

Active healthy seniors create a better future

Local role in promoting a better lifestyle for older Americans

MAY IS “OLDER AMERICANS MONTH” and an appropriate time to highlight the importance of building healthy communities that include healthy eating and active living opportunities for older adults. According to the National Council on Aging, “more than ever before, older Americans are working longer, trying new things, and engaging in their communities. They’re taking charge, striving for wellness, focusing on independence, and advocating for themselves and others.”

communities to work together to create age-friendly environments that will help their older citizens stay vital and remain healthy as they age.

Active living

As people age, they stop driving or limit their driving. Therefore, the walkability of a community becomes especially important to older adults. If they can walk to places in their neighborhood - such as a public transportation stop, a grocery store, a senior center, and a park - they may be more likely to stay engaged in community life and “age in place.” Also, walkable neighborhoods can encourage older adults to walk for exercise.

By adopting and implementing “complete streets” policies and practices, local government leaders can create walkable neighborhoods. Complete streets are designed and operated to provide safe and convenient travel for all roadway users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, users of public transportation, motorists, children, older adults, and people with disabilities. Some of the strategies that create complete streets for older adults include retiming signals to account for slower walking speeds and providing median refuges or side-walk bulb-outs to shorten crossing distances. Also, side-walk design features such as curb ramps, seating (such as benches and other street furniture), good lighting, and planter strips that provide a buffer to traffic, as well as other features that take account of the mobility, visual, and hearing capacity of all community members, can improve walkability.

Older adults are overrepresented among pedestrian deaths so designing complete streets that slow down cars and create the kind of pedestrian-friendly infrastructure described above can also reduce the risk of pedestrian injury. Sidewalks that are well-maintained and that do not present fall hazards are also important to keep older adults safe. Further, older adults’ security concerns can be addressed by design

“All sectors must be engaged in planning for the opportunities of a growing population of older adults to ensure we are not only adding years to life, but life to years.”

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Prevention, Health Promotion, and Public Health Council. Healthy Aging in Action: 2016 Advancing the National Prevention Strategy.

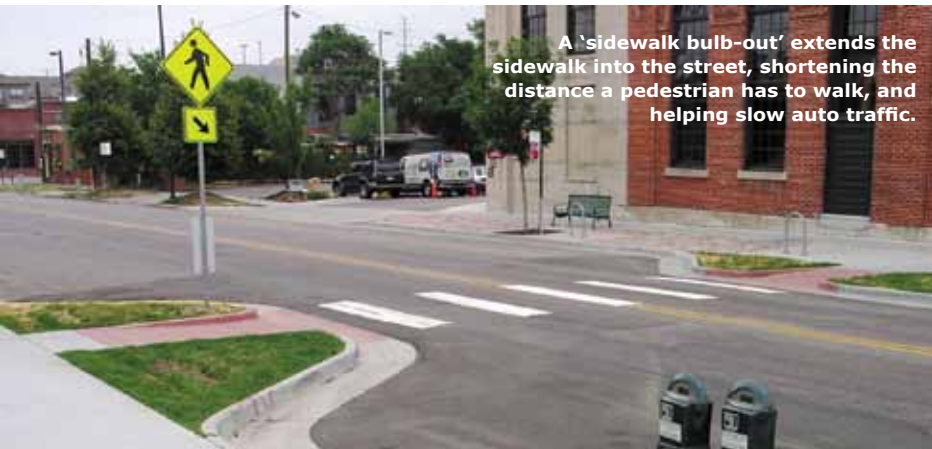


14.2% of Virginia’s population (about 1.2 million) is 65 years and over. Some projections forecast that there will be over one million more older adults in Virginia by the year 2025.

Sources: American Community Survey and Project 2025.

Active lifestyles and healthy eating can promote older adult health by lowering the risk of being overweight and obesity. In Virginia, 29.3% of the population 65 years and older is obese. Weighing too much leads to costly and debilitating health conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, some cancers, osteoarthritis, breathing problems, body pain, and difficulty with physical functioning. Keeping physically active in later life can also help reduce the risk of falls, improve balance and stamina, and delay cognitive decline. The World Health Organization notes that “... older people who live in an unsafe environment or areas with multiple physical barriers are least likely to get out and therefore more prone to isolation, depression, reduced fitness and increased mobility problems.”

The physical environment in which older adults live has been shown to affect their levels of physical activity as well as their ability to access healthy food. Municipal and county leaders can harness the ideas and vigor of the older adults in their



features. For example, crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) incorporates street design elements that deter criminal behavior.

Parks can also be an important community resource for older adults and can serve as a place to be physically active, connect to nature, and make social connections. The distance to a neighborhood park can sometimes deter use by older adults, as can concerns about safety and security. Design features that promote safety, deter crime, and improve the walkability of roads and sidewalks that lead to the park can help promote use of parks by older adults.

The concept of a “complete parks system” can help ensure that the needs of older adults are considered when parks are designed or improvements are made. According to the Complete Parks Playbook, “it is necessary to take into account numerous factors, including how people travel to parks; equitable access to parks; how parks are designed; what types of activities and amenities are planned for parks; how and by whom parks are used; what types of plants and trees are planted in parks; how parks are maintained; and how parks are funded.”

Healthy eating

Access to affordable, healthy foods is also important for older adult health. Distance to the nearest supermarket or other healthy food retail outlets matters – longer distances are associated with a decrease in the daily consumption of fruits and vegetables by older adults. Municipal leaders can use land use planning, zoning regulations, economic development, tax credits, and other incentives to encourage healthy food retail, especially in communities where healthy food options are lacking. Also, municipal leaders’ efforts to increase the walkability of communities, as described above, can provide older adults with safe access to retailers who do sell healthy food.


Older adults often have limited incomes, and low-income status has been identified as another barrier to healthy food access. Farmers’ markets/farm stands, food carts, and community gardens can increase convenient access to affordable, healthy food for older adults. Facilitating the use of municipally-owned and privately-owned property for community gardens by providing zoning and open space protections and a water source can promote the establishment of community gardens. Defining farmers’ markets as an approved land use, allowing and identifying sites for farmers’ markets and food carts on municipal-owned property; providing easier, less expensive permitting processes; and encouraging developers to dedicate

space for farmers’ markets are all ways local leaders can encourage the establishment and strategic location of farmers’ markets and food carts.

Many low-income older adults rely on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to purchase their food. Enabling or requiring vendors at farmers’ markets and farm stands to accept Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) can increase access to healthy food for older adults who, by means of EBT, can use their SNAP benefits.

Municipalities and counties that run senior centers can also increase access to nutritious food through their “purchasing power.” Contracts with vendors who supply food to senior centers, for example, can require that the food served at the center meet federal nutrition standards.

Conclusion

Municipal leaders can adopt and implement an array of policies and practices to create community environments that promote and support the health and well-being of their older constituents. By integrating the needs of older adults into local decision-making and planning – for example, decisions and planning involving transportation, street and sidewalk design, park development, and land use and zoning – localities can create age-friendly communities. But age-friendly communities that provide safe, walkable neighborhoods and convenient access to healthy food and places to be physically active promote not only the health of older adults – they benefit citizens of all ages! 

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For more information

THE HEAL CITIES AND TOWNS CAMPAIGN of the Mid-Atlantic offers free technical assistance to municipal leaders to help them create healthy, prosperous communities. The Campaign, funded by Kaiser Permanente, is a project of the Institute for Public Health Innovation. The Virginia Municipal League has been a strategic partner in the development and promotion of the Campaign. To date, 27 cities, towns and counties in Virginia have joined the Campaign. For more information about coming a HEAL city or town and for resources regarding older adults and healthy eating and active living, visit the HEAL Cities and Towns website at www.healcitiesmidatlantic.org or contact Susan DeFrancesco, HEAL Cities & Towns Campaign Manager at 240-252-2016.

