

Senior Friendly Communities

How Would You Rate Your Municipality?

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By Kristin Beltz

As we go through life, we sometimes take for granted the fact that we can hop in the car and drive to the grocery store, utilize our insurance benefits for a doctor's visit and walk rapidly across the street before the traffic light changes from red to green. But what about Northeast Ohio's senior citizens? From mobility to housing affordability and accessibility, senior citizens are faced with a multitude of challenges in their everyday lives. Several Northeast Ohio communities are making great strides by improving the quality of life for their senior citizens in the areas of Home Life, Community Life and Affordability. What steps can you, as a municipal leader, take within your own community to improve the livelihood of this unique segment of your population?

The Successful Aging Initiative of The Cleveland Foundation is proactively addressing these issues through a multitude of programs and grants. The Initiative is a three-year, \$4 million program aimed at motivating aging-centered dialogue and action within Cuyahoga County.

According to literature provided by the Successful Aging Initiative, the goal of the Initiative is to "launch an effort to make Cuyahoga County a more livable community for individuals across all generations, shifting some of the emphasis from health as the sole measure of success in aging to a focus of celebrating and empowering individuals as they transition through every stage of life."

"In Cleveland, more than one-quarter of Cuyahoga County residents will move into the traditional retirement years, and long-gone will be the stereotype that getting old means slowing down," wrote Stacey Easterling, Director of Community Responsive Grantmaking with The Cleveland Foundation, in an article titled *Cleveland Thinks Differently About Aging*. "Boomers will be more active, more educated and more civic minded than any older generation in history. In turn, they'll expect more options, opportunity and support from their communities."

The Successful Aging Initiative focuses on five key components in its quest to prompt people to think about aging, including:

- Elder-friendly communities
- Elder employment
- Public awareness campaign
- Lifelong learning and development centers
- Civic engagement

According to the Successful Aging Initiative, the goal for the Elder-Friendly Communities portion of this program is to "increase awareness of impending population increases of adults over the age of 65 living in Cuyahoga County; to encourage local

communities to assess their own elder-friendliness; and to engage a pilot group of communities in the use of an elder-friendly assessment tool.”

As part of its elder-friendly community component, The Cleveland Foundation awarded grants to six communities to allow them to assess their level of “elder-friendliness” and to develop five-year plans to address any needs that were uncovered. Communities were given a survey to allow them to assess their neighborhoods on three levels: Home Life, Community Life and Mobility.

Home Life is described as “assessing the affordability, accessibility and availability of appropriate housing choices,” while Community Life is referred to as “assessing the availability and accessibility of public, safety and social services” and Mobility is explained as “assessing the livability and ‘walkability’ of a community, including public and private transportation for older adults.”

The six communities that received Elder-Friendly Community grants include: City of Cleveland (\$45,000); City of Bedford with Glenwillow and Oakwood Village (\$25,000); City of Lakewood (\$25,000); City of Maple Heights with Bedford Heights and Garfield Heights (\$25,000); City of Brook Park with Berea, Columbia Township, Middleburg Heights, Olmsted Falls and Strongsville (\$25,000); and the Orange City Schools/Orange Community Education and Recreation with Hunting Valley, Moreland Hills, Orange Village, Pepper Pike and Woodmere (\$25,000).

Tim Anderson, Project Director for Bedford, discovered a great deal about his community as he conducted surveys and spoke to community groups about their knowledge and perceptions of Bedford’s elder-friendliness.

“We found a large information gap between seniors and their communities,” Anderson said. “Seniors simply weren’t knowledgeable about existing programs available to them, which gave us a great starting point.”

To counteract this issue, a Senior Information Fair was held on June 14 to give seniors a resource for finding the information they need. More than 80 vendors had booths at the fair and representatives from county offices, assisted living facilities, the legal profession and more were on hand to answer questions and give advice on subjects from living wills to moving into a senior living facility. In addition, the municipality put together a directory of senior programs and mailed it to homes.

Anderson also found that, “Seniors don’t define community by political boundaries. Instead, they define it in a broader sense: where they go to work, where they shop, where they go to church.”

As a result, Anderson and his colleagues worked together to provide regional support versus community-specific programming and assistance. Utilizing a program called the Older Adult Connection (OAC), which predated the grant, representatives from Bedford, Oakwood, Glenwillow, the Bedford hospital and the local YMCA and library meet on a

monthly basis to coordinate volunteers and programs for area seniors. Currently, 18 Volunteers in Independence go to seniors' homes to assist in one of five categories:

- Sitter/companion
- Indoor assistant
- Outdoor assistant
- Errand assistant
- General helper

These volunteers help in a multitude of ways, whether it's changing a light bulb, helping to move boxes or sitting with seniors while maintenance repair work is being done to their homes.

The program has been so successful that Maple Heights, Garfield Heights and Bedford Heights have joined the OAC. The organization recently met to coordinate transportation in Southeast Cuyahoga County for senior citizens who need dialysis and other services. Anderson credits the grants as the impetus to helping the coordination effort.

Overall, Anderson found that the Elder-Friendly Communities grant spurred cooperative conversation between people who had never talked before. Bedford, Glenwillow and Oakwood Village have all seen tremendous benefits from the grant and are taking steps to act upon the information gathered.

Laura Guentner, Director of the Orange Community Education and Recreation Department, has also seen the benefits of the Elder-Friendly Communities grant in action. The Orange City Schools, Orange Community Education and Recreation, Hunting Valley, Moreland Hills, Orange Village, Pepper Pike and Woodmere took their grant and used it to discover the challenges and strengths of their current senior situation and to determine positive solutions for this unique segment of the population.

Utilizing an existing consortium, Orange amassed a task force of more than 30 people which took the elder friendly assessment tool provided by the Successful Aging Initiative and adjusted it to fit their own needs. By conducting interviews, hosting town hall forums and visiting community meetings, members of the task force were able to identify the unique challenges that face the community of Orange.

Orange already knew that its community has the largest population of Baby Boomers and Emerging Elders in Cuyahoga County. After talking with hundreds of government officials, senior citizens, business owners and retail merchants, they also learned more about why seniors enjoy living in Orange. Orange seniors benefit from having resources at their fingertips, such as educational opportunities to take classes at a college or art center. They also enjoy services such as big print menus in restaurants, convenient benches in public service areas and grocery stores with delivery options. Overall, Orange determined that "elder friendly is family friendly," according to Guentner.

As a whole, the task force also found that Orange seniors want to stay in their own homes and not move into assisted living, nursing homes or adult living communities. Instead, they want to be in neighborhoods with families and children.

However, the task force found that Orange seniors face a variety of challenges specific to their location, especially in the categories of mobility and transportation. Since Orange is a somewhat rural area, there is no RTA system and very few opportunities for seniors to walk to their destinations, due to the lack of sidewalks.

Guentner and her team identified four challenges that the task force discovered while surveying the services offered by Orange:

- Getting the word out about opportunities and resources that already exist
- Physical access barriers, including mobility, feasible transportation options and the number of walking areas
- Housing options, such as an aging housing stock and doorways that are too small for wheelchairs
- The number and variety of services available

On the flip side, Guentner's team was also able to identify five strengths:

- Numerous opportunities exist for elders who want to be involved, including volunteer opportunities in the schools
- The existence of a cooperation/consortium between five communities, including school system and community education
- Residents who have lived in the community for most of their lives
- An exceptional safety force
- Access to schools, art and more

Since the Orange Community Education and Recreation Department is housed on the Orange School System's property, senior citizens are given a unique opportunity to utilize all of the school system's amenities, such as swimming pools and fields. In addition, numerous volunteer opportunities exist for seniors to interact with students as tutors, aides, classroom presenters, research sources and more.

As a result of this grant, both Bedford and Orange have reported their findings to their community and are in the process of implementing programs and initiatives to address their findings.

As municipal leaders, it is your duty to look out for the well-being of all your citizens. Ask yourself these questions in regards to your senior population:

- What programs or initiatives are aimed specifically at seniors?
- What transportation options are available for seniors?
- What housing options are available for seniors? Are these options affordable?
- What types of volunteer and work opportunities are available for seniors?
- How can I help to make my community a better place for our senior residents?

Once you've found the answers to these questions, take action! Recalling what Guentner and her task force found, remember that "senior friendly is family friendly," which means that helping this one segment of the population actually benefits all of your residents. Take action today to reach out and make a positive difference for your senior community.

To learn more about the Successful Aging Initiative, visit www.successfulaging.org. In addition, visit www.clevelandfoundation.org to learn more about the programs and projects offered through the Cleveland Foundation. **NEO**

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