

## BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES FOR OLDER ADULTS



*“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.”<sup>1</sup>*

Eating healthy and staying physically active can help to keep older adults feeling well and engaged in their communities. Good nutrition and physical activity can lower their risk of obesity and chronic disease.<sup>2</sup> Keeping physically active in later life can also help reduce the risk of falls, improve balance and stamina, delay cognitive decline, and avoid isolation and depression.<sup>3,4</sup>

Municipalities can create age-friendly communities that promote older adult health and wellness by integrating the needs of older adults into municipal decision-making and planning related to transportation, street and sidewalk design, park development, and land use and zoning,

### ACTIVE LIVING

As older adults limit or stop driving, the ability to walk to places in their neighborhood safely and conveniently, such as to public transportation, a grocery store, a senior center, or a park may allow them 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, municipal 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 sidewalk bulb-outs to shorten crossing distances. Also, sidewalk design features such as curb ramps, seating (e.g., 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.



Sidewalks that are well-maintained and that do not present fall hazards are also important to keep older pedestrians safe. Older adults' security concerns can also be addressed by design features. 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 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 and deter crime in the park and improve the walkability of roads and sidewalks that lead to the park can help promote use of parks by older adults.

### HEALTHY EATING

Longer distances to the nearest grocery store or other sources of healthy food can decrease 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.

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 municipal 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 Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. Also, cities' and towns' contracts with vendors who supply food to senior centers can require that the food served at the center meet federal nutrition standards.



### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> National Council on Aging. Accessed at: <https://oam.acl.gov/>

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Health Effects of Overweight and Obesity*. Accessed at: <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/effects/>

<sup>3</sup> National Prevention Council. *Healthy Aging in Action*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Office of the Surgeon General; 2016. Accessed at: <https://www.surgeongeneral.gov/priorities/prevention/about/healthy-aging-in-action-final.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> World Health Organization. *Active Ageing: A Policy Framework*. (2002). Accessed at:

[http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/67215/1/WHO\\_NMH\\_NPH\\_02.8.pdf](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/67215/1/WHO_NMH_NPH_02.8.pdf)



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*The HEAL Cities and Towns Campaign of the Mid-Atlantic provides free technical assistance to local government leaders to help them create healthy, prosperous communities by adopting policies and practices that improve their communities' physical activity and food environments. HEAL is a project of the Institute for Public Health Innovation, in partnership with the Maryland and Virginia Municipal Leagues, funded by Kaiser Permanente, founding partner.*

*For more information, visit the HEAL website at [www.healcitiesmidatlantic.org](http://www.healcitiesmidatlantic.org) and contact HEAL staff at 202-747-3455 or [jgroenfeldt@institutephi.org](mailto:jgroenfeldt@institutephi.org)*