

Santa Clara County's Senior Age Friendly Initiative – A Model to Promote and Address the Needs of Santa Cruz County's Aging Population

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fact: the population is aging at an unprecedented rate. Research indicates that as individuals age, additional support is needed in order for them to cope with the physical and social changes that are linked with aging. Current social policies and programs are not enough to provide the support needed for older adults to live comfortably in their communities. Population projections indicate that by 2060, individuals age 60 or older will make up 25% of the total county population in Santa Clara County; this number increases to 29% for Santa Cruz County.

Given this, Santa Clara County initiated its Age-Friendly initiative as a method to proactively promote and address the needs of its aging population. The goal is to have all of its fifteen cities designated as age-friendly by the World Health Organization by July 2017. Current dialogue between the County of Santa Cruz and senior-related stakeholders does not focus on age-friendly practices. That having been said, a recent study indicates that seniors residing in Santa Cruz have expressed concerns regarding their ability to live comfortably in the county. Because of this, the county should look into adopting age-friendly practices in order to respond to the increasing needs of its older adult population.

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Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “The world is rapidly ageing: the number of people aged 60 and over as a proportion of the global population will double from 11% in 2006 to 22% by 2050” (WHO, 2007, p. 3). This fact is no stranger to the United States. In fact, it is estimated that every day 10,000 Americans turn 65. More importantly, by 2030, when the last of the baby boomers—individuals born from 1946 to 1964—reach this age, the older adult population will represent nearly one-fifth of the entire U.S. population (National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (N4A), 2015). While there are many arguments related to how an aging population can impact a community, the fact is that there are many benefits to an aging society. This case study looks at how Santa Clara County’s Age-Friendly Initiative can be used as a model to promote and address the needs of an aging society and how Santa Cruz County can use this model to establish its own age-friendly initiative.

Background

It is no secret that additional support is needed as individuals age in order to compensate for the physical and social changes that are linked with aging (WHO, 2007, p. 4). In the United States, “supporting the growing aging population poses challenges for most American communities...The majority of older adults live in suburbs that were designed with little regard for the level of connectivity needed to enable older adults...to flourish in their homes and communities” (N4A, 2015, p. 2). To further complicate this issue, it is a longstanding belief that

“aging is seen primarily as an individual problem rather than a societal problem, reflecting American values of individualism, independence, and autonomy... Individuals are expected to solve their own problems, principally by individual effort or by purchasing products and services” (Scarlarich, 2011, p. 27). Unfortunately, the reality is that most older Americans do not have the economic means to pay for the products and services that are needed to cope with the physical and social changes associated with aging. It is “only after private human and economic resources are exhausted [that] public support typically become[s] available” (Scarlarich, 2011, p. 27).

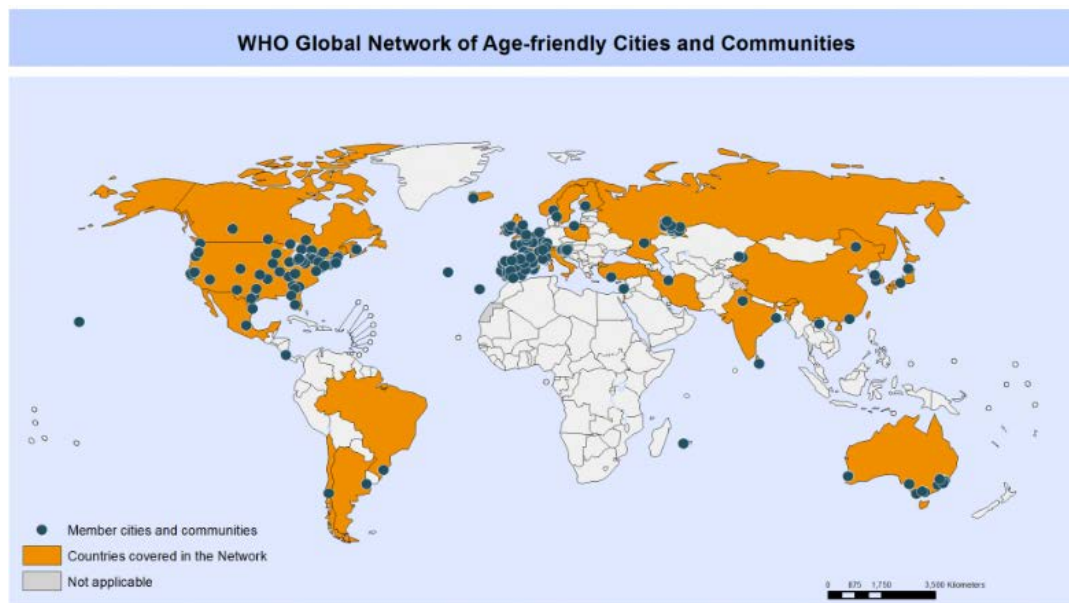
While means-tested public assistance programs and services are an option, the fact is that these programs pay “little attention to quality of life, social integration, community participation, and other non-economic outcomes of helping elders to remain in familiar homes and neighborhoods” (Scarlarich, 2011, p. 28). To address this issue, the concept of an age-friendly world was established “as a response to the growing demographic of older people throughout the world and the growing urbanization of the population” (SSA-DAAS, 2016, p.3). According to the WHO (2017), an age-friendly world is:

“A place that enables people of all ages to actively participate in community activities. It is a place that treats everyone with respect, regardless of their age. It is a place that makes it easy to stay connected to those around you and those you love. It is a place that helps people stay healthy and active even at the oldest ages. And it is a place that helps those who can no longer look after themselves to live with dignity and enjoyment” (para. 1).

In short, an age-friendly world benefits the community as a whole, not just the older population living within the community.

Established in 2005, the WHO's Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (Figure 1) now spans 400 cities and communities in 37 countries and covers over 146 million people worldwide (WHO, 2017). In the United States, the City of Portland, Oregon was the first city to be designated age-friendly by the WHO in 2013 and since then, 124 cities and communities throughout the country have been designated as age-friendly (WHO, 2017).

Figure 1 - WHO Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities



Source: WHO, 2017.

The process to become designated as WHO age-friendly includes a commitment to a five-year cycle of continuous improvement by cities and communities (SSA-DAAS, 2016). To join its global network, cities and communities must:

- Complete an application,
- Obtain a written commitment from the city/community's administrators (mayor, city manager, city council and/or board of supervisors) declaring their commitment to the WHO's cycle of continuous improvement, and
- Begin the following four step cycle:

- I. Establish mechanisms to involve older people throughout the age-friendly five-year cycle;
- II. Develop a baseline assessment of the city/community's age friendliness based on the following eight domains of livability:
 1. Outdoor spaces and buildings,
 2. Transportation,
 3. Housing,
 4. Social participation,
 5. Respect and social inclusion,
 6. Civic participation and employment,
 7. Communication and information, and
 8. Community support and health services.
- III. Develop a three year city/community-wide plan of action based on the findings of the aforementioned assessment; and
- IV. Identify the indicators to monitor the progress of said plan (WHO, 2017).

As noted above, one of the requirements to be designated age-friendly by the WHO is for cities and communities to follow the aforementioned four-step process. One important factor is that while the WHO requires a baseline assessment of the city/community's age friendliness based on the eight domains of livability, when developing the three-year city/community-wide plan of action, cities and communities are not required to incorporate all eight domains in their plan. In fact, most cities select to focus on a few of the eight domains for their three-year city-wide plan of action (SSA-DAAS, 2016).

Santa Clara County

Santa Clara County (SCC), commonly referred to as the "Silicon Valley," encompasses 1,316 square miles and is by far the largest county in the Bay Area. Estimates indicate that the countywide population is in excess of 1.8 million people. By 2030, it is projected the population will increase to 2.1 million. More importantly, as of 2016, there are 361,566 adults age 60 or

older, approximately 17% of the total county population, that reside within SCC. It is projected that by 2060, this number will increase to 25% of the total county population. It is important to note that at the state and national level, projections indicate this population, those 60 and older, will comprise 24% of the total state and national population (Sourcewise, 2016). Given these demographics, one of the key priorities for SCC was to address the needs of its aging population. As a result, the SCC Board of Supervisors has made the age-friendly initiative one of its top priorities.

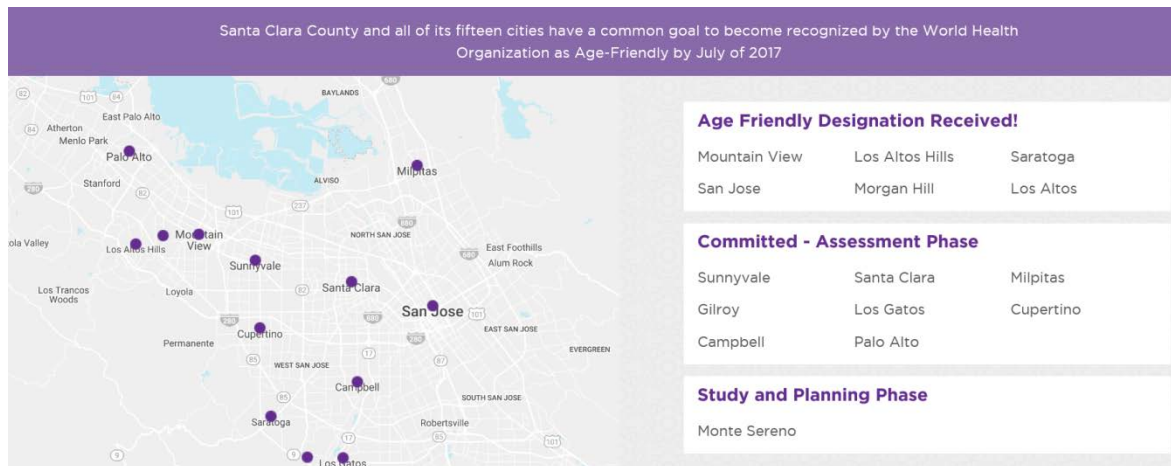
SCC's Age-Friendly Initiative

The goal for SCC is to have all of its fifteen cities be designated as age-friendly by the WHO by July of 2017 (SSA-DAAS, 2016). Although SCC's age-friendly initiative began its journey in 2015, its initial roots can be traced back to 2011 when "the Board of Supervisors announced a Seniors Agenda to prepare for the growing population of older adults in [the] county" (SSA-DAAS, 2016, p. 2). At the time, the Seniors Agenda did little to make any noticeable changes. It did, however, manage to gather various organizations throughout the community to discuss and work on senior issues in the county. In 2013, Diana Miller was hired as Project Manager for the Seniors' Agenda, which by then, was established as a formal program under the umbrella organization of the SSA-DAAS. In 2015, the Seniors' Agenda made a formal recommendation to the Board of Supervisors to become an age-friendly community. In 2016, the SCC Board of Supervisors declared a formal resolution to become an age-friendly county. When SCC is officially granted the age-friendly designation it will be the first county in the United States (with all of its cities) to be designated age-friendly by the WHO (SSA-DAAS, 2016).

SCC Age-Friendly Designation – How are they doing?

SCC is well on its way to achieve its goal of having all fifteen cities be WHO designated as age-friendly cities. At present Mountain View, Los Altos Hills, Saratoga, San Jose, Morgan Hill and Los Altos are six cities in SCC that have received their age-friendly designation by the WHO. The remaining nine cities are in various stages of the age-friendly process. Sunnyvale, Santa Clara, Milpitas, Gilroy, Los Gatos, Cupertino, Campbell and Palo Alto are all in the assessment phase and are working on determining each city's age friendliness based on the eight domains of livability. Monte Sereno, the last of the fifteen cities, is currently in the planning phase and is working on establishing a task force and conducting focus groups (SSA-DAAS, 2016). Figure 2 below depicts the fifteen cities in SCC and its current stage in the process of attaining their age-friendly status with the WHO.

Figure 2 – Age Friendly Santa Clara County Cities and Communities.



Source: SCC Age Friendly Silicon Valley, 2017.

Fiscal Impact

The fiscal impact to SCC is minimal as the majority of the work is done at the local level and requires a minimal financial commitment from the county. In fact, the entire age-friendly initiative is handled by a staff of one, Diana Miller. However, it must be noted that for SCC, the

commitment to achieve its goal resulted in the county allocating additional resources to its age-friendly initiative. For this, the Center for Age-Friendly Excellence was brought in to provide technical assistance and interns for the assessment and planning phases to each city (SSA-DAAS, 2016). As made evident by this information, the financial impact to the county is minimal, the salary and compensation for one full time staff member. Any additional resources that the county wishes to allocate would be based solely on the level of commitment that the county has to ensure that its age-friendly initiative succeeds.

The City of Morgan Hill's Age-Friendly Designation

The WHO designated the City of Morgan Hill as age-friendly in June of 2016. In hindsight, this designation was a relatively quick and smooth process. The process started in September 2015 when Debbie Vasquez was hired as the Older Adult Services Supervisor for the City of Morgan Hill. Within a couple of months, and with the support of the City Manager, Debbie began to present on the benefits of an age-friendly city to city leaders. In January of 2016, the first step was taken with the development of a task force. In this phase, two focus groups were created, one with seniors and the other with professionals that work with seniors (individuals in the medical, legal, social services, and other fields). Following the focus groups, brainstorming sessions were held to prioritize which of the eight domains of livability would be included in the city-wide plan of action. As a result of these brainstorming sessions, three areas were identified as focus areas for the city's age-friendly initiative: transportation, information and communication, as well as lifelong learning. During April of 2016, a formal presentation was given to the City Council and it was then that the council offered its committed to being age-friendly. Lastly, the age-friendly application was submitted to the WHO and the City of Morgan Hill received its official designation as an age-friendly city in June of 2016.

The City of Morgan Hill's seamless designation as an age-friendly city was in part due to the support received by its City Manager. Given the fact that one of the requirements to be designated as an age-friendly city is to have its administrators formally commit to age-friendly practices, being designated as an age-friendly city would not have occurred without the support and commitment by the City of Morgan Hill's City Manager and City Council. In order for the city to maintain its age-friendly designation, when there is a shift in leadership, the new incumbents will need to provide their continued commitment to age-friendly practices to the WHO.

The County of Santa Cruz

The County of Santa Cruz encompasses 445 square miles and is geographically the second smallest county in the state (the smallest being San Francisco County). Estimates indicate the total county-wide population is 274,697. More importantly, 58,383 adults age 60 or older—approximately 21% of the total county population—reside within the county. It is projected that by 2060, this number will increase to 29% of the total county population (California Department of Finance, 2016). Given these demographics, within the next few decades, the County of Santa Cruz's aging population will rapidly increase. It is because of this that the county should soon look at establishing policies and programs that will address the needs of its aging population, while ultimately, benefiting the county as a whole. SCC's age-friendly initiative is one such program that will benefit the county as a whole.

Age-Friendly in the County of Santa Cruz

Unfortunately, at this time, there are no conversations taking place about age-friendly practices in the County of Santa Cruz. However, a recent study conducted by the Seniors Council, the local Area Agency on Aging representing Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties, identified the

following areas of concern for seniors residing within their jurisdictions: paying for dental care, paying for health care costs, feeling isolated or depressed, and paying for mortgage or rent (Seniors Council, 2016). These four areas of concern fall in line directly with five of the eight domains of livability: housing, social participation, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment, and community support and health services. Based on this factor alone, the County of Santa Cruz is a prime candidate to begin exploring the feasibility of establishing age-friendly practices and ultimately, seek to be designated as an age-friendly county by the WHO.

Recommendation

To begin, Santa Cruz County can examine and evaluate SCC's age-friendly initiative and consider using it as a model to promote and address the needs of its community and more importantly, its aging population. There are various strategies that can be used to start this process, however, a successful age-friendly program involves collaboration between county, city and local community based organizations.

At the county level, the Adult and Long Term Care (ALTC) services division of the county's Human Services Department can begin the process by initiating the age-friendly conversation with the various local community partners that work closely with the ALTC. One method to begin this would to hold a Seniors Summit where individuals, public and private organizations can meet to discuss the issues that affect the county's aging population. From this, ALTC will be able to identify the "champions" or advocates for seniors within the county. These champions can start the age-friendly momentum in the county and assist in establishing Santa Cruz as an age-friendly county.

An additional avenue to explore is to reach out to the elected officials at both the city and county levels. As stated earlier, these individuals play a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining a city's age-friendly designation with the WHO. For this strategy, ALTC should work with those elected officials that have clearly expressed an interest in the needs of their aging constituents. Upon receiving support from these individuals, the county will be more likely to successfully adopt age-friendly practices.

Conclusion

Within the next few decades, Santa Cruz County's aging population will rapidly increase, prompting the need for proactive measures to ensure that the needs of its aging adults are identified and met. One method to address this issue is establishing an age-friendly initiative within the county. By collaborating with county, city and local community partners, the county will be better prepared to meet the needs of its aging population.

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