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Creating Livable Communities for All Ages: How Local Governments Perceive Their Role in Age Friendly Planning

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Creating sustainable communities that support individuals throughout their lifespan requires intentional consideration of public policies and community planning. The municipalities and local jurisdictions that serve as home to almost 77 million individuals over the age of 65 are beginning to initiate government responses relative to their statutory and legal obligations to provide supports for vulnerable populations. Through the literature, this article provides evidence that a practical place for government response is associated with the functional areas of mobility, housing, the built environment and public services. Findings suggest that local governments are achieving goals to enhance the quality of life for their older residents through comprehensive and strategic planning efforts. Further, local governments are finding that engagement of older adults in the planning process yields community-wide benefits.

Introduction

As the baby boomers age, this population of individuals aged 65 years and older is forecasted to make up approximately 20 percent of the population in the United States by 2030 (West et al., 2014). The oldest age group, those individuals aged 85 years and older, will account for almost 2.5 percent of the population by 2030 and 4.5 percent of the population by 2050 (Ortman et al., 2014).

For many communities in the U.S. this may be the first time they have had to plan programs and services for this many older adults. Preparing our communities for this substantial growth requires attention by local governments to the public policies, programs, and services necessary to support older adults as their needs change. Given the role of local governments and essentially their obligation and responsibilities for community planning, design, and infrastructure, this paper aims

to explore the question, what are local government perceptions of age friendly policy action and planning?

Older adults express a desire to remain in their communities (Fitzgerald & Caro, 2013; Wiles et al., 2012). Communities can create stressors that make it difficult for older adults to remain in a certain place or attractors, such as housing choice and mobility options, supporting their needs as they change (Boldy et al., 2011). Sustainable communities are those that consciously support individuals throughout their lifespan (Winick & Jaffe 2015). The older adult's ability to age in their home and community may depend on the community's ability to offer certain age friendly features both in the physical and social realm (Lui et al., 2009; Benavides & Keyes, 2015). This paper examines the concept of age friendly as defined by the literature, deconstructs the concept of age friendly identifying the specific domains that align with the daily responsibilities and legal obligations of local governments, and associates the concept of age friendly with an attitude or culture of responsiveness held by local governments to the needs of their older adult residents.

Conceptualizing age friendly policy

The international and national age friendly initiatives include the following as critical policy domains as built environment, mobility, housing, programs and services, access to information, civic participation, security, value, and leadership as shown in the first column in Table 1 (Benavides & Keyes, 2015;

Fitzgerald & Caro, 2013; Lui et al., 2009). According to the World Health Organization (2007), age friendly places are defined as those that promote active aging, health and security and are both inclusive and accessible to older adults. Specifically, community programs, services, and public policies should assure enhanced quality of life of older adults. Perspectives of community planning and development are moving away from considering aging and elderly needs in isolation from shared environments such as hospitalization and institutionalized care. Along these lines, Winick and Jaffe (2015) argue that a paradigmatic shift is occurring with respect to the conceptualization of age friendly policies and planning needs at the community level. They go on to suggest the policies captured in the domains (first column, shown in Table 1) cut across fields of aging, transportation, housing, and community design supporting comprehensive solutions to livability for persons of all ages. The authors suggest that the aging paradigm is moving from viewing aging as a health-related condition to a view of whole person and lifestyle issue.

As illustrated as local government initiatives in Table 1, communities are developing multi-modal transportation solutions that accommodate walking, biking, and transit options. Research finds overall health benefits to older adults when pedestrian facilities create viable options for travel (Kerr et al., 2012).

Table 1. Domains of Age Friendly Policy and Bureaucratic Responsiveness

Domains of Age Friendly Policy	Example Local Government Initiatives	Comprehensive Government Responsiveness
Mobility	Pedestrian and bicycle facilities; Transportation options including transit and older driver safety design	Comprehensive transportation plan; Improvements to transportation safety and access including sidewalks
Housing	Housing options across price range and type	Community Housing Needs Assessment Plan; Housing Affordability plan
	Subsidized housing; Home services for elderly - home repair and maintenance	Updates to zoning and regulations to facilitate housing options
Built Environment	Community design and features that support open space and recreation	Integrated strategic plan
	Planning and Zoning	Comprehensive land use plan
	Land use policies	Allocation of resources toward community features/design to attract older adults to the community
	Library	Adopted programs and services plan
	Recreation	Adopted parks and recreation plan
Programs and Services	Health; Senior Center	Senior oriented programming
Access to Information	Communication and Information	Website and Community newsletter
Participation	Social engagement opportunities and involvement in activities	Participation plan
Security	Public safety and emergency management provisions	Public Security plan
Value	Civic participation and employment	Program and service plan; Partnership beyond city
	Lifelong learning and education opportunities	
Leadership	Participation on advisory councils or committees	Public participation plan

Source: Adapted From Fitzgerald and Caro, 2014; Lui et al., 2009; and Benavides and Keyes, 2015

Further, as reflected as a local government initiative in Table 1, sustainable initiatives nest housing into mixed-use environments and integrate walkable and accessible design elements in community

development. A contribution of this paper is the addition of a third column to Table 1, organizing what we know about a cultural awareness by local governments to be responsiveness to an aging population and

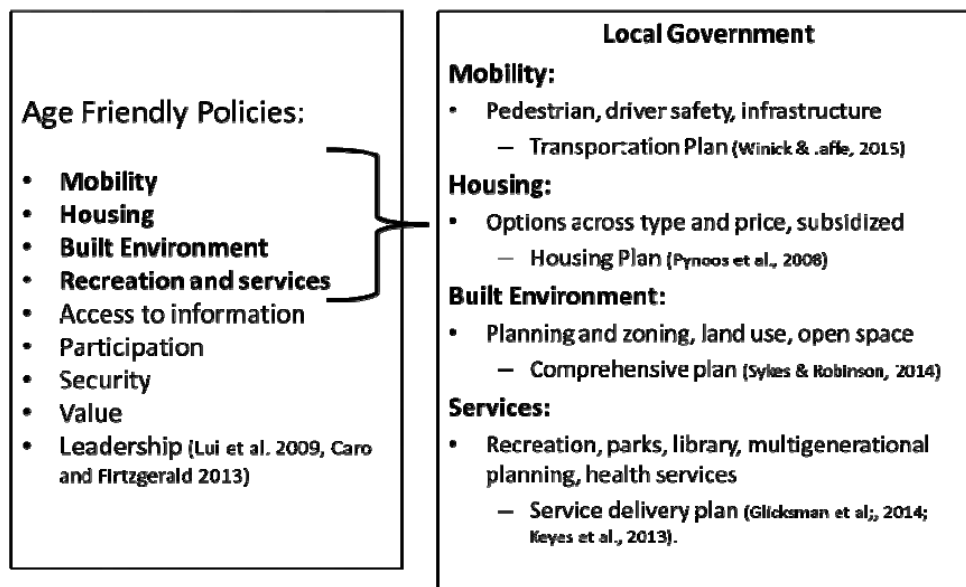
to plan sustainable communities across all ages.

Age friendly and local government responsiveness

Evidence suggests that local governments actively pursuing age friendly policies in general tend to focus on the relationship of older adults to their physical environment (Warner et al., 2016) over the social environment (Greenfield et al., 2015; Lui et al., 2009). The physical environment relates to the interaction between the

person and the environment in which they reside, while the social environment is expressed more broadly as an individual’s participation in their broader community (Lui et al., 2009). Based on the definitions and evidence of physical and social interactions with community, the opportunity space for local governments to advance age friendly policy making, as depicted in Figure 1, are primarily limited to mobility, housing, built environment, and public services.

Figure 1. Age friendly policy domains of local government



Local governments, through their statutory obligations, may assess the needs of its citizens and lead changes through age friendly policies ensuring residents may remain in the community and access things they need for maximum independence (Lui et al, 2009). A lack of attention to age friendly policies by local governments may create difficulties for older adults to achieve goals for independence because their

communities lack access to transportation, housing, and basic health and supportive services (Keyes et al., 2013; Keyes & Benavides, 2017). The relationship of local government and age friendly design is whether the community infrastructure including: transportation, housing, built environment and service promotes or creates barriers to successful and independent aging.

Local government adoption of transportation policies

The current lack of public policies advancing the implementation of viable mobility options in communities may create challenges for older adults to remain independent when they are no longer able to drive (Fitzgerald & Caro, 2013). Carr and Ott (2010) find an association between the loss of driving and an older adult's physical well-being. They go on to suggest that the loss of mobility and reduced access to the community may lead to the decline of an older adult's social network diminishing their access to basic and health and supportive services. Kerr, Rosenberg, and Frank (2012) provide evidence that drivers over the age of 65 are driving more miles annually when compared to younger drivers. The authors suggest that when older drivers are forced to give up the keys they turn to family and friends. This solution is complicated by reduced or obsolete social networks. Ultimately, a lack of mobility options results in older adults driving their own automobile for longer.

Communities, in many cases by design, exacerbate the decline of older adult independence and health offering few transportation options such as safe pedestrian facilities and walkable places. Physical barriers in the built environment and Euclidean zoning isolate housing from daily basic needs. Local governments and partner nonprofits are organizations to overcome these barriers. First, intentional integration of age friendly policies into planning and community design furthers opportunities for the creation of walkable and connected communities. Better

community design that integrates housing near shopping, restaurants, and stores reduces the need for automobiles and increases the opportunity for social interaction. Second, the community supports offered through nonprofits and government services fill in the transportation gaps ensuring older adults remain connected with their community and increasing opportunities for social interaction (Dumbaugh, 2008). The implementation of nonprofit taxis, and volunteer driver programs, for instance, put low cost solutions for mobility within reach of older adults.

Conceptualizing a local government response toward planning for older drivers includes support for volunteer driver programs, better roadway design, improved lighting, and integrated transit services (Winick & Jaffe, 2015). With regards to the domain of Mobility listed Table 1, the City of Casper, Wyoming, demonstrates the concept of responsiveness through their government's transportation plan adoption and allocation of resources relative to their emphasis on new sidewalks, trail development, and pathway construction throughout the city (Sykes & Robinson, 2014).

Local government adoption of housing policies

Housing policy to support older adults has devolved at the local government level through federal regulations such as the Fair Housing Act Amendments which require multi-family units constructed after 1988 to be accessible, for instance, with wider doorways. The concept of accessibility further relates to

design features of the space and its surrounding environment allowing for equal opportunities for individuals that may experience functional limitations (Demirkin, 2007). The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 places responsibility on local governments to ensure public spaces and public buildings are accessible but has had limited effect on housing (Smith et al., 2012). In 2009, the Supreme Court ruling in *Olmstead v. L.C.* basically called for community integration for all individuals, allowing anyone the option to reside independently in their community instead of residing in institutionalized nursing care (Pynoos et al., 2008). These federal regulations in addition to the anticipation for community based long-term care supports are factors in supporting an individual's desire to age in place (Tang & Pickard, 2008). Local governments may create barriers through the use of exclusionary zoning practices, lack of training of building code officials to ensure compliance with federal regulations, lack of mobility options, and lack of connectivity, especially in communities with suburban land use patterns (Pynoos et al., 2009).

The reality of any individual, regardless of age, being able to live in one community versus another comes down to having access to housing matched with ability to pay and choice. Myers and Pitkin (2009) suggest that American cities are going to feel the pressure from the growing number of older adults and their changing demand for housing products. They contend that cities will feel the impact as baby boomers sell off their current homes. In some cities, the authors suggest, the

impact will be much greater where there is an imbalance of potential new younger buyers leaving a pool of houses on the market without the prospect of purchase. Conversely, cities with higher density and compact design, where residential and shopping areas are connected for ease of pedestrian access, are gaining momentum among older buyers in search of different housing options including rentals. A motivating question for further research is whether the available affordable housing stock is proportional to the needs of the older adult population.

City planners are beginning to examine the long-term impacts on housing given the ratio of older adults to younger adults has increased roughly 30 percent in the last two decades (Giuliano, 2004). The mismatch between older sellers and available younger buyers will ultimately result in a strain on municipal budgets as the situation could reduce overall home values. Myers and Ryu (2008) provide evidence that more individuals aged 65-year and older will sell homes than there are buyers available to purchase them in this forecasted sell off. The authors suggest that the rental properties are top options for replacement by older buyers especially in central cities with density where the built environment supports a pedestrian friendly lifestyle. They argue that cities should examine their stock of affordable units and adjust policy to support development of more affordable units. Municipalities need to consider how to balance the ratio between selloff of housing by older adults and the potential access to a pool of younger buyers. The issue of aging is

important to local governments due to potential impacts to the local housing markets and the ripple effects on municipal budgets.

The baby boomer housing demand is trending toward areas with density, variety in housing options, and access to services (Pynoos et al., 2008). Establishing a universal response to housing may be challenging due to specific place based needs of older resident such as proximity to family, employment, health care, etc. Government responsiveness, in the form of a community needs assessment, allows for an evaluation of available housing relative to residential income levels and identifies gaps between population groups and available housing options (Winick & Jaffe, 2015) (see column 3, Table 1). With regards to the domain of housing shown in Table 1, for example, in the town of Scarborough, Maine, government responsiveness is illustrated by the leadership of the Community Services Department in the development and adoption of a comprehensive housing plan resulting in the approval of several new senior housing projects (Sykes & Robinson, 2014).

Local government policies on the built environment

Barriers exist between geographic location and access to basic community services. Evidence suggests that the design of the community has a relationship to health and quality of life (Glass & Balfour, 2003). The authors' findings suggest that as perceptions of community design deteriorates, older adult perceptions of their health and well-being deteriorate. Additional research evidence suggests that

physically disabled seniors are more vulnerable if the environment creates barriers to accessibility or is restricted for someone with functional limitations (Elreedy et al., 1999; Krause, 1993). In other words, increasing vulnerability with age is related to one's ability to navigate the built environment.

Senior centers, typically run by city or county governments and recognized as an important community based support, provide non-institutionalized older adults with opportunities for socialization, congregate meals, and recreation (Benavides, 2007). Johnson, Gorr, and Roehrig (2005) provide evidence that the location of senior centers may create barriers for older adults in their ability to access them and utilize their services. The authors suggest that a government response relates the location of public services relative to population concentrations and economic characteristics of the community to ensure maximum use of public facilities.

A democratic response to community needs through the planning of public infrastructure and services raises issues surrounding equity and social sustainability. Garrido (2013) focuses on a geographic measurement of access between public infrastructure investments and spatial justice. Spatial justice is defined as the supply, quantity, and access to services based on the needs of people in the area (Harvey, 2010). Communities with suburbanization patterns tend illustrate a dispersion of inequities due to a lack of access to public infrastructure and services (Garrido, 2013).

Responding to challenges in accessibility created by the built environment requires attention to community connectivity and accessibility between housing, the public realm, recreation, shopping, and basic needs of daily living. With regards to the domain of built environment shown in the last column in Table 1, bureaucratic responsiveness is reflected, for instance, as the City of Portland's Comprehensive Plan as an age friendly policy instrument integrating the connections between housing, transportation, and land use planning (Neal et al., 2014).

Local government policies on service delivery

The provision of services to older adults is complex and ranges from needing access to health and supportive services to basic every day needs such as shopping, social interaction, and recreation. King and Farmer (2009) provide evidence through a survey of older adults that there was reluctance by older adults to rely on volunteer services and apprehension from statutory services offered by their government. The authors found evidence that older adults wanted access to services that supported their independence and only considered institutionalized housing with existing supportive services as a means of last resort. In general, they found that older adults had expectations for localized services by their government but only those that supported active and independent lifestyles.

Stenberg and Austin (2007) argue that local governments need to factor in older adults relative to public services

planning and programming (e.g. see domain of Services in Table 1). This consideration, they argue, is especially important if demographic forecasts for a jurisdiction trend toward increasing numbers of older adults and decreasing numbers of youth which opens the door for repurposing public spaces. For instance, they suggest reusing a vacant school for senior services. Consideration of citizen interest in services is also important given the inclination for those identified in the baby boomer generation to be less interested in using a traditional senior center and more likely to use health and recreation opportunities in multigenerational facilities (Winick & Jaffe, 2015). Intergenerational facilities may rely on joint use strategies and have fiscal benefits for some jurisdictions (Israel & Warner, 2008). With regards to age friendly policies, a local government in Ohio utilized Community Development Block Grant Funding to construct a recreational and fitness park designed specifically for older adults in partnership with the existing community center (Winick & Jaffe, 2015).

Focusing specifically on the provision of elder services at the local government level, Warner et al. (2016) find evidence of a positive and significant relationship between local governments that plan for seniors and the provision of government funded or provided elder services. Authors suggest that local governments appear to make tradeoffs between the provision of services to the elderly and children when their population of younger residents is larger. The list of

services covered in Warner et al.'s (2016) research covers additional domains listed in Table 1 including health care, workforce development, and community and civic engagement which are arguably not specifically isolated to the role of local government.

Conclusion

The literature is rich in descriptive definitions of age friendly policies and normative arguments of why local governments have a role in policy adoption. Foundational empirical research identifies factors of population, government expenditure and advocacy as positively associated with age friendly innovation (Lehning, 2012; Warner et al., 2016). This paper contributes to the literature illustrating the alignment of government responsiveness with specific age friendly policies commensurate with local governments including: transportation, housing, the built environment and public services.

From a social perspective, cities that make necessary changes to accommodate the needs of their older citizens contribute to a positive living experience. Normative arguments suggest local governments adopt age friendly policies to support older adult independence and their goals toward meaningful participation in their community (Greenfield et al., 2015; Pynoos et al., 2008; Scharlach & Lehning, 2013; Thomas & Blanchard, 2009). Some example accommodations include continued access to transportation, parks and recreation, socialization, health care, and basic elements of everyday living (Dickerson et al., 2007; Fitzgerald & Caro, 2013; Kerr,

Rosenberg, & Frank, 2012; Rosenberg & Everitt, 2001). The International City County Management Association's (ICMA) Knowledge Network suggests that local governments become actively involved in learning about and promoting age friendly policy adoption in order to help them strategically plan for the forecasted growth of the population 65 years and above.

From an economic perspective, lawmakers are beginning to focus attention relative to the high costs of institutionalized care and need for housing options (Wiles et al., 2012). Notwithstanding, the benefit to local economies from the rising demands for housing options (Nelson, 2009) are the opportunities communities have from this existing workforce. For example, the slow growth of the nation's workforce will place increased demand for the baby boomer skillset to remain active in the workforce longer (Klinger & Nalbandian, 2003).

Finally, from a civic perspective, older adults comprise an active segment in American civic engagement. Participation ranges from community, political, and government sponsored programs. For example, federally funded volunteer opportunities for retired individuals increase the capacity of older adults actively participating in communities across the nation (Achenbaum, 2006). Individual groups such as these provide opportunities to connect citizens with the public administrative process (Vigoda, 2002). In other words, the engagement of older adults has both individual and community-wide benefits (Keyes et al., 2013).

Theoretically, it is difficult to support an argument as to why communities would be at a disadvantage socially by accommodating any group within their community. As a representative bureaucracy, public managers have a responsibility to serve the public interest of the citizens they serve and maintain a democratic process in decision-making (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2001). Public values of political responsiveness suggest that public administrators are morally obligated to address needs of the underserved (Frederickson, 1980). Considering any class or group of citizens a social burden puts public administrators in

conflict with ethical and democratic obligations.

The findings surfaced through this review of literature inform on the important policy role of local governments in supporting the desire of individuals to remain in their community across the lifespan. They are limited in understanding the specific policy actions implemented by local governments and the role older adults played in informing local governments on the necessary programs and services needed to age in place. Future research should explore objective actions by local governments and their association with successful health outcomes and positive living experiences for older adults.

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