tool and process.



CONS

The perceptions and opinions of older adults would need to be compared to what really exists in the community.

The online survey is much less expensive, but it is not scientific. It requires much work on the ground to engage older adults to take the survey.

Online survey results may or may not accurately represent the community at large. (However, the community work required to get the survey taken online or on paper actually builds community. This does not occur with the phone survey.)

BEST FOR:

A CITY OR MUNICIPALITY

A COUNTY

SELECTED AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT TOOLS FOR FUNDERS

AARP LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

Developed by: Arizona State University Herberger Center for Design Excellence

www.aarp.org/livable-communities/network-age-friendly-communities/info-2014/an-introduction.html



OVERVIEW

This extensive guide presents a method for assessing the physical features of a community to identify where changes are needed to make the community age-friendly.

The guide includes detailed instructions on how to conduct community assessments and examples of “innovative ideas” and “success stories.”



INDICATORS/ TOOLS

The 162-page *Evaluation Guide* provides survey questionnaires for assessing a community's

1. transportation options
2. walkability
3. safety and security
4. shopping options
5. housing
6. health services
7. recreational and cultural activities
8. “caring” community features.

The assessment tasks are presented in very structured formats.



TOOL COST

None



PROS

The *Evaluation Guide* is much more than the survey questionnaires—it's like a textbook on planning and design to make communities more age-friendly.

It is easy to use only sections of interest.

It is oriented to AARP and other volunteers who have the time to do at least some, if not all, of the assessments.



CONS

The *Evaluation Guide* is comprehensive, but some might find it overwhelming. An assessment team leader who's very familiar with the Guide could conduct training that summarizes much of the information in the Guide to make it easier for the people who conduct the survey.

BEST FOR:

A CITY OR MUNICIPALITY

A TOWN

A NEIGHBORHOOD

SELECTED AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT TOOLS FOR FUNDERS

AARP SURVEY OF COMMUNITY RESIDENTS AGES 50 AND OLDER

Developed by: AARP Livable Communities

www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/home-and-family/livable-communities/2013-12/who-community-survey.pdf



OVERVIEW

This is a survey questionnaire to be filled out by older adults, who assess specific community features according to how important these features are to them.



INDICATORS/ TOOLS

The community features in the questionnaire correspond to the World Health Organization's eight domains of a livable community:

1. Outdoor spaces & buildings
2. Transportation
3. Housing
4. Social Participation
5. Respect and social inclusion
6. Civic participation and employment
7. Communication and information
8. Community support and health services

Demographic questions are also included.



TOOL COST

None



PROS

The *Survey of Community Residents* is straightforward and does not seem to be difficult to implement.

The survey can be conducted by volunteers.



CONS

The perceptions and opinions of older adults would need to be compared to what really exists in the community.

Effort is required to obtain surveys representing all older residents in the community.

BEST FOR:

A CITY OR MUNICIPALITY

A TOWN

A NEIGHBORHOOD

SELECTED AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT TOOLS FOR FUNDERS

**BEST CITIES FOR
SUCCESSFUL AGING**

Developed by: Milken Institute
<http://successfulaging.milkeninstitute.org>



OVERVIEW

This project uses existing data sources to provide rankings of more than 350 U.S. cities and metro areas on 78 indicators relevant to older people, such as housing options, the availability of health care, and other community amenities.

One hundred large cities and 259 smaller metro areas are ranked using multiple indicators. The rankings are updated every two years. The “Programs with Purpose” section includes brief descriptions of promising programs, such as Beacon Village, Green Houses, and Complete Streets.



INDICATORS/ TOOLS

This Index uses 78 indicators to rank cities. Rankings are based on a weighted, multidimensional methodology. Sub-components are the basis for overall ratings:

1. general indicators
2. health care
3. wellness
4. living arrangements
5. transportation/ convenience
6. financial well-being
7. employment /education
8. community engagement.

Each sub-component is based on multiple indicators. In addition, there are two sub-indexes/ rankings, one for people 80+ and one for those 65-79. For the 80+ group, more weight is given to health care and weather; for those 65-79, more weight is given to active lifestyle indicators.



TOOL COST

None



PROS

The website is easy to navigate.

This tool can be a good way to begin assessing a city or metro area.

Rankings may be used to raise awareness about successful aging, engage decision makers, media, and the community at large, and set goals for improvement.

A calculator tool helps in understanding how improvements in particular areas can impact the overall ranking.

Best Cities for Successful Aging provides a method for ranking—and therefore comparing—cities and metro areas with one another.



CONS

Tool is useful only if the city is in the Index.

There is a great deal of information to sort through.

There are some methodological issues, such as unavailable public-use data, for which proxy measures or weights were used. Thus some of the comparisons may not be based on the same types of data or data sources.

Comparing communities with one another using rankings or other data points can be tricky because communities are so different from one another.

BEST FOR:

A CITY

SELECTED AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT TOOLS FOR FUNDERS

VITAL COMMUNITIES

Developed by: Vital Aging Network

www.vital-aging-network.org (Toolkit)

www.vital-aging-network.org/files/media/vital_communities_assess.pdf (Assessment)



OVERVIEW

This planning toolkit offers access to assessments, surveys, questionnaires, and other tools to help people learn about their community, hone their community vision, and achieve their goals.

This toolkit includes:

1. Information about the structures, processes, and relationships that help make a community vital
2. Discussion of what is needed to develop a vital community
3. Planning advice and insight
4. Tools (assessments, surveys, questionnaires)
5. Successful models

Vital Communities Assessment tool is included in this toolkit.



INDICATORS/ TOOLS

Vital Communities Assessment tool is a brief survey with questions in three categories:

1. Basic needs for self-sufficiency (housing, food, etc.)
2. Community involvement (ease of navigating the community; accessible transportation; support for community participation)
3. High quality of life (e.g., exercise opportunities; educational programs).

Individuals are asked to “rate your community on these assets for vital aging.” There are also checklists asking whether the items on the checklist are available in the community.



TOOL COST

None



PROS

The brevity of the *Vital Communities Assessment* is great if the goal is to get quick ratings of community features from older adults and/or other community residents.



CONS

The survey seems to be a test of the knowledge respondents have about assets and needs in their community.

Some questions may be difficult for people to answer unless they know all that is available in their community. This may result in many “don’t know” answers.

Effort would be needed to assure surveys represent all older people in the community.

BEST FOR:

A SMALL TOWN

A NEIGHBORHOOD