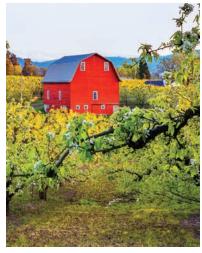
## AARP Rural Livability Workshop Report

How and why small towns and remote communities are working to become more livable for older adults and people of all ages

















Websites: AARP.org and AARP.org/Livable

Email: Livable@AARP.org

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AARP is the nation's largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering Americans 50 and older to choose how they live as they age. With nearly 38 million members — plus offices in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands — AARP strengthens communities and advocates for what matters most to families, with a focus on health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. The AARP Livable Communities initiative works nationwide to support the efforts of neighborhoods, towns, cities, counties and rural areas to be livable for people of all ages. The initiative's programs include the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities, the AARP Community Challenge "quick-action" grant program and educational publications, including this one and others available at AARP.org/LivableLibrary.

#### **AARP** Rural Livability Workshop Report

Written and Edited by: Melissa Stanton, Editor/Senior Advisor, AARP Livable Communities | Patricia Oh, Consultant, Age-Friendly Maine

Contributing Editor: Danielle Arigoni, Director, AARP Livable Communities

Art Director: Mimi Park, Design Park, Inc.

Copy Editor: Don Armstrong

Contributing Reporters: Sarah Dale, Amy Lennard Goehner, Stefan Joyce, Jessica Ludwig, Jay Walljasper

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#### **AARP Rural Livability Workshop Planning Committee**

AARP Livable Communities: Danielle Arigoni (Director), Rebecca Delphia (Advisor), Jack Montrose (Analyst)

AARP Programs: Jean Setzfand (Senior Vice President)

**AARP States and Community Engagement:** Kim Adler (Vice President, West Region), Kelly Clark (Vice President, East Region)

**AARP State Directors:** Erik Gaikowski (South Dakota), Greg Marchildon (Vermont), Gaylene Miller (West Virginia), Bob Murphy (Colorado), Alan Ormsby (Utah), Lori Parham (Maine), Tim Summers (Montana), Sean Voskuhl (Oklahoma)

**Additional Staff and Consultants:** Geoff Alexander (Consultant), Joanne Binette (AARP Research), Sibora Gjeçovi (AARP Research), Jennifer Hopson (AARP Multicultural Leadership), Patricia Oh (Consultant), David Torresen (AARP Maine)

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# **AARP** Rural Livability Workshop Report

How and why small towns and remote communities are working to become more livable for older adults and people of all ages

#### THE WORKSHOP

In June 2019, AARP convened its first-ever national gathering about rural livability — as it relates to people of all ages and, especially, to older adults.

Held in Portland, Maine, the three-day event was attended by AARP staff, volunteers, community partners and livability practitioners representing a range of specialties and locations. (See the list of participating organizations on page 53.)

This report is based on presentations, discussions and activities from the workshop — the videos and materials from which can be found at AARP.org/RuralLivability. The topics covered in this report surfaced while the event was being planned, and were reaffirmed during it as being of greatest interest and opportunity.

The "Local Voices," "Expert Insights," "Field-Tested Strategies," "News Clip" and "Snapshot" items that appear in this publication come from the workshop, related events, media sources and AARP's work in communities throughout the nation.

The AARP Rural Livability Workshop Report is by no means complete regarding the many issues and interests that impact rural communities. But the observations, data and examples contained within these pages can serve to inform community influencers local, state and national officials; policymakers; service providers; nonprofits; citizen activists; and others — about the needs, benefits, challenges and solutions found in rural places.

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Wood Island Lighthouse, Saco Bay, Maine

#### **MUCH ADO ABOUT MAINE**

With a median age of 44.9 years old, Maine has the oldest population in the nation. 1 It is also the most rural state: 61.3 percent of its citizens live in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> Many of the examples in this report are from Maine due to these realities and also because the AARP Rural Livability Workshop took place there. Another reason: Maine is the state with the most rural localities in the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities. Learn more about the network on page 53.

### Introduction

America's demographic future is showing up first in rural areas, where older residents form a greater proportion of the population than in urban areas

ne-quarter of all Americans age 65 or older live in small towns and rural communities. That percentage is growing, since the rural population is aging at a faster rate than the nation's population as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

According to the AARP Home and Community Preferences Survey, adults in rural areas are more likely than those living in cities and suburbs to say they want to reside in their community and/or current home for as long as possible.<sup>2</sup>

The realities of aging are playing out in rural communities: In reporting that the number of people age 85 or older will more than triple in the United States by 2050 — from 5.8 million in 2010 to 19 million — the Housing Assistance Council, a rural housing advocacy organization, declares, "This change will have profound implications in rural regions which already have a larger share of seniors and a smaller share of social services than suburban and urban communities."

As the importance of community livability for people of all ages becomes more evident, it's critical for elected officials, local leaders, businesses and nonprofits to understand the issues, challenges and opportunities facing rural communities.

Aging in the home where a person lived comfortably for years can be difficult when distance or a lack of transportation is a barrier to needed services. Distance also isolates people who no longer drive and contributes to feelings of loneliness.

Three in five homes in rural areas and small towns were built prior to 1980. Many lack adequate insulation and age-friendly features such as grab bars and single-floor living. Due to the age and condition of the structures, modifications are often needed but are delayed due to cost and the difficulty of performing the work.

People are leaving rural communities at a faster rate than they are moving to them: Although some rural communities, particularly those in the Western United States, have had slight gains in population over the past 20 years, the majority, especially in Midwestern counties that are economically dependent

on farming, have experienced population declines.

One reason is the growth of industrial agriculture (and decline of smaller, independent farms) and the mechanization of farming (which means fewer farm workers are needed). Another is that the death rate in rural areas of the Northeast and Midwest is greater than the birth rate.<sup>5</sup>

Since 2000, nearly a million people nationwide have left their rural hometowns to move to a larger community (see the related image from Maine on the opposite page), while only 600,000 people have moved to rural counties. Many of those leaving are young people in pursuit of higher education and careers. The decrease in the working age population in rural areas is leading to labor shortages, sinking home values, reduced tax bases and, consequently, a decline in or loss of municipal services.

Yet despite the overall trend of population decline, some rural counties are attracting new residents, leading to rural places that are increasingly diverse, multicultural and multilingual. In amenityrich communities that have experienced growth (such as those in parts of California, Colorado and Montana), the influx of relatively well-off new residents is leading to an increase in housing prices,7 which both benefits and challenges long-time residents.

**Small towns and rural places can be laboratories for change:** While most small communities also have small operating budgets that can't accommodate big projects, there are often other resources to tap, such as a deep well of civic involvement among residents.

Because there are typically fewer bureaucratic hurdles, weaving age-friendly considerations into broader local objectives is possible. There may also be more opportunities for innovation and efficient decision-making. Communities that have a strong sense of independence and resourcefulness can be better able to mobilize and tackle new challenges.

As a participant at the AARP Rural Livability Workshop observed, "There's a greater sense of permission in rural areas to try things." Another said, "Innovation really does exist in small towns and rural communities. Planning doesn't have to take years. We can just do it!" ■



#### Why small towns and rural communities are great places to live:

- "My neighbors aren't on top of me, but we're still very much a community."
- "Main Street and the town center are real places, not just the name of a shopping center."
- "We never sit in traffic."
- "I don't have to lock my door."
- "I'm surrounded by nature trees, flowers, wildlife, fresh air, bright stars at night."
- "Neighbors are available to help when help is needed and wanted. However, neighbors also know to stay out when help isn't wanted. We respect the right to privacy here."
- "If someone comes on hard times, the community helps. It may be a neighbor giving a ride to someone who can't drive or mowing the grass for a person who can no longer do it themselves. When something really bad happens, like a home fire or large medical bills, we raise funds. We may throw a bean supper or put a donation jar out. There are lots of ways we help each other."
- "In a rural community, you feel needed." We depend on volunteers to run our town, keep the library open and do a host of other important things."
- "My cats can go outside. My dog doesn't need a leash. My chickens can free-range."
- "Hills and hiking trails are my fitness center."

### [boo-muh-rang] noun An individual, who either grew up in WARK Maine or spent some time here, but left the state for whatever reason only to return to Live + Work in Maine. Make the move back: LiveWorkMaine.com/boomerang

▲ Signage at the airport in Portland, Maine

#### Advice from local leaders and advocates in small towns and rural communities:

- "It's a mistake to assume that a town is dying just because it has fewer residents than in the past. That diminishes all of the positive things going on every day and leads communities to invest energy and resources into attracting new businesses or residents rather than paying attention to the people who are already there."
- "Pursuing livability work doesn't mean a community isn't currently livable."
- "Outsiders wanting to help a community need to work with residents. People won't respond if there isn't a trusted local link."
- "We need to frame livability differently in rural areas. It's often seen as strictly an urban concern."
- "People take pride in the place they live, so we need to work with that. You won't get anywhere starting with the assumption that something is wrong or missing in their town."
- "Go in with questions rather than answers, and be prepared to listen."



"Some of the most talented and resourceful people I know live in rural communities and in communities that are underserved or forgotten. We often have what we need to make places great. We just need the invitation and the knowledge and spark to do it."

- Andrew Howard, placemaking specialist and co-founder, Team Better Block\*
- \* See page 50 to learn about several of the organizations that appear in this report.

# GETTY IMAGES | ISTOCK

### What Is a Rural Community?

The answer varies, depending on who — or what — is being asked



▲ With nearly 900 farms, more than 70 percent of the land in Champaign County, Ohio, is used to grow crops.

hat's perceived as being a rural or remote community can differ greatly by region. People living in the remote Mountain West might not consider the small towns of coastal Maine to be particularly rural. Life in the rural Midwest isn't like life in the rural South or most anywhere in rural or frontier Alaska.

So what qualifies a community as rural?

The **U.S. Department of Agriculture** attempts to answer in an article titled "What is Rural?"<sup>1</sup>

"The existence of multiple rural definitions reflects the reality that rural and urban are multidimensional concepts. Sometimes population density is the defining concern, in other cases it is geographic isolation. Small population size typically characterizes a rural place, but how small is rural? Population thresholds used to differentiate rural and urban communities range from 2,500 up to 50,000, depending on the definition."

The definition used by the **U.S. Office of Management and Budget** is based on counties.

"Metropolitan" regions include a core county with at least one densely populated urban area of 50,000 or more people, plus surrounding counties where at least 25 percent of residents work in the core county. "Micropolitan" regions include a core county with at least one urban area that has a population of 10,000 to 49,000. All other areas are classified as "noncore." (Some but not all noncore areas are rural.)<sup>2</sup>

The **U.S. Census Bureau** defines rural as "all population, housing, and territory not included within an urbanized area or urban cluster. As a result, the rural portion of the United States encompasses a wide variety of settlements, from

densely settled small towns and 'large-lot' housing subdivisions on the fringes of urban areas, to more sparsely populated and remote areas."

(In fact, most rural communities are clustered in the vicinity of urban areas, which has historically been the case "as rural populations resided on farms producing food and other goods for nearby urban centers or resided in small market and mill towns serving the needs of both surrounding rural populations as well as residents of nearby cities.")<sup>4</sup>

Additional definitions come out of other federal and state offices, the variations often based on the work being done or why the question is being asked. One way to achieve some location specific clarity is to use the **Am I Rural?** tool. Provided by the Rural Health Information Hub, the interactive web page can be accessed at *RuralHealthInfo.org/am-i-rural*.



▲ Since many rural areas no longer have a local post office, the presence of one is essentially a confirmation that a community exists. Located in the Florida Everglades, the nation's smallest post office (Ochopee 34141) serves about 300 residents.

#### THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

Yes, it still exists!

#### According to the **National Center** for Frontier Communities.

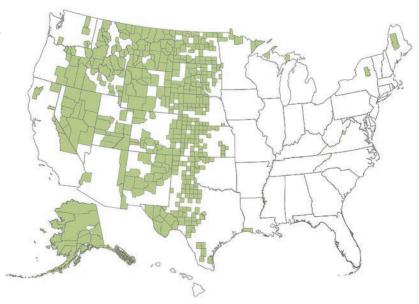
"Frontier America consists of sparsely populated areas that are geographically isolated from population centers and services.

"Frontier, like rural, suburban, or urban, is a term intended to categorize a portion of the population continuum. Frontier refers to the most remote end of that continuum (in some states the wilderness designation is considered most remote)."1

"Unfortunately, there is not a single universally-accepted definition of frontier," notes the Rural Health **Information Hub.** "Definitions of frontier used for state and federal programs vary, depending on the purpose of the project being researched or funded.

"While frontier is often defined as counties having a population density of six or fewer people per square mile, this simple definition does not take into account other important factors that may isolate a community.

"Therefore, preferred definitions are more complex and address isolation by considering distance in miles and travel time in minutes to services."2 ■



▲ Frontier counties (marked in green) are often defined as having a population density of fewer than six people per square mile.

The **National Rural Health Association** identifies several factors to consider in classifying an area as frontier.3 The following conditions, explains the association, "may cause significant problems in access to health services, create poor economic opportunities and other conditions causing health and social disparities."

- population density
- distance from a population center or specific service
- travel time to reach a population center or service
- functional association with other places
- service or market area
- availability of paved roads
- travel inhibiting weather
- seasonal changes in access to services



"Rural is typically defined ... as 'non-metropolitan' or 'non-urban.' This doesn't tell us much. Perhaps due to this lack of precision and our nation's agrarian roots, people still commonly equate rural with agriculture, fields of corn, cows and hardscrabble farmers. This is not only inaccurate; it is wide of the mark. From vibrant college towns to communities gone bust from the flight of paper mills or coal mines, from hopping cultural tourism locales to centers of furniture, machinery and textile manufacturing, rural America is anything but simply farmland, and it is anything but uniform."

— The Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group, "Rural Development Hubs: Strengthening America's Rural Innovation Infrastructure" (November 2019)

### **Rural America Stats and Facts**

#### **People and places:**

- 97 percent of the nation's landmass is rural, but only 19.3 percent of the population (nearly 60 million people) lives there
- 64.4 percent of rural residents live east of the Mississippi River
- Only 10 percent of people in the West live in rural areas
- 46.7 percent of people living in rural areas reside in the South

#### The most rural states by population by region:

- Northeast: Maine and Vermont (with 61.6 and 61.3 percent of the population living in rural areas)
- South: West Virginia (50.9 percent)
- West: Montana (43.6 percent)
- Midwest: South Dakota (42.9 percent)

### As of the 2010 Census, there were 3,143 counties in the United States and a total population of 308.7 million:

- 704 completely rural counties accounted for 5.4 million people
- 1,185 mostly rural counties accounted for 36.8 million people
- 1,254 mostly urban counties accounted for 266.6 million people

#### **Poverty in rural America:**

- Of the nation's 353 "persistently poor" counties,
   301 or 85.3 percent are in nonmetro or rural areas.
- The most severe poverty is found in historically poor areas of the Southeast, including the Mississippi Delta and Appalachia, as well as on Native American lands.
- The 2019 poverty threshold was \$13,300 for an individual living alone under age 65 and \$12,261 for a single head of household 65 or older.
- 16.4 percent of rural residents live at or below the poverty line. Of those individuals, 32.0 percent are Black/African-American, 31.0 percent are American Indian/Alaska Native, 24.5 percent are Hispanic and 14.2 percent are White.
- Among the rural poor, 10.1 percent are age 65 or older.

### **POPULATION AGE 65+** AND 'LEVEL OF RURALITY' Mostly urban counties • Population is less than 50.0 percent rural Median county percent 65 years or older is 15.1 percent **Mostly rural counties** • Population is 50.0 to 99.9 percent rural Median county percent 65 years or older is 17.8 percent **Completely rural counties** Population is 100 percent rural Median county percent 65 years or older is 20.2 percent Percent ■ 25.0 or greater 20.0 to 24.9 15 0 to 19 9 Less than 15.0

#### **RURAL COMMUNITIES AND RACE**

"Whites make up nearly 80 percent of the rural population, compared with 58 percent of the urban population. Hispanics are the fastest growing segment of the rural population but make up just 9 percent of the rural population, compared with 20 percent in urban areas. Blacks constitute 8 percent of the rural population, while American Indians are the only minority group with a higher rural than urban share (2 percent versus 0.5 percent). Relatively few Asians and Pacific Islanders (included in the "Other" category) are rural residents, with these groups accounting for only 1 and 0.1 percent of the rural population, respectively. The rest of the "Other" category (accounting for 1.8 percent of the rural population) are residents reporting multiple races.

— U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, "Rural America At A Glance" (2018)

#### Population Age 65 or Older in Rural and Urban Areas, 2002 - 2016

	(In percent)	Rural	Ut	-ban	Rural, all ages
Vermont		65.3	34	4.7	61.3
Maine		62.7	37	.3	61.5
Mississippi		54.7	45.3		50.3
West Virginia		52.5	47.5		50.9
Arkansas		50.5	49.5		43.3
Montana		19.6	50.4		43.7
South Dakota		19.4	50.6		42.8
North Dakota	46		53.5		39.5
Alabama	45.		55.0		40.7
Kentucky	44.		55.6		40.9
New Hampshire	43.3	_	56.7		39.8
Iowa	41.1		58.9		35.6
Wyoming	40.6		59.4		35.3
Oklahoma	39.8		60.2		33.3
Tennessee	39.2		60.8		33.2
North Carolina	39.2		60.8		33.2
Alaska	37.1		62.9		34.1
South Carolina	36.1		63.9		32.8 28.7
Idaho	35.7		64.3	64.3	
Wisconsin	35.1		64.9		29.8
Nebraska	35.0		65.0		26.3
Missouri	34.2		65.8		29.3
Virginia	32.7		67.3		24.1
Minnesota	32.4		67.6		26.3
Kansas	32.3		67.7		25.5
Georgia	32.3		67.7		24.3
Indiana	31.0		69.0		27.2
Michigan	29.9		70.1		25.4
Louisiana	28.9		71.1		
Oregon	26.8		73.2		18.5
New Mexico	25.6		74.4		22.1
Ohio	23.5		76.5		21.9
Pennsylvania	23.5		76.5		21.1
UNITED STATES	22.9		77.1		18.9
Texas	21.5		78.5		15.2
Washington	20.6		79.4		15.5
Delaware	20.6		79.4		17.3
Colorado	18.6		81.4		13.7
Maryland	15.8		84.2		12.6
Illinois	14.7		85.3		11.3
New York	14.2		85.8		11.9
Arizona	13.1		86.9		10.2
Utah	13.1		86.9		9.5
Connecticut	13.0		87.0		11.9
Rhode Island	9.9		90.1		9.2
Florida	9.3		90.7		8.7
Massachusetts	9.1		90.9		8.0
Hawaii	8.8		91.2		7.5
Nevada	8.2		91.8		5.7
California	7.1		92.9		4.9
New Jersey	5.8		94.2		5.3
strict of Columbia			100.0		0.0

SOURCES: Rural America Stats and Facts (see page 51) | Population Age 65+ and 'Level of Rurality': U.S. Census Bureau. Smith, A.S. and Trevelyan, E (September 2019). The Older Population in Rural America. Page 17. Retrieved from: https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2019/acs/acs-41.pdf. | Rural Communities and Race: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (November 2018) Economic Information Bulletin 2000. Retrieved from: https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=90555 | Population Age 65 or Older in Rural and Urban Areas, 2002-2016: U.S. Census Bureau. Smith, A.S. and Trevelyan, E (September 2019). The Older Population in Rural America. Page 5. Retrieved from: https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2019/acs/acs-41.pdf

# **Community Connections**

It's important for local leaders to be connected to the community and for community members to connect with one another

he topics in this publication focus on placebased service and infrastructure needs. They apply to people of all ages and include suitable housing, safe streets, community services and the proximity of retail areas.

Of course, those features alone don't make a place a community. A key ingredient — perhaps *the* key ingredient — is the ability and desire of residents to be involved in the community and with one another.

Local government, businesses, organizations and individuals all play a role in cultivating an age-friendly community, one where younger and older people can live, play, work or volunteer. When towns are small and remote, having opportunities to interact with fellow residents is especially important.

But connecting with neighbors, being with family and friends, and simply seeing and speaking to other people on a regular basis is becoming more difficult in many rural places.

A lack of jobs and other income opportunities lead many working-age adults to leave their hometown. Aside from the transportation and internet-access challenges common in rural communities (and discussed later in these pages), the shuttering of local businesses and Main Street shops due to economic stagnation and competition from retail malls, big box stores, chain eateries and online shopping mean there are fewer places to actually go. It's little wonder that people who live in rural areas have a higher risk for social isolation than their urban peers.

Most adults want to be independent and self-sufficient. However, even people who value their autonomy need social connections. AARP research reveals that three in 10 adults age 45 or older in rural areas lack companionship, feel left out and consider themselves to be too isolated.<sup>1</sup>

Loneliness has serious health consequences. A 2015 study by Brigham Young University found that social isolation, living alone and loneliness each have a negative effect on longevity that is the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day or consuming six alcoholic drinks a day. (In fact, the lack of social connections, the study found, is worse than the impact of inactivity or obesity).<sup>2</sup>

According to survey results published in May 2019 by National Public Radio, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, one in five rural residents age 18 or older say they always or often feel isolated or lonely.<sup>3</sup> Those feelings are often compounded by poverty and, for many frail older residents, illness or disability.

Some simple but effective interventions do exist. For instance, the Carrier Alert program, a joint effort of the U.S. Postal Service and the National Association of Letter Carriers, enlists mail carriers to keep an eye on the well-being of older and disabled residents along their delivery routes.

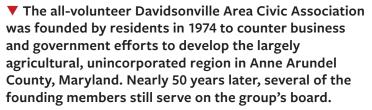
In Burnham-on-Sea, a small town in southwest England, the police department created "chat benches." Signs on the benches read, "The 'Happy to Chat' Bench: Sit Here if You Don't Mind Someone Stopping to Say Hello." <sup>4</sup>

Although the opioid epidemic is present in all types of communities, it has wreaked particular havoc in already underresourced rural households. When adults with minor children become addicted or die by overdose, their parents, grandparents or other relatives often become the children's caregivers.

In 2017, 28 percent of custodial grandparents in the United States were living in rural areas. Even though the majority of parenting grandparents live in urban centers, the concentration of grandfamilies is higher in rural America, where 6.5 percent of grandparents are responsible for one or more grandchildren under the age of 18, compared with 4.2 percent of grandparents in urban areas.

Complex family dynamics, coupled with a lack of services (e.g., support groups, back-up care options, transportation), mean that most parenting

Nestled in the mountains of Southern Vermont, Grafton describes itself as "a vibrant community, still holding the traditional Town Meeting with participation from a wonderfully diverse population of 600 people."











**▲▲** When distances are great, interactions with neighbors can amount to little more than waving at one another from a passing car. Volunteering is a way people can connect or stay connected with the community they live in. Volunteer-led AARP chapters enable residents to participate in good works, meet new people and — like chapter members from Prentiss, Mississippi (left), and Bessemer-West Jefferson County, Alabama (above) — enjoy good food.

grandparents don't get the support they need. As a result, these adults are at a higher risk for social isolation, depression and poor physical health than their noncustodial grandparenting peers.7

Changed attitudes about age and aging are needed. Age in and of itself doesn't define an individual's role and responsibilities. After all, many people age 65-plus are still in the workforce. Many are primary caregivers for small children or adult loved ones.

In a livable community, local leaders recognize the realities of its residents, provide supports and encourage people to participate in the full range of local activities, regardless of their age. ■

#### **FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES: Community Connections**

#### **EXPERIENCE MATTERS**

AGE to age, an initiative of the Northland Foundation, fosters intergenerational connections in northeastern Minnesota, where it operates in seven rural counties and three tribal nations.

Although the region makes up 25 percent of the state's landmass and is home to 327,000 people, there are "a lot of lakes and trees between all those people," Lynn Haglin, the foundation's vice president, explains.

When Northland assessed community needs, the top one was the need for greater civic engagement. The second — a surprise, Haglin said — concerned the area's children. As one resident put it, "We want children in our community to know we care about them, we recognize them, and we really hope that when they have gone off to college and figured out what they want to do in life, that they will make their way back to the community if possible."

Each AGE to age program differs in the work it takes on, but each provides a multigenerational approach to community building through social and community engagement. Reading Pals matches older people with elementary school students. Other projects pair teens with older people to create public art or to plant and care for community gardens, which then support local food pantries.

Within the tribal nations in Minnesota, AGE to age programs have focused on Native American culture and traditions, such as blanket making, rice harvesting, beading and learning to speak Ojibwe.

A bonus for many participants is the development of supportive relationships that continue beyond the project work.

"There are many lonely children these days two parents are working or maybe it's a singleparent household," said Haglin. "We have a lot of poverty in our area. Some kids may be surrounded by children in school, but they don't belong to a group or have connections. The older adults are providing that for the kids, especially for young people who do not participate in sports. There's very little in small, rural communities for youth who have other interests."

For the older adults, participating in AGE to age means fewer days spent alone and, many say, a renewed sense of purpose.



"Connecting kids with an older adult is a way to give them the support of a mentor and a chance to feel like a valued member of the community."

- Lynn Haglin, vice president, Northland Foundation, and director, KIDS PLUS, a project that includes the intergenerational initiative AGE to age





**Olathe, Kansas**, is a mid-sized city (population 137,000) but its Operation Lifeline program can easily be replicated by communities of any size or just among neighbors.

Since 1979, the Olathe Police Department has arranged for volunteers (some shown above) to make daily telephone calls to older people who live alone. If there's no answer, a police officer is dispatched to ensure that all is well.

The program is free and "truly does save lives," Mayor Mike Copeland told AARP in 2018. "We've assisted people who have fallen during the night and were discovered when they couldn't answer the volunteer's call."

Even when the person does pick up the phone, there have been times, said Copeland, when a caller sensed something just wasn't right. In those cases, the volunteers reached out to family members who were able to help.

#### PRESERVING THE PAST

After a long-time resident of Old Orchard Beach, Maine, donated several dozen old photographs of the town to the Harmon Museum, the local age-friendly initiative, OOB Community Friendly Connection, wanted to include the images in an exhibition.

However, as is true of many communities and even individual households, no one was familiar with the faces in the newly recovered photos or the stories behind the images.

The failed attempts to identify older residents who might be familiar with the pictured people and places inspired the age-friendly team, along with local educators Joanne Dowd and Casey Rossignol, to launch a historical research project. The work would be led by local sixth-graders.

The students divided themselves into photographers, interviewers and hospitality hosts. Longtime residents were invited to the school to share their recollections about earlier days in Old Orchard Beach.

The researchers' methods were very simple — the camera crew placed iPads on music stands and the interviewers asked questions — but the results were not. "The kids blew us away!" said Rossignol. The students were surprised as well.

"I felt more in tune with my community after meeting people who had lived in my town their entire life," said a student named Izzy. "I became more interested in the history of my town, and I'm not one for history."

Chloe, a classmate, was similarly moved.

"I interviewed a lady name Velma Williams," explained Chloe. "She had an interracial relationship with Emerson Cummings, a town council member and math teacher in the high school. When they were dating, people would stare at them. And she would stare back. She told me she really loved him. When some people came to play music on the pier, Emerson and his mom, Rose, gave them a place to stay and would feed them because black musicians weren't allowed to stay in the hotels."

By encouraging people of very different ages to sit together, talk and listen, the community's past became part of its present and future.

Find another Old Orchard Beach article on page 38.



"Older adults residing in small towns and rural communities may be especially vulnerable to the dangers of isolated living, but these individuals and their communities, with modest levels of support, can be mobilized to take action against this threat to well-being in later life."

— Lenard W. Kaye, director, University of Maine Center on Aging, Bangor Daily News, April 25, 2017

- "In some communities, it can be hard to bring neighbors together and to create opportunities for the generations to meet and work collaboratively."
- "If you live in a small town that is very widespread, with not many people, and you have a lot of older people who don't use the internet and your phone system is not always reliable, it's hard to get people to know where they are and where you are and how to ask for help or how to join together in any kind of social engagement."
- "Compared to living in a city or a suburb, there aren't a lot of supports and services in rural areas for new parents. And there's really nothing for the people who are raising their grandchildren or great-grandchildren."
- "When I was a new mom, I lived in a small town where older women ran a program that provided local mothers with two hours of free child care at a church nursery school. The older-lady volunteers got to cuddle and care for babies and toddlers and the mothers got a short but needed break. Helpful, intergenerational programs like that can be created in all kinds of communities."

#### FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES: Community Connections

#### **ACTING OUT**

Although Broadway shines the brightest spotlight, theatrical productions are staged throughout the country. In fact, in many towns, a high school musical or a concert by the town choir is a big social event.

In a growing number of communities, theater is also being used to educate audiences about local issues and societal concerns, including those specific to the lives of older adults.

The Stagebridge theater company regularly travels to schools and community centers in nearby rural towns and regions from its homebase in Oakland, California. Founded in 1978, the company seeks to "enrich the lives of older adults and their communities through the performing arts."

The productions address a variety of agingrelated realities, including depression, downsizing and caregiving. Many of the scripts are original and tailored to the audience. (Was There Light Before TV?, for instance, is performed for schoolchildren.) Discussions with the audience follow each show.

A secret to the success of this type of theater is its flexibility. Some performers read their lines while others rely on improvisation. Some of the troupes include actors who have dementia or use assistive devices to move around.

What the productions have in common is that they present older people as active, engaged, vital contributors to the community.

In Somerset County, Maine, the Resiliency in Action Interactive Improvisational Theater (an affiliate of the Marti Stevens Interactive Improvisational Theater) pulls residents of all ages into tough, often emotional conversations — on purpose.

In the Somerset productions, acting troupes of two to four people perform short dramatizations, of usually less than five minutes, that abruptly end when the characters reach a moment of crisis.

A moderator then turns to the audience and invites them to ask questions and make suggestions to the still-in-character actors, all of whom are volunteers and many of whom work in public health, education or community advocacy.

Interactive improvisational theater is a way of strategizing solutions to everyday problems. It delves into elder abuse, grandparents' raising grandchildren, hunger, bullying, and school shootings, among other realities. The scenarios inspire discussions about how the community can be more supportive,



▲ Something is always happening at the historic Lincoln Theater (circa 1875) in Damariscotta, Maine. The venue presents plays, hosts lectures, screens feature films and broadcasts live performances from stages throughout the world.

especially of the most vulnerable. The performances help people see themselves in others.

In fact, the scenarios are often so realistic that audience members cry, get angry and, at times, argue with the characters. At the end of the gatherings, the actors step out of their roles and introduce themselves to ensure that audiences understand they aren't really, for instance, a fraudster trying to swindle an elderly neighbor.

Employers, organizations and governments seek out the troupes for trainings, interventions and group-learning activities.

As described on the Marti Stevens website, the method provides "learning without lectures, blackboards, experts, flip charts, pencils, or workbooks. It encourages cooperation, critical thinking, respect for others, and taking healthy risks to express oneself in front of peers." ■

#### **HEAVY LIFTING**

Recruiting teenagers for service projects can be tough. Due to school, homework, sports and jobs, young people have limited free time. In rural areas, which often have a disproportionately small youth population — one served by regional rather than local schools — many young people spend a lot of time simply commuting to and from school.

To ensure that young residents are involved in its livability efforts, the age-friendly committee in Cumberland, Maine, includes a high school student on its leadership council.

Teen involvement is also a priority for the town's semiannual Big Project Day, when residents help older neighbors with household projects they can't handle by themselves. Examples include gardening, repair work, and the installation or storage of window air-conditioning units.

"Relationships now exist as a result of these projects between seniors and our younger folks," said Teri Maloney-Kelly, the event's coordinator. "There are families that didn't realize they had a neighbor around the corner who needed help until they did a project like this." ■



▲ A young volunteer shovels snow off a carport roof as part of Aging in Place Cumberland's efforts to keep the community's older residents safe.

#### **TAKEAWAYS**

- Big city solutions such as a chat bench, acting troupes of older people or a daily check-in call — can, with a little creativity, be replicated in small towns and villages.
- People of all ages and life stages who want to be involved in the community often lack a means of doing so. Empowering them requires tearing down barriers, such as a lack of transportation, and developing programs that fit the community and build connections.
- When seeking volunteers, develop a task (or "ask") that is tailored to potential candidates' interests, needs and availability.
- Activities that build on what people enjoy or need can engage residents who aren't involved in other aspects of community life.
- When addressed in nonconfrontational or non-embarrassing ways, difficult conversations about community issues — such as senior hunger, elder abuse or the impact of drug addiction on families — can take place and lead to solutions.
- It may take a little imagination to bring people of different ages together in a community, but it can be done when they share a common interest and when members of each age group can feel they're making a meaningful contribution. Working together in a community garden or recording the stories of older people are two activities that bring groups together on the basis of a common interest and give residents of all ages a sense of purpose.
- Young people care about their communities. When they're more involved in making decisions about projects designed to improve livability, they'll be more engaged in the projects and more interested in volunteering.
- The best way to find an effective program for a community is to seek the input of its residents.

# Outdoor Spaces and Public Places

Just because someone has a yard or acres upon acres of land doesn't mean they have no need for parks and community gathering spots

ocal parks and public spaces can help build a sense of place and social belonging, and this is true whether the community is suburban, urban or rural. However, the ways parks and public spaces are designed, maintained, programmed and funded don't always meet the needs of the people the places were meant to serve.

A rural community's identity, tax base and municipal priorities are affected when the population grows or shrinks or when the community experiences changes in its economic base. As a result, the local government's ability to fund basic services — such as education, infrastructure and public safety — is put to the test. Pinched for funds, there might not be room in the budget for investing in parks and other vital public places.

The disapearance of Main Street businesses and the increase of empty storefronts reduce foot traffic to once-thriving downtowns. With fewer visitors and a decline in the tax base, it may not be feasible for a small city or town to invest in the amenities and activities that can enhance its center.

The consequences of such declines undermine the health of both people and places.

As the National Main Street Center declares: "Downtowns are the heart of our communities" and "a community is only as strong as its core."

Time outdoors, either in one's own yard or a public place, helps people be more active; reduces obesity; and improves blood pressure, bone density and cardiorespiratory fitness. Access to natural areas help people manage feelings of stress, anger and aggression; lessens social isolation; and improves coping abilities and cognitive function.

For children, time spent in quality outdoor spaces can enhance creativity and problem-solving, reduce hyperactivity, and improve focus and behavior.<sup>3</sup>

Green spaces and trees play a vital role in overall ecosystem health by absorbing stormwater runoff and pollutants. Great parks and public spaces also build community pride, enhance local economies, increase civic engagement and bring people together — for fairs and festivals, flea markets, cookouts, family reunions and other events and activities.

Small local parks are as important as large, regional, state or national parks.

In fact, the Trust for Public Land believes that all Americans should have a park or green space within a 10-minute walk of their home. While access to natural places takes on a different meaning in urban as opposed to rural settings, the point is that all people should be able to easily access a safe, outdoor, natural space.

And people really do need places to go to.

As sociologist Ray Oldenburg writes in *The Great Place*, in addition to home and work, people need "a third place," which he defines as a destination where a person can "relax in public ... encounter familiar faces and make new acquaintances."

Andrew Howard, co-founder of the placemaking and urban design firm Team Better Block, observes that, "the typical place in need of our team's help are old Main Streets, places that used to be active but are now essentially dead. We always ask, 'What did this place used to be like?' Then we work to make it like that again. Our goal is to reclaim cities and communities for the public good, one block at a time."

Such places and spaces need to be engaging, safe and accessible — the latter meaning that in addition to being navigable for people with disabilities, the larger population needs to be able to get to the location. And once they're there, programming (e.g., exercise classes, ranger-led hikes, special events) is essential to keep them coming back.

An often overlooked outcome is that spaces and places need to be suitable for users of vastly different ages and life stages. As livability expert Gil Penalosa, founder of 8 80 Cities, explains in what has become his mantra: "If everything we do in our public spaces is great for an 8-year-old and an 80-year-old, then it will be great for people of all ages."



▲ Located near Denali National Park, Talkeetna, Alaska, is a very remote, very small (population 875), very welcoming community with an active Main Street that's listed on the register of National Historic Places.

▼ A waterfront park and Little Free Library box is a popular spot in Eastport, Maine, the easternmost community in the United States.





- Combining funds from an **AARP Community Challenge** grant (see page 49) with the talents of local artists and volunteers, the Black **Belt Treasures Cultural Arts** Center created mosaic benches for Camden, Alabama's historic downtown. "We hope that as people shop, walk and do business in town, they'll stop and rest and learn a little bit more about our community, our history, our culture," said a center director.
- ◀ The Tolani Lake community in the Navajo Nation is located in a barren, sparsely populated region of northeastern Arizona. The closest shopping is an hour away. Schools and medical services are even farther.

#### FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES: Outdoor Spaces and Public Places

#### **REINVENTION AND REPAIR**

Outdoor public places needn't close due to the cold. In 2015, community leaders in **Anchorage**, **Alaska**, voted to turn a former greenhouse property that was in disrepair into a much-needed 12-acre recreation area and green space in the city's east end.

The Muldoon Town Square Park is usable yearround, with a playground, picnic shelter and running track. In the winter, the track becomes an ice skating rink. A small or rural community in a cold climate can replicate and even improve upon the idea.

In a similarly cold and snowy community hundreds of miles to the southeast, the senior center on the **Blackfeet Reservation** in **Montana** is well-run and well-used, but has very limited outdoor space.

Located across from boarded-up houses, the center was connected to a park that had no trees or shade or protection from the wind and snow. Discarded pets turned semiwild dogs roamed freely.

When the community's elders were asked about their concerns and wishes for the senior center and park, their top priorities were safety, shelter from the wind, and a place to gather and socialize. The tribe



▲ A curvy ice skating track in Anchorage, Alaska.

used grant funding to install a secure wooden fence with decorative iron gates around the center and outdoor space. Young people put down sod and built planters according to specifications provided by the elders, who can now garden without having to stoop over or sit on the ground.

#### **BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME**

With help from AARP and the placemaking firm Team Better Block, a push for better walkability and a livelier downtown is helping transform and reinvigorate **Bethel, Vermont**.

After Tropical Storm Irene battered the town in 2013, residents organized ad hoc efforts to fix the place up. It began with a fall festival, during which the Bethel Revitalization Initiative encouraged people to imagine what they wanted for the town.

That brainstorming led to an ambitious, free "pop-up" college (dubbed Bethel University) in which residents taught lessons based on their own skills and interests. The program "helped create a sense of pride and possibility for the first time in years," said a local leader. The new energy led Bethel to look at more ambitious changes, so the town hosted the state's first "better block" project.

During an October weekend, a downtown block on Main Street received a makeover featuring street plants, crosswalk enhancements and a protected lane for cyclists and wheelchair users. Pop-up shops (some of which became permanent) opened in several of the long-vacant storefronts.





▲ By turning two
Main Street parking
spots into a temporary
parklet, the downtown
location (shown from
the sidewalk and sky)
became a popular place
for people — and a taco
booth — rather than cars.

#### **HAVE A SEAT**

A common sight in all types of communities are bus and transit stops where people are standing and waiting. They're standing because the only place to sit is on the ground.

In Jackson Hole, Wyoming, several young families, older adults and people with disabilities were living near a bus stop that consisted of a sign and nothing else but weeds and trash.

After a bench financed by an AARP Community Challenge grant (see page 49) was installed, neighbors added landscaping. One volunteered to water the plants, another said he'd remove snow from the bench in the winter. The bus stop was transformed by a small infrastructure investment and lots of public support.

To encourage pedestrian traffic in its small business district, Port Orford, Oregon, installed four benches with attached planters.

The seats gave the business district a boost and provided a needed place for shoppers to rest, people watch, talk to friends and enjoy the town. The benches were constructed by a crew from the nearby correctional facility. High school students made plaques to recognize the inmates for their work and AARP for helping to fund the building supplies

A few well-placed benches can make any destination a lot easier for people to visit.

When residents of Bangor, Maine, told a local livability committee that seating was needed outside the Cross Center, a large event venue, the advocates asked the manager to install benches in key locations. "Sure," he replied. "We have benches in storage out back."

With little effort and no cost to the advocates, the benches were supplied and installed.



In addition to being functional, seating can be an attraction, such as in the Napa Valley town of Yountville, California, where a plaza in front of the community center is sometimes set up like a living room, with furniture arranged to facilitate conversation. The space also has two pianos at which anyone can sit and tickle the ivories.



"As the nation's first cross-country multiuse trail, the Great American Rail-Trail will connect people of all ages and abilities with America's diverse landscapes and communities. Nearly 50 million people living within 50 miles of its route will be able to call this iconic American infrastructure their own as the trail delivers new access to the outdoors and new opportunities for physical activity and recreation. Hundreds of communities along the route will experience new opportunities for business development and tourism. ... Whether bridging gaps within and between communities; creating safe walking and biking access to jobs, transit, shopping and green space; or serving as recreation for cyclists, runners and casual daily explorers, this will be America's trail."5

 Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, announcing the preferred route for a 3,700-mile walk/bike trail that will stretch between Washington state and Washington, D.C.

Visit RailsToTrails.org to see the route and learn how much of it is already open for use.

#### FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES: Outdoor Spaces and Public Places

### OI) LOCAL VOICES

- "When people hear talk of parks, they
  often think of national parks or state
  parks. What we're lacking are small, local
  parks and local public places where we can
  spend a bit of time without having to plan
  for an outing that will take an entire day."
- "I wish we had a downtown, center of town. A place to go and maybe bump into people you know. We have strip malls and big box stores."
- "Being an older person stuck alone at home can be sad and lonely. But the places we have for seniors to gather are also sad and lonely."
- "Cities have their hazards and dangers, but so do rural areas. Boredom and nothing to do or place to go can lead to people using illegal drugs or drinking to excess just to pass the time."
- "We have a great library in this town.
   There are classes for people to learn to use their cell phones and iPads, book groups, and many activities. Since I had my stroke and have to use a walker, though, I can't get inside. There is no parking near the ramp, and I can't do stairs."
- "Our local grocery store has reserved special parking for people with disabilities and for seniors, new moms, and pregnant ladies. I just love seeing those signs, because it means we are all welcome."
- "The town got some grant money and invested in a wheelchair accessible trail that goes through some woods and to the lake. Eagle Scouts designed and built beautiful benches with scenes from our town history. Everyone goes there now."

#### **PARKING FOR PEOPLE**

The revitalization of downtown **Kuna, Idaho**, has been an ongoing process involving businesses fixing up storefronts and sidewalks being repaired. Street lights, benches and plantings were spruced up. Streets were repaved.

Improvements were happening — except in one key area: the Bernie Fisher parking lot, adjacent to a walk-bike trail, the Kuna Senior Center, and the business district.

Blighted, oversized, largely vacant parking lots are not hard to find in communities throughout the United States. The Kuna lot fortunately had great potential as a pedestrian-friendly public plaza.

To spark the community's imagination and hoped-for change, the city and Idaho Smart Growth hosted a Park for a Day event so residents could experience the parking lot as a pedestrian plaza. There was live music, a food vendor and sketches of how the expanse of asphalt could be transformed.

Attendee suggestions tended toward using the space for short-term, recurring events, such as an Oktoberfest or themed dance nights. ■



▲▼ An often-empty parking lot in downtown Kuna, Idaho, could be repurposed as an ice-skating rink.



#### **GET WET! HAVE FUN! TAKE A HIKE!**

Charles City, Iowa, was struggling due to vacant storefronts and plant closings. The population was shrinking. Flooding had destroyed an entire neighborhood.

But the removal of a dangerous dam along the Cedar River enabled the city to transform a section of the waterway into the state's first whitewater park. The effort excited local young people and brought needed tourism dollars to town.

In Fort Lincoln, North Dakota, the Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park has to contend with both harsh weather and limited staffing. Among the park's doable and successful event offerings are a competitive fitness hike, a nighttime "glow" hike and a multiday Halloween-themed Haunted Fort event. Visitors who participate in 12 of the park's monthly hikes earn a free one-year park pass.

In Carlsbad, New Mexico, the support of local gas and oil companies, businesses and individual donors enabled the creation of Friendship Park, a "playground for everyone" that includes equipment suitable for people with special needs.



"It's easy to say we can't build friendly environments for physical activity in rural settings because it costs too much, and we're afraid of change in rural communities, and we don't have the resources, and we may not even have the technical know-how, and we are suffering population decline.

"In fact, rural communities and small towns may be uniquely advantaged to build fully accessible environments where it's convenient and inviting and safe to get out and move under your own power. Rural communities that build inclusive environments that invite everyone to get outside and move have a higher quality of life, and the local economic energy is better."

- Mark Fenton, transportation, planning and public health consultant and adjunct associate professor, Tufts University



▲ The development of a whitewater park helped change the fortunes of Charles City, Iowa.

#### **TAKEAWAYS**

- When a local park or the downtown area offers fun, worthwhile activities, it encourages residents to engage in outdoor recreation and boosts both the local economy and the community in general.
- A property lot or small piece of land may not look like much, but it can be turned into an inviting park or other public space, even if only for a special event.
- Pop-up events are a great way to gauge public support for long-term change. Ask businesses, the local government or the community at large to supply or help create the materials and elements needed to make an event happen.
- Whether in urban or rural areas, hiking trails and park spaces can have a positive impact on real estate values, business activity and community identity.

## Housing

Rural regions have an acute need for housing that is affordable as well as accessible for residents of many ages and abilities

he housing stock in rural America is "older than that of the nation as a whole, heightening the need for, and the cost of, repairs, maintenance, and accessibility retrofits," states a report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which also notes that in 2013, 63 percent of rural homes were built before 1980.¹

In many rural communities, much of the housing stock dates back to the early 20th and even the 19th centuries. Unless a renovation has occurred, many of these homes lack a first-floor bedroom or toilet. Few older homes are wheelchair accessible.

The majority of homes in rural areas are single-family residences, which are often far too large for empty nesters and require a level of maintenance that is costly, physically demanding and time-consuming.

According to AARP research about rural home ownership, nearly two out of five properties need major modifications to accommodate residents who want to age in place.<sup>2</sup>

Modifications come with a significant price tag, but making the needed changes is often preferable, safer and more cost effective and realistic than staying in an inaccessible home or downsizing to a newer, more accessible residence.

About 80 percent of older adults in rural communities own their homes,<sup>3</sup> and among those residents nearly all own their homes free and clear.<sup>4</sup>

"But the structure isn't appropriate, the size is not appropriate," declared David Lipsetz, CEO of the Housing Assistance Council, at the AARP Rural Livability Workshop. "There is a small percentage of rental to move to. There's an enormous need for affordable, right-sized housing."

Another barrier to uprooting for more suitable housing is that the equity accumulated by older rural homeowners tends to be less than that of older homeowners in urban areas. This is because rural homes are generally less expensive. For instance, in 2017, the national median price of a rural single-family home was \$159,300 compared with \$207,800 for urban communities.<sup>5</sup>

But as in any neighborhood, housing values in

rural areas can be a boom or a bust.

Stagnant or declining values are devastating for people planning to relocate who had counted on their home as an asset. In some areas of the rural Midwest, housing prices have stagnated at 1990 levels. From 2000 to 2016, rural regions in Ohio, Indiana and Michigan saw a decrease in housing values of up to 7 percent. Such values generally benefit home buyers rather than owners.

Although increasing and very high housing prices and shortages are common in booming cities, the same situations exist in many rural places.

This often happens in picturesque areas that attract tourists and well-to-do retirees.<sup>7</sup> For instance, in Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota and South Dakota, rural home prices increased by 40 to 78 percent from 2000 to 2016.<sup>8</sup> High-income buyers compete with one another for available properties, which raises asking prices and boosts the housing market to levels that many current or returning residents can't afford.

Rapidly increasing property values make life tough for existing homeowners as well. They often find themselves asset rich but cash poor due to steep increases in real estate taxes and other costs. If they sell their home, they might not find an affordable and suitable house or apartment elsewhere in the area.

Colorado is a place where soaring housing prices, compounded by high utility costs, are creating problems for both young and older residents, neither of whom can afford to live where they already have a life.

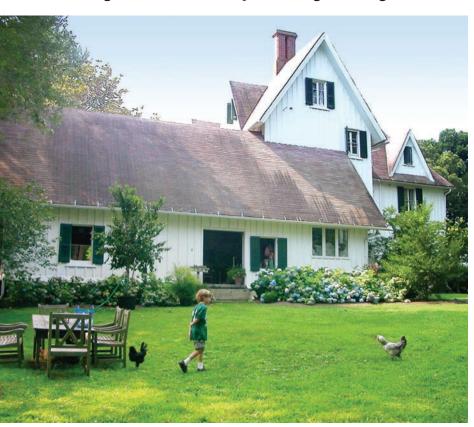
Among the other challenges: Many communities in rural America struggle with endemic, multigenerational poverty. To make ends meet, residents of various ages are often forced to move in with others, leading to overcrowding.

The nation's opioid epidemic has added both community and household hardships. When adults with young children become addicted or die, their parents often become the children's guardians. An empty nest becomes full again.

The lack of housing that's safe and affordable, and size and place appropriate, impacts people of all ages and life stages. ■



▲ Oregon's Willamette Valley is stunning. But living far from services and neighbors can be isolating.



▲ Old homes, such as this rural Maryland farmhouse built in 1850, often have a lot of stairs and are expensive to maintain.



▲▼ Among the benefits of life in a rural downtown (such as Harrodsburg, Kentucky) are walkability and (in Nelsonville, Ohio) front row seats at the parade.



#### FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES: Housing



#### MISSING MIDDLE HOUSING

Across the United States, there's a mismatch between the housing stock and what the market wants and needs. This is partly due to changing demographics, such as the rapidly aging population and shrinking household sizes.

A practical solution is something called "missing middle housing."

These types of residences (see the illustration, above) are described as missing because very few have been built since the early 1940s due to zoning constraints, financing difficulties and the shift to automobile-centric patterns of development.

Where the structures do exist, they easily go unnoticed because — and this is a good thing they blend right in. Original missing middle homes are located in walkable urban areas as well as in historic small towns and Main Street districts.

As a housing type, missing middle homes are close to amenities, mix well with other building types, never exceed the scale of a house (height,

width, depth) and can be purchased or rented. Many of the properties are designed as live-work units.

While new missing middle housing projects are becoming more common in large cities, they're also located in smaller communities, including

#### Papillion, Nebraska, and South Jordan, Utah.

"Missing middle housing types are a great way to deliver affordable housing choices by design since they're of a scale that most communities would support," explains Daniel Parolek, founder of Opticos Design and the architect who coined the term "missing middle."

The concept can also broaden housing discussions, including with people or groups that bristle at words like "density" or "multifamily." Conversations can develop around a question such as "Where will downsizing empty nesters live when they need to be in a less car-dependent home, but want to remain in or near their community?"

One answer is missing middle housing.



- "We have people who've lived in a home their family has owned for generations, and when it comes time to turn over the keys, it's very difficult. Once people are in the smaller places, they are usually happier. But the transition of leaving their house, of getting rid of their possessions and downsizing, is emotional and physically difficult and even dangerous when they're older and they try to make repairs or do the packing and moving themselves."
- "Aging in place isn't a viable option for people who can't afford to maintain or retrofit a home. Finding affordable, comfortable, high-quality housing is especially challenging in rural areas."
- "We think of roommate housing as being only for college students or young people. But there's no reason why older people shouldn't be sharing a large home. Doing so provides everyone involved with companionship, help when needed and a more affordable way to live."

#### **FIND AND SEEK**

Rural residents sometimes have problems accessing emergency services. Conversely, first responders can experience problems finding and reaching rural residents.

Common reasons for the latter include a home being difficult to find due to hidden or missing house numbers, the home being inaccessible because a driveway is too narrow or is covered with snow or overgrown with vegetation, or the road to the home is poorly maintained.

To address the first issue, the Georgetown for All Ages Committee in Georgetown, Maine, helped create, distribute

▲ Reflective house-numbers help both residents and first responders.

and install large, reflective house numbers that can be clearly seen from the road at each of the town's 500 homes. The service was free.

In **Davidsonville**, **Maryland**, the Boy Scouts raised funds for their troop by creating and selling, for \$5 each, reflective house-number signs (pictured). In **Phippsburg, Maine**, the town asks residents to ensure that their driveways are wide enough and that trees are kept trimmed so fire trucks will have full access to all homes.

#### **BOARDING SCHOOL**

Gowanda, New York, needed affordable housing for its older residents. An old school building stood vacant until it was converted into 32 apartments for low-income adults age 62 or older. The building also contains a medical office, an adult daycare facility, a food pantry and counseling services.

The town of Hallowell, Maine (population 2,400), is home to more older adults than school-age children.9 In 2016, after years on the market, the Maine Industrial School for Girls, a 19th century institution for "wayward" young women, was converted into Stevens Commons, a 55-acre mixed-use campus with affordable rental apartments for people 55 or older.

Forgiveable loans from the Community Development Block Grant program and the nonprofit Community Housing of Maine funded the housing for older residents. ■



"Some native elders are living in the home they've lived in for decades. A lot of those homes are intergenerational, and they're crowded because they have kids and grandkids in the home. That can deteriorate the homes. A lot of our tribal housing programs' main job is maintaining housing stock. But the tribes are also in a unique position. Because of the housing shortage, every time they build a new unit, it's something they can really consider and tailor to the particular individuals they're trying to serve."

— Tony Walters, Executive Director **National American Indian Housing Council** 



"Many homes here [in Ogallala, Nebraska] were built for a far different time, before mechanization, when you needed big families to work the farms. Most are outdated. The few that are on the market ... often need thousands of dollars' worth of upgrades. Most people can't — or aren't willing to — pay that."

— "Rural America Faces a Crisis in 'Adequate Housing," Weekend Edition, National Public Radio, August 11, 2018

#### FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES: Housing

#### **COMFORTABLY HOME**

To help older residents maintain their homes, nonprofits in many communities organize volunteers who assist with simple chores, weatherization and routine maintenance.

In rural **Putnam County, Ohio**, for example, a local men's organization partners with the national nonprofit Habitat for Humanity to replace roofs, repair siding, install stair railings and grab bars, and even add plumbing to equip homes with running water.

The Honey Do Crew does the same for low-income adults in **Kanawha County, West Virginia**.

In **Trappe, Maryland**, AARP Foundation partnered with Habitat for Humanity to host workshops that provide home maintenance tips and teach older homeowners how to perform simple repairs.

In many places, state and local housing authorities are also helping to make homes safer and more comfortable for older residents. In 2017, **Maine**'s state housing authority launched a repair program to assist older people who want to remain in their homes but can't afford the needed repairs and modifications. Participants receive an in-home assessment to identify low-cost, high-impact changes that can make their home safer.

The renovations are paid for by the state and are performed by a housing agency employee who is also a certified aging-in-place specialist. The most common modifications: installing bathroom grab bars, adding insulation, and making it easier and safer to enter and exit the home.

During the program's first two years, the average cost of materials per home was \$1,578. In that same timeframe, the program reduced the rate of in-home falls by 79 percent and decreased the number of hospital visits, including trips to the emergency room, by 61 percent.<sup>10</sup>



Home repair volunteers in West Virginia.



▲ A volunteer driver for the VegiCare program.

#### **IT TAKES A VILLAGE**

The Village to Village Network is a national umbrella organization that supports nonprofit, community-based, volunteer- and neighbor-run aging-in-place arrangements called Villages.

Where the programs exist, residents typically pay dues to their local Village, which then connects them with services, activities, and support from volunteers and vetted vendors.

The first Village was established by neighbors in Boston's Beacon Hill. In rural areas, a Village program might serve several small towns.

CommunityCare of Lyme, the Village affiliate in **Lyme**, **New Hampshire**, doesn't charge membership fees and its services are available to all residents, regardless of age.

The organization's mission is to "build on Lyme's heritage as a warm, welcoming and service-oriented community by building partnerships, embracing new ideas and designing systems that improve our individual and collective sense of well-being."

A men's group, called Those Guys, provides transportation services and performs minor household tasks and seasonal chores.

Farmers donate vegetables to the VegiCare program, which distributes produce to households in need. The SouperCare program delivers homemade soup to people who are ill, going through a life transition (such as a new baby or the death of a family member) or have a disability that makes it difficult to prepare their own meals.

#### SENIOR-SAFE SMOKE ALARMS

Fire prevention and detection is especially important in rural areas, where most residents get water from private wells on their property. Fire hydrants — which exist only where there's a piped, municipal water supply — are rarely available.

Firefighters either transport water to the site in tanker trucks or extract it from nearby lakes, ponds or swimming pools. Since most rural areas depend on volunteer firefighters, the response time may be slower, too, despite the level of devotion. (See page 44 for more about firefighting.).

As part of the Senior Safe Program in Casper, Wyoming, Rotary volunteers and Casper College fire science students work with the fire department to install smoke detectors, carbon monoxide alarms, night-lights and LED bulbs, which last longer, shine brighter and use less electricity than traditional incandescent bulbs.

Thanks to funding from local organizations, including AARP Wyoming, there is no cost to homeowners. Between 2014 and 2019, 60 volunteers installed more than 2,000 smoke detectors and carbon monoxide alarms in 300 homes.



The Fire Rescue squad in North Yarmouth, Maine, installed key safes on or near the entry doors of homes with older residents who live alone. The town's first responders are the only people who can open the lockbox that contains the key. A tracking system records when each box is opened and by whom.

#### **ROOMS AND MORE FOR RENT**

Since the Mount Washington Valley in New **Hampshire** attracts tourists year-round, real estate prices are high. By matching older homeowners who have an extra bedroom with home seekers, the HomeShare MWV program enables older residents to generate income from rent and not live alone.

To expand housing options statewide, the New Hampshire legislature legalized the creation of accessory dwelling units (or ADUs), which are secondary residences attached to a single-family home or built on the same property lot. ■

#### **TAKEAWAYS**

- Many older residents want to remain in their small town or rural community, but a lack of aging-suitable and "right-sized" housing options limit their ability to do so.
- Solutions needn't always be implemented by government officials. Neighbors, even distant ones, can check on one another.
- Neighbors can also provide services to one another (e.g., raking leaves, plowing snow), meet for meals, share equipment, offer rides and do errands together.
- Local governments can convert unused schools or other town-owned buildings into smaller, more centrally located housing for older people who need to downsize or for younger residents seeking a starter home.
- Rural communities need to "find" or create their missing middle housing — and introduce the concept of cohousing and home-sharing as residential options.
- Accessory dwelling units can help address housing shortages, enable family members to live near one another and allow homeowners to earn rental income. (See page 49 for how to learn more.)
- The presence of housing choices that are affordable and appropriate for individuals and families at different life stages enables people of all ages to thrive in a community.

## **Transportation**

It can be difficult if not impossible for nondrivers in rural areas to get where they need or want to go

very rural place has a transportation issue and may not even know it," declared John Robert Smith, chair of Transportation for America and a former mayor of **Meridian**, **Mississippi** (see more on page 30), at the AARP Rural Livability Workshop.

"Transportation affects the creation of jobs and whether people stay in the community," said Smith. "It affects whether young people can take classes at the community college. Whether Grandma can get to her critical oncology appointment. Whether workers can get home from the third shift at the plant."

In survey after survey, transportation is a top concern for people who want to age in place. According to AARP research, nine out 10 adults in rural areas drive to get around in their community.<sup>1</sup>

Why? In most rural places, living without a car can mean living an isolated, dependent and disempowered life. There are solutions — and numerous challenges for implementing them.

Transportation funding at every level of government is tightening.

Barriers, bureaucracies and an inability to coordinate between local, regional, state and federal jurisdictions leads to a disconnected transportation network with mixed priorities and vast limitations.

There is further dysfunction among the different types of providers: public, private, organization-based and volunteer-operated.

To manage through the cost-cutting and chaos, and then better coordinate services, the Age-Friendly Berkshires team in **Massachusetts** invited all transportation providers in the region to meet and collaborate. A direct result was *The Berkshire County Transportation Guide*, which is updated biannually.

The Transportation Management Association advocates for funding and programs to help people connect to the "last mile (or seven miles in the most rural areas)" between public transportation and their home. In 2019, the association partnered with the Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicles, AARP Massachusetts and Dementia Friendly

Massachusetts to offer AARP Smart Driver classes and CarFit workshops. (See page 49 for information about the AARP Driver Safety program.)

Some seemingly small barriers to making transportation more accessible are still significant.

For instance, many houses of worship have a vehicle that sits idle in a mostly empty parking lot for much of the week, used only on certain days to shuttle nondriving worshipers.

While the same vehicle could take people to the grocery store and medical appointments, providing that kind of service involves spending more on fuel and insurance — and requires a driver. Sometimes, finding a driver is the most difficult part.

During the AARP Rural Livability Workshop, representatives from **Grayson County, Virginia**, and **Holly Springs, Mississippi**, confirmed that even though each community had a vehicle ready to provide its older residents with rides to medical appointments, neither could find a qualified driver.

Without public transportation options, people who aren't able to drive must depend on friends, neighbors, family members or volunteers. Some rural, all-volunteer driver programs are relatively small and informal, limited to one community; others have paid staff and serve a large region.

Either way, whether someone is leaving their home for medical care, shopping or social opportunities, getting around depends on the dedication of volunteers, many of whom are retirees who will only drive during daylight hours.

"There is a stress," said Smith, "on finding enough drivers to meet the need."

In a survey of volunteer driver programs in **Minnesota**, 68 percent did not have enough drivers, forcing the groups to turn down requests.<sup>2</sup> Nationwide, the number of volunteer drivers in a community drops significantly when seasonal residents relocate for a few months each year.

Another problem is the lack of information about existing services. While larger municipalities often have apps or websites detailing transit options, routes and schedules, many smaller communities rely on volunteers and social service groups to both



▲ Like many of the nation's fast-moving, multilane commercial roadways, traveling in a vehicle is a must for shopping along or crossing Route 491 in Gallup, New Mexico.

disseminate transportation information and provide the needed services.

The nonprofit organization Feonix: Mobility Rising is an AARP partner that's working to fill those information and service gaps for "vulnerable and underserved" communities in, among other states, South Carolina, Texas and Michigan.

And then there's the demographic reality that one in five drivers in the United States is age 65 or older.<sup>3</sup> Due to health issues or simply normal aging, many older adults choose to limit their driving or turn in their car keys entirely.

According to the AAA, people typically outlive their driving years by seven to 10 years.4

It's important for rural communities — actually, all communities — to help residents plan for a future when they might not drive. It's also important for communities to provide transportation options for people of all ages.

Although walking typically can't serve as the sole form of transportation for nondrivers, and bicycling may not be viable for everyone, both should be included on the transportation menu.

In fact, according to a Rails-to-Trails Conservancy report, people in towns with a population under 50,000 walk nearly as much as people in urban and suburban centers, thanks to streets with little traffic and businesses within easy walking distance.

Being able to walk, bike or safely "roll" to one's destinations keeps people connected to their community and is good for the local economy.

Rural communities are becoming healthier and more socially connected by implementing traffic calming solutions and making creative, low-budget improvements to — among other street-level features — sidewalks, crosswalks, recreational trails, lighting and bicycle lanes. ■

#### FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES: Transportation

#### **COMPLETING THE STREETS**

A "Complete Street" is a roadway that is safe and useful for pedestrians, cyclists, drivers and passengers.

The approach, explains the National Complete Streets Coalition, "integrates people and place in the planning, design, construction, operation, and maintenance of our transportation networks." Doing so "helps to ensure streets are safe for people of all ages and abilities, balance the needs of different modes, and support local land uses, economies, cultures, and natural environments."

In Brookings, South Dakota, the emphasis of downtown development is on creating walkable neighborhoods. Planters, benches, safe pedestrian crossings and public art make the area attractive. Businesses that are accessible to all ages and abilities encourage everyone to shop and spend time there.

In Ennis, Montana, the town government worked with local partners, including the Montana Center for Independent Living, to design the first sidewalks for its Main Street. The sidewalks are now fully accessible — for wheelchair users, people pushing baby strollers, everyone. Children can even safely walk to school and to local parks.

Residents of Manzanita, Oregon, want to keep the small-town vibe and live in harmony with the surrounding natural environment. The oceanside community is a popular vacation destination and retirement location. To encourage people to walk and bike, the town committed to making all of its streets at least 20 feet wide so they can be shared safely by drivers, bicyclists and pedestrians.



After a community survey, North Yarmouth, Maine, realized there was widespread concern about traffic speeds in its village center.

In response, the town and the Living Well in North Yarmouth committee created the "Kite in Your Sight? Please Slow Down" campaign, in



which 40 colorful kites were placed in spots known for speeding.

The project's theme built upon the success of the annual North Yarmouth Kite Festival. In the street safety effort, plastic kites from a local discount store serve as visual "don't speed" reminders.

To educate drivers, an overhead banner stretching across the entrance to town declared, "Welcome to the Village Center. Kite in Your Sight? Please Slow Down. Our Community Thanks You."

The effort was a hit with kite-spotting children, their parents and local safety officials.



"Before automobiles were common, my great-grandfather would catch a ride into town with the mailman. People used to know their neighbors and barter things all the time. Not so much anymore. Many times, if you're in a community where you haven't had transportation options for a long time, you just give up on once-routine parts of life. You don't even think about going to have coffee with your friends on Tuesday or going to the VFW on Friday night anymore, because it's been years since you've been able to do so."

- Valerie Lefler, Nebraska-native and founder of Feonix: Mobility Rising

#### **CATCHING A RYDE**

Residents of all ages in a seven-county region of south-central Nebraska can contact RYDE Transit (Reach Your Destination Easily) for a low-cost door-to-door ride.

John Fagot, the mayor of Lexington, Nebraska, is a regular rider. He doesn't drive due to vision loss.

"But RYDE Transit takes me wherever I want to go," he said, "City Hall, home, work. Life would be difficult for many people in the county without it. People depend on it. They could not keep their jobs. They could not do their daily errands."

About half of all RYDE Transit riders are over age 50, but many children take RYDE Transit to afterschool activities. Passengers are asked to book their rides 24 hours in advance if possible, while return trips are more flexible.

"When you're at the doctor, you don't know if it will be 10 minutes or two hours," RYDE Transit director Charles McGraw points out.

RYDE Transit, which is one of more than 60 public transit providers in Nebraska, is run by the Community Action Partnership of Mid-Nebraska, which also manages the region's Head Start programs, numerous senior centers, WIC programs and food banks. Funding comes from local municipalities and counties as well as the state and federal governments, foundation grants, local United Ways, and individual donors. ■



"The nation's rural population is declining while greater percentages of people living in far-flung places are relying on mass transit. That's because these places are home to populations that are aging, and increasingly low-income. This translates into growing numbers of people who can't or shouldn't drive, or that can't afford a car or its gas and upkeep."

— "It Makes Rural Living Possible: Rural Transit Districts Help Many Get Around," The Southern Illinoisan, February 14, 2019, citing research by the American Public **Transportation Association** 

#### **NEIGHBORS DRIVING NEIGHBORS**



In Mount Vernon, Maine, a twice monthly, two-car shopping excursion starts with socializing over coffee and a quick bit to eat.

Neighbors Driving Neighbors is a grassroots nonprofit serving five rural communities in central Maine — specifically Vienna, Fayette, Mount Vernon, Belgrade and Rome.

The drivers describe themselves as "volunteers providing rides for those who don't drive so they can more easily stay in their homes."

The destinations need to be within 35 miles ("or so") from the passenger's home.

In a three-year period, 44 drivers provided more than 2,000 free rides to 100 neighbors to help with medical appointments, errands and social activities.6

The grant- and donation-funded service grew out of a community forum in which residents identified transportation as a problem in need of a local solution. The organization is run by a part-tme manager and a volunteer board. The clientele are older residents and people with a disability.

"I feel better not burdening family," one passenger explained.

The drivers say the work is rewarding because they can help someone directly and meet new people. In at least one case, the time spent volunteering was actually relaxing.

"The driver was so sweet," a rider reported. "My appointment was long but she said it was okay because she took a nap in her car." ■

#### FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES: Transportation



◀ Greyhound buses and Amtrak's Crescent Line (between New York City and New Orleans, Louisiana) stop at Union Station in Meridian, Mississippi.



- "In rural areas it's often like a village system, where family and neighbors provide rides when needed. But now the people who were the primary ride givers are getting old themselves."
- "Many rural areas do have public transit buses or vans, but many older residents have never, or hardly ever, used them.
   Our transit agency now brings vehicles to community events so older people can see what it's like to board and ride."
- "In some places, transit vans en route to a city or large town will pass through a small town or rural area without stopping. That's a wasted resource and missed transportation opportunity."
- "Communities need a 'one-stop shop' for coordinating all rides in a region."
- "People are often more willing to scrape together the money to pay for a ride than to ask someone for the favor of a ride."
- "There's a myth that rural communities aren't walkable. Many do have walkable downtown areas. When I go to my wife's hometown in North Dakota, we park the car and walk the entire the time we're there."
- "Some rural communities have a distinct town center. For those that do, downtown walkability is key. For areas without a central downtown, it's still important to be able to take walks for recreation and health."

#### IF YOU BUILD IT THEY WILL COME

Established at the crossroads of two railway lines, **Meridian, Mississippi**, was a thriving city throughout the late 1800s.

During his 16 years as mayor, John Robert Smith recognized the potential of his hometown to again serve as both a destination and transportation hub.

The restoration of Union Station in the late 1990s made the facility one of the best multimodal transportation centers in the country and helped revitalize the city's downtown.

In addition to housing Amtrak and other transit providers, the upgraded building was designed with meeting rooms and event spaces for community activities as well as weddings and other celebrations.

Smith's advocacy for the restoration of the Grand Opera House of Mississippi — and the development of an arts district and arts education centers — made Meridian and its walkable downtown a place people want to visit and live in.

According to the Great American Stations
Project, "Meridian's tremendous success story has
provided ample inspiration for other small cities."

#### **CATCHING A FLIGHT FOR CARE**

In some parts of rural America, specialty medical services — including for organ transplants, ongoing burn treatments and even cancer — can be hundreds of miles away.

People in need of distant care are often helped by pilots who volunteer with "public benefit flying" organizations. (The nonprofits that provide such services include the Angel Flight programs, each of which covers a specific state or region.)

Using their own small planes and covering all costs, the pilots transport patients to distant medical facilities. They also assist with disaster response, animal rescue efforts and family reunifications.

Visit *AirCareAlliance.org* to learn which organizations serve what areas. ■





#### SLOW DOWN FOR PEDESTRIANS

The downtown area of **Wayne**, **Maine**, appears suddenly when a driver travels along Route 133, a busy state highway with fast-moving traffic

Because of curves in the roadway and a hill, pedestrians crossing Main Street often aren't seen by drivers until the last moment.

"Logging trucks and other large trucks race through town, barely slowing down as they do," Stan Davis, a member of the community's aging-at-home committee, told AARP in 2017.

An AARP Community Challenge grant helped the town acquire two "Reduce Speed" beacons that were installed at either end of the downtown. The town also purchased portable pedestrian-crossing signs.

"They'll help keep everyone safe as they cross the road to the post office, the library, the restaurant, the school, the dam where people swim and the farmers market," Davis added. ■

◀ Wayne, Maine's town manager (far left) and aging-at-home coordinator stand with a flashing traffic sign that alerts motorists to slow down!

#### **TAKEAWAYS**

- Contrary to common assumptions, walkability is an important part of small-town life.
- It can be difficult if not impossible for nondrivers in rural areas to get where they need or want to go. Rural transit services and choices can be improved through better coordination and communication and through expansion, including ride-sharing and, yes, safe ways to walk and bike.
- While ride-sourcing and -sharing services, such as Uber, Lyft, Via and GoGoGrandparent, are easy to find in urban and even suburban areas, they are often not available in rural places.
- Autonomous vehicles (aka: self-driving cars) could be a solution for getting nondrivers around the vast distances of rural regions, but they're part of a future not yet on the docket. In fact, most experts believe rural areas will be the last to see the technology.
- Look at all the organizations in a community — from faith-based groups to businesses to regional transportation authorities — as potential sources of transportation solutions and services.

- There's a real need to improve "last mile" mobility, such as the trip to and from the bus stop.
- Most older Americans grew up walking and bicycling. Many would do more of each today if provided safe routes for doing so.
- Public transit waiting areas need to be safe and provide both seating and protection from bad weather.
- Volunteer drivers are the heart and soul of volunteer transportation programs. Successful recruitment strategies include scheduling flexibility and stressing the community benefit.
- To retain volunteers, it's important to find creative ways to thank them, keep them busy (but not too busy) and provide ongoing training that benefits them personally and maximizes their effectiveness.
- Transportation options are a lifeline for rural communities. As John Robert Smith, the chair of Transportation for America, warns, "Without transportation choices, we face the continued depopulation of small town and rural America."

# Healthy Living, the Economy and High-Speed Internet

Essential needs include nearby medical care, reliable internet access and innovative thinking about work and economic development

any of life's modern conveniences aren't readily found in some small towns or rural areas. That can include access to medical care, high-speed internet service, reliable and safe drinking water, reasonably priced healthy food, and other services and products that urban and suburban communities generally take for granted.

For instance, the availability of potable water depends on the presence and quality of a drilled well — and the absence of natural and man-made pollutants. A 2018 report in the *New Republic* found that half of the 5,000 drinking water systems in the United States that received health violations in 2015 served 500 or fewer residents.<sup>1</sup>

Even when the water is safe to drink, if there's an electrical blackout due to a storm, high winds or even high use, a home that doesn't have a gas- or solar-powered backup generator may be left without power, heat, cooling, or telephone and internet service. Residents can also be left without running water and a working septic system since most private wells and sewage septic system pumps run on electricity.

Although food is grown in rural areas, it is increasingly difficult for rural residents to find fresh meat, fruit and vegetables in their local stores.

For one in five rural communities, a supermarket or fresh food options are more than 10 miles away.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Department of Agriculture classifies such communities as "food deserts."<sup>3</sup>

In many areas, the proliferation of dollar stores, which sell discounted household goods and packaged foods, undermines local grocers that haven't already shut their doors due to the influence of mega-supermarkets such as those within Walmart or warehouse stores. The on-demand grocery delivery services (Instacart, Peapod, Shipt, AmazonFresh) that feed many urban and suburban residents are costly options and usually not available in low-population areas.

Local solutions to the scarcity of fresh food

include informal volunteer transportation services, community gardens and food pantries. A church in rural **Conetoe, North Carolina**, for example, started the Conetoe Family Life Center, a 21-acre community garden and bee farm. Half of the produce is donated to low-income families.

In **Newport, Vermont**, a remote community with high unemployment where one in four residents are age 65 or older, the Fresh Start Community Farm coordinates multiple garden sites (one on the lawn of a local business) and chooses plantings based on what will grow best in each location. Some of the sites include safe places for children to play while parents are working in the garden.

A community grant from AARP Vermont was used to add raised planting beds so people can garden without getting down on the ground. The gardens are harvested weekly during the three-month growing season and volunteers receive a share based on the number of hours they work.

"While younger people do the manual labor, like digging and weeding, older people grow the seeds in their homes over the winter and instruct the kids on how to care for the plants," Patricia Sears, a former AARP Vermont volunteer state president, explained in 2015. "A pride has developed in the neighborhood, and the people are taking care of one another."

In **Lenox, Iowa**, a store owner provided the healthy food solution. Ramsey's Market sells groceries and runs both a Mexican restaurant (called Tiger Taco) and a hardware store. The market features weekly low-cost "Fresh Deals" that include meat, fruit and vegetables. To meet the needs of residents who can't get to the store, Ramsey's makes free deliveries for orders over \$50 and charges \$2 to deliver smaller orders.

Great distances and a lack of medical providers, particularly for specialty services, can make it difficult for rural residents of any age to access health care, even if they have insurance or can afford to pay out of pocket. Only 10 percent of the



▲ In many rural or remote communities, it can be hard to find an open store or restaurant during the "off-season." Seasonal closings are common in areas that attract tourists (such as Boothbay Harbor, Maine, pictured) but also occur in less destinational places, with "winter schedules" beginning as early as September.

nation's physicians practice in rural communities.<sup>5</sup> For many people, an emergency room is the medical provider of first and only resort.

That's assuming they live in an area that still has a hospital. More than 100 rural hospitals closed during the 2010s,6 and many of the nation's 2,000 rural hospitals are struggling to survive due to factors including unpaid patient debt. Patients are likewise struggling due to their unpayable medical bills.

According to a 2019 article in the Washington *Post*, the Poplar Bluff Regional Medical Center — a for-profit hospital serving Butler County, Missouri, and other rural counties — has filed thousands of lawsuits against its patients with balances due. More than 35 percent of the people in Butler have unpaid medical debt on their credit report. Some of the defendants derisively refer to their court appearances as the "follow-up appointment."7

Even when care is nearby, it can be inaccessible due to a lack of transportation. That's partly why the regional hospital in **Paris**, **Texas**, helps fund a shuttle service — cheekily named the Paris Metro.

With the rise of the internet, a rural renaissance

was widely predicted. People would be able to live and work anywhere, and millions would move into idyllic smaller communities where, with the push of a button, the world would be at their fingertips.

Overlooked in that vision were the physical barriers to connectivity (mountains, oceans, distance), the cost of developing or updating the necessary infrastructure, and the influence and interests of various corporations, stakeholders and special interests.

For-profit internet providers want to invest in areas flush with potential customers. Sparsely populated rural regions don't provide the desired bang for the buck. Yet in more than 20 states it's actually illegal for a municipality or community to develop its own internet network.8

Fixed (i.e., installed) and mobile high-speed internet access (also known as broadband) are now the norm in densely populated areas, but the services aren't available in all rural communities. In fact, as of 2019, 98 percent of urban areas nationwide had some sort of high-speed internet access compared with 69 percent of rural households.9 Continued ▶

MELISSA STANTON, AARP

Even where the service does exist, the cost, coupled with those of computers and smartphones, can be too much for a cash-strapped household. Yet, in many ways, high-speed internet is now an essential utility, like electricity or water.

In some situations, reliable high-speed internet is a matter of life and death. That was the case in 2016, when a **Sioux Falls, South Dakota**, emergency medicine physician with the telehealth network Avera eCARE guided a physician's assistant, located 700 miles away in rural Montana, through the treatment of a child badly injured in an ATV crash.<sup>10</sup>

When telehealth services are an option, patients can participate in routine and follow-up medical appointments from home.

Another reality is that due to a lack of career opportunities and modern services, young people are leaving rural regions. Depending on the community, such migrations are debilitating or at least a matter of concern. While older residents in many places are more than capable of performing the jobs that need doing, as the population ages it may become more difficult to find essential services in rural areas.

High-speed internet access can be the key to a small town's ability to survive and its residents to thrive. For instance, knowing that more than 50 percent of its residents are age 50 or older, 11 remote **Eastport, Maine**, made securing high-speed internet a priority so it could attract younger residents who are able to work for distant employers.

While the topics addressed in the previous chapters are each vital to rural livability, economic opportunity, available health services, and high-speed internet access are necessary for a chance at success and a comfortable standard of living.





Millinocket, Maine, once supplied some of the largest newspapers on the East Coast, including The New York Times. The Great Northern Paper Company's mill operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week, providing jobs and good incomes for residents, many of whom had immigrated from Europe and Canada. The community's fortunes changed in 2008, when the mill closed its doors after a series of corporate acquisitions and ultimately a bankruptcy. As the nearest town to the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail, Millinocket is still frequented by hikers and others who love the outdoors. To provide the local economy with an off-season, pre-winter-blues boost, the town hosts an annual marathon — in *December.* The marathoners and their supporters shop, socialize, eat and drink. Nearly 2,000 runners braved the cold (25°F but sunny) in 2019.



"At its essence, smart growth is about shaping the quality of the place, and then that place shapes the lives of the people who live there. Our 21st century economy is no longer based on tools and spools. Only 10 percent of our economy is manufacturing today. It is about the knowledge economy. Large businesses, industry and tech firms are moving into downtowns. Why? They are chasing the workforce they can't get to move to the more distant office or research park. Businesses are moving to downtowns, where walk scores, transit and bike scores are better because that's where the workforce wants to be. And that doesn't mean living in big metropolitan areas."

— John Robert Smith, chairman, Transportation for America, and former mayor, Meridian, Mississippi

# **Healthy Living**

#### FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES

#### STREET SMARTS

An available and powerful resource in or near many small towns and rural places are the students and researchers at educational institutions.

Jermaine Mitchell, an assistant professor of exercise and nutrition science at the University of Montevallo in Montevallo, Alabama, has his students create wellness programs specific to the needs and interests of local older adults. (So if a person or group enjoys square dancing, the fitness activities might feature music and dance steps.)

The students also use the AARP Walk Audit Tool Kit (see page 49) to assess the walkability of Montevallo neighborhoods. Sidewalks have been fixed and crosswalks added due to their work.

Says Mitchell: "Service learning projects form partnerships of faculty, students and communities to put knowledge and skills to work on today's most critical problems." ■



▲ University students in Montevallo, Alabama, met with local leaders about improving street safety.



"Rural clinics and hospitals are closing across the nation. When they close, it's hard for younger families and older residents to stay in town — and harder to attract new businesses, or attract replacements for the doctors, nurses and other health-care workers who may be retiring from their practices or just leaving town."

**Deborah Fallows**, "The Surprising Rural Health-Care Legacy of the '60s," TheAtlantic.com, September 4, 2019

#### **HELPING HANDS**

The Healthy U program at the **University of** Wyoming in Laramie provides a free six-week, 40-hour training to people with chronic health conditions, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis, pain and depression.

Participants learn how to best manage their illness. They then take what they've learned into rural communities as volunteer "peer leaders" who support others with chronic conditions. Similar programs exist in rural parts of California, Colorado, Kentucky, Mississippi, South Dakota and Vermont.

A study by the National Council on Aging found that chronic-disease self-management programs save money, increase medication compliance and reduce emergency room visits. 12 Participants report leading more active lives, experiencing less depression and having fewer sick days.



"Because nurses are uniquely woven into the fabric of the community — in schools, workplaces, homes, prisons, hospitals, assisted living facilities, and other community spaces — they are positioned to be a more powerful part of improving health and health equity."

- Center to Champion Nursing in America, an initiative of AARP, AARP Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

### FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES: Healthy Living

#### **COMMUNITY NURSING**



◀ Suzie Zimmer, a community nurse in Washington state's **Chelan Valley** provides preventive care, medication management and other supports to frail and vulnerable adults so they can live independently and reside in their homes for as long as possible.

Community nurses are a trusted and primary source of care where medical services and supports can be hours away. These licensed clinicians live in the areas they serve. They deliver care and supports in local settings, including within houses of worship, community centers and patient homes.

Some community nurses are paid. Many volunteer their expertise and are affliciated with faith-based organizations. (In Christian churches, these providers may be referred to as "parish nurses." Those working within the Jewish faith are known as "congregational nurses." In Muslim communities, they're called "crescent nurses.")

In Lyme, New Hampshire (also noted on page 24), a pair of parish nurses offer drop-in office hours and make house calls.

In **Hope**, **Alaska**, a nurse serves about 200 people, providing care and case management services to people who have complex medical conditions, developmental disabilities or mental health diagnoses.

Established in 2017, the Chelan Valley Community Nurse Program in Chelan, Washington, provides assessments, education and prevention services and acts as an essential link between uninsured residents and health care systems. Funding from grants and donations enable the services to be offered for free.

As part of the Guilford Cares program in Guilford, Vermont, volunteer community nurses do house calls to help residents manage chronic illnesses. Other supports include a friendly-visitor program, medical equipment loans, a food pantry, and transportation services for medical appointments. ■



- "People who have spent a lifetime living in rural areas want the life and are aware of the trade-offs. Their attachment to the community where they have lived can keep them here even when needed medical services, home care and caregiver supports aren't available."
- "One of the challenges in rural retirement destinations — the kinds of places where people want to vacation and fantasize about living — is that people move there when they're healthy and active and able to enjoy all the community has to offer. But they don't plan for what life will be like when they're no longer able to drive, or they develop a chronic illness, or need help to live independently in their homes."
- "Our little town is lucky. We have one old-fashioned general medicine physician. The problem is that he is 78 years old."
- "When they closed the local nursing home and then shut down the hospital, it took the heart out of our community. If there's an emergency, it's a two- or three-hour wait for an ambulance now, and if someone needs to be in a nursing home, the nearest is more than two hours away."
- "Opioid deaths are 45 percent higher in rural areas than in the cities. That has a huge impact on our communities - for children born to addicted moms, businesses that can't find the workers they need, and for older people helping raise the children. Even if someone wants to beat their addiction, there isn't any treatment within a reasonable commute."

## The Economy

#### FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES

#### THE CAR IS NO LONGER KING

"Traditional Main Streets are back," declared John Robert Smith, during his presentation at the 2019 AARP Rural Livability Workshop.

The former mayor of Meridian, Mississippi, and current chair of Transportation for America, was telling a story about Conway, Arkansas, which he says attracted three tech firms that chose the small city over a suburban office park because each felt that "Conway has a cool downtown." As a result, the businesses could attract the workers they needed.

Part of why North Dakota has a statewide Main Streets program is that it sees the redevelopment of its small towns into places with vibrant downtowns as a way to keep and lure young adults and families as residents.

"Vibrant community centers are a fundamental element of workforce development. North Dakota's Main Street initiative provides community leaders with direct access to tools and resources to capitalize on their community's strengths and make sound planning decisions," reads the Main Street ND page at ND.gov. "These efforts help create vibrant communities that attract and retain the 21st century workforce North Dakota needs to compete and succeed in a global economy."

Smith said he found that younger generations "move to where they want to be, then they find a job. They find a place that's vibrant and attractive"



▲ Conway, Arkansas, is a member of Main Street America, a revitalization and preservation-based economic development program of the National Main Street Center.

According to Smith, "47 percent want to live in large metropolitan areas. Only 12 percent want to be in the suburban cul-de-sac neighborhoods they may have grown up in, 40 percent want to live in small towns and rural places — provided they have high-speed internet access and a downtown with a little pop that's authentic. These economic and demographic shifts have big implications." ■



"McGregor [Minnesota] once had a bustling downtown, full of stores, bars and restaurants. People shopped and socialized there, running into each other and stopping by each other's homes. ... But that started to change a couple of decades ago ... when the local economy began to decline. Stores like Walmart and Costco arrived, pushing out local businesses. Minnesota's timber industry, a big source of employment, began to struggle. And family farms did, too, as the farms became less profitable and young people moved away looking for other careers. ... Today, downtown McGregor is eerily quiet, with only a handful of businesses, such as a car repair shop, a bowling alley, a health center, a church and a funeral home."

— "Bringing Together Young and Old to Ease the Isolation of Rural Life," All Things Considered, National Public Radio, August 7, 2019

### FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES: The Economy

### SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS CAN LEAD TO LONG-TERM CHANGE



▲ A pop-up demonstration project in Old Orchard Beach, Maine, inspired positive change.

Washington Street in **Old Orchard Beach, Maine**, had seen better days. As part of its age-friendly communities work, AARP Maine invited the urban design and placemaking firm Team Better Block to the oceanfront town. The goal: help the community see the neighborhood's potential.

In July 2019, the consultants and local volunteers stenciled lobster and shell shapes onto sidewalks and crosswalks. They added planters, outdoor seating and took over two vacant storefronts to open a pair of temporary pop-up eateries: Specially For You, a bakery, and The Local Eatery, a burgers and hot dogs spot.

More than 250 residents showed up for the free meats and sweets. The local Salvation Army band provided live music.

Although the shops were gone within hours of their grand openings, seeds had been sown, and the buildings' owners subsequently reopened The Local Eatery. The bakery didn't follow suit, but the space is now home to a community-focused police station. When it's open, free coffee and doughnuts are available to anyone who drops by.

"Making what was a small investment of time and volunteer energy is paying off beyond what we could have imagined," said Louise Reid, the assistant town manager (who retired in 2019 at age 82). "The neighborhood is excited about the new businesses and, for the first time in decades, hopeful about what the future can bring." ■



- "For too long, the measure of success for a young person raised in a rural area is that they leave the community for college and launch a well-paid career in the city. The young people who stay behind are unfairly seen as failures."
- "We need to value all paths a young person can take in building a life. If everyone is pushed to go to college, and if work that involves physical labor or noncollege skills is held in low esteem, who will build our houses, drill our wells, maintain our power grid, fix our cars, open and run local businesses, and work on our ranches, farms and fishing boats? All of these jobs are essential to the survival of every community."
- "Our community has 1,018 residents, is very rural, and our main problem is our K-6 school has only 43 students. How do we attract young people to move to our community when we don't have broadband, roads and industry — and property is expensive?"
- "We have to dispel the myth that rural towns are only good places to visit and to live in old age. Our communities need to become more attractive places for young people to live, work and do business."
- "The issue is infrastructure. If we had broadband in our community, young people who work from home or who want to start small businesses of their own would stay. These days, you can't start a business or telecommute without internet. But that takes investment by the town. In my town there's no interest in spending money. Economic development is key, but it won't suddenly appear. We have to work at it."

## **High-Speed Internet**

#### FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES

#### LIBRARIES ARE HOT SPOTS

Today's public libraries are destinations for books, of course, but also for activities, equipment (see the photo of skis, below) and — perhaps most importantly in many rural communities — high-speed internet access.

But since many rural libraries have limited hours and depend on volunteers as staff, the doors are often locked when people need an internet connection. As a result, it's not uncommon to see the parking lots of closed libraries filled with cars, inside which are adults who need the internet to search for work or parents with students who need the internet to do homework. (The dining areas and parking lots of fast-food eateries often serve a similar purpose.)

To address the lack of home-based internet, school districts in Athens, Georgia, and Winterset, Iowa, reached out to local businesses with free Wi-Fi and asked them to display decals that let students know the location is a safe and welcoming place for them to do their homework.

In Coachella Valley, California, school buses equipped with internet routers are parked overnight in residential areas that don't have connectivity. The bus-based routers enable students to complete their assignments.

In 2017, Oklahoma State University launched the Rural Library Hotspot Lending Program in the towns of Elgin, Perkins, Seminole and Haskell — the latter of which has a population of 1,900, half of whom had no home access to the internet.<sup>13</sup> During the one-year pilot, the program provided up to seven mobile hot spot devices to each town's library, to be lent just like a book for one week at a time.

The American Library Association has information about setting up hotspot lending programs. (Use the keyword "hotspot" to search ALA.org.) ■

#### **Check Out the Internet Here!**

Mobile hotspots are available for Okemah Public Library cardholders!

- Works anywhere a Sprint signal is available (home, around town, on the road)
- Connect up to 10 devices at once (phones, tablets, laptops)
- Connect to 4G LTE (high speed) service, unlimited data
- 1-week checkout period





▲ Libraries in Oklahoma and elsewhere are lending mobile hotspots (shown above and held by a librarian, below) to patrons who otherwise won't have Wi-Fi access.  $\blacktriangledown$ 





▲ Public libraries are customizing their offerings to meet community needs. Skis, snowshoes, mountain bikes, canoes and kayaks are among the holdings of the "Katahdin Gear Library" within the Millinocket Memorial Library in Maine. Most equipment can be checked out by residents for one week.



"Entrepreneurship and innovation thrive in rural towns where people are connected. Access in these communities to reliable high-speed internet is crucial to that success."

— Krista Burdick, community engagement officer, **LOR Foundation** 

See page 50 to learn more about LOR.

### FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES: High-Speed Internet

#### COMMUNITY-CREATED INTERNET

"In the mid-2000s, several towns in east-central Vermont determined that robust broadband telecommunications services were a necessary part of their continued sustainability," explains the history page on the website of ECFiber, the local internet provider.

"Local broadband committees reached out to wireless service providers, but wireless proved to be unsatisfactory in our hilly wooded terrain." In response, two dozen small towns joined forces to create ECFiber.

When residents of rural St. Francis, Kansas, felt the burden of the digital divide, they reached out to Eagle Communications, which brought high-speed internet to the town. Every home and business now has access to St. Francis' fiber network. After more than five decades of losing population, the town is seeing new businesses open shop and home construction is is on the rise.

Internet access in Grayson County, Virginia, was so lacking that residents described their connectivity as "advanced dial-up."

In March 2019, the state's governor signed legislation that will bring high-speed internet to the rural county. The delegate who advocated for the service declared, "We're way past the point where broadband is a simple luxury. It's as much a necessity these days as electricity."

A community-created internet carrier could help Project MILES in Larimer County, Wyoming. MILES is an acronym for Mobility, Inclusiveness, Locations, Everywhere, Simple.

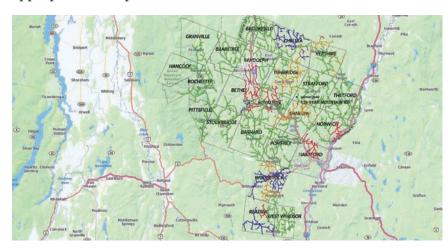
The idea is that people should be able to find appropriate transportation services with one click



▲ A poster in a shop window promotes a communitybased effort to provide the Mount Katahdin region of northern Maine with "lightning-fast, responsive, stable, and affordable fiber internet connections for every home and business — at no cost to the community and without using taxpayer dollars."

or one call. The larger goal is to use data and local resources to build "systemic solutions" rather than short-term programs. As noted after the project's test pilot, however, solutions can't be delivered by smart software alone.

"All software services with real time driver information transfer will require internet and/or satellite service," states the pilot summary. "A One-Click/One-Call service will need to have processes in place to address the needs of riders who reside in and drivers traveling to rural areas with limited connectivity." ■



◀ The cluster of colored squiggles represent ECFiber's present and planned coverage area. The "nonprofit fiber-to-the-premises network" connected its first customers in 2011 and promotes itself as providing "Wicked fast internet for rural Vermont." As of mid-2019, the network was serving 3,500 customers, who paid \$66 a month for basic internet (25 megabits per second) or \$149 for high-speed (700 mbps) service.

- "Many people in rural areas haven't been exposed to high-speed internet, so they don't understand its value. Lots of folks think it's only for watching movies or playing games."
- "Much of the newer farm equipment including tractors — use GPS technology and require internet access."
- "There are a lot of drawbacks with slow internet speeds. Decent-size companies will not move into a community without broadband. We have lost out because we don't have it."
- "People think rural communities don't want 'new-fangled' technology and that they're averse to change. That could not be farther from the truth. Children in rural areas need broadband to do their homework, same as city kids. The catch is that the rural kids can't take their tablets or computer to public Wi-Fi. If they don't have it at home, they don't have it. Rural older folks want to be healthy, same as city folk. Telemedicine can be a huge help, but only if they have broadband. In the city, telemedicine can make life more convenient, but in rural areas, it might be the only option within 200 miles if a person needs, say, speech therapy."



"Many Illinois farmers are handicapped by the lack of high-speed internet in the rural areas where they perform their livelihood. This compromises an advantage long held, as the state is in the center of the breadbasket of the world, which supplies food for the masses."

— "Rural Internet Access a Must for Farmers," Daily Journal, Kankakee, Illinois, September 11, 2019

#### **TAKEAWAYS**

- Even a one-day pop-up demonstration event can inspire residents to imagine what permanent change can look like in their community.
- Rural communities that have high-speed internet can support telemedicine services, robotics-related work, collaborative care models and other innovative medical solutions.
- Telemedicine can save lives, especially in remote regions and towns without direct access to emergency or specialty medical care.
- Community and faith-based nurses provide much-needed help managing chronic illnesses and disability in rural communities. They are a critical link between residents and the health care system.
- Reliable, affordable high-speed internet service can help older adults avoid isolation and remain independent as they age by enabling them to use services such as online banking and shopping.
- Public libraries play an important role in small towns and rural communities. They are places where people can gather and find needed information. For many, the library is their only access to fast and reliable internet service.
- Without access to high-speed internet service, communities suffer, losing out on opportunities for local businesses to prosper and people to learn, find jobs and stay healthy.
- High-speed internet is critical for attracting businesses and enabling people to live locally if they telework or want to start a business.
- Both young adults and older adults want to settle in vibrant towns that ensure basic connectivity to jobs and information via the internet.
- When local utilities or for-profit corporations are unable or unwilling to expand high-speed internet service, it may be possible for a community or small cooperative to develop its own nonprofit network by financing, installing and maintaining a cell tower or other infrastructure and operations.

# AARP VIRGIN ISLANDS

# **Extreme Weather** and Disasters

Changing weather norms and weather-related events often have tragic consequences in remote and rural places

ntense weather patterns and disasters such as droughts, extreme temperatures, floods, wildfires, blizzards and mud slides, among other hazards, can be especially dangerous in rural communities, where distance, inadequate communication, a lack of emergency equipment and a fragile utility grid are common. Each event can prevent residents from being reached during a crisis or can require evacuation, permanent relocation, or extensive repairs and rebuilding.

Disasters are often hardest on older residents. Since there is a higher concentration of older adults in small towns and rural areas than in other parts of the nation, disaster planning and responses need to include a special focus on older people.

There are a number of reasons for the greater vulnerability. Some older residents are isolated, with few if any friends or relatives to check on them. People with chronic illnesses, such as hypertension or diabetes, have a harder time bouncing back after a disaster. Reduced mobility can make it difficult to get out of the house. Stockpiling

medication and food is often impossible for people who struggle to afford those items in the first place.

The fear of the unknown, concerns about leaving pets or being far from familiar medical providers, a lack of transportation options (see page 26) and previous successes sheltering in place are among the reasons why people resist leaving their homes, even when an evacuation order is in place.

The vulnerability of older residents extends beyond the emergency itself. Researchers have found that older people experience an elevated risk of death in the year that follows a natural disaster.1

Interestingly and ironically, the rugged independence ("We can take of ourselves, thank you") that is valued by many

residents of small towns and rural communities can lead to uncoordinated and inadequate responses to an emergency. In some cases, emergency personnel aren't even aware of where vulnerable residents live.

An attendee at the AARP Rural Livability Workshop shared that an effort to make sure every home in her community had large, readable house numbers (see an example on page 23) was met with resistance. Some residents, protective of their privacy, said they didn't want to be so easily found.

No government, organization, community, household or individual can fully prepare for every crisis or catastrophe, be it climate- or weatherrelated, a result of human error or treachery, or a natural disaster.

However, governments, organizations, communities and individuals can prepare and plan for the likely emergencies — nor'easters in Maine, tornadoes in the Midwest, blizzards in the Rockies, hurricanes in the Caribbean, earthquakes or wildfires in California.



▲ September 2017 marked the first time in recorded history that two hurricanes — first Irma, then Maria — struck the same area within two weeks. After weathering both storms, AARP Virgin Islands staff helped distribute relief supplies.



▲ Hurricane damage in remote Ramrod Key, Florida



▲ A tornado funnel near McCook, Nebraska



▲ A wildfire near North Bonneville, Washington



▲ A frozen landscape along a Montana highway



▲ Flooding in Healdsburg, California



▲ Drought conditions in Squaw Valley, California

#### FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES: Extreme Weather and Disasters

#### **MAKING RADIO WAVES**

The need for a community radio station came to Fran Kaliher in 2012, on the day a flash flood overwhelmed Two Harbors, Minnesota.

"Every way I tried to drive into town was impassable," she recalled about her small community (population 3,700). "That's when I thought, 'We need to have a radio station so people could find out what's happening."

Kaliher shared her idea with folks around town, including Leo Babeu, who had worked in radio when he was younger. Their creation, KTWH, has a broadcast radius of up to 10 miles.

Four dozen volunteers and two part-time workers operate the station out of a crowded threeroom studio behind a Vietnamese restaurant.

The on-air schedule ranges from Linda Lee's polka show to The Flip Side, on which both sides of hit 45-rpm records are played.

Since KTWH streams over the internet, snowbirds wintering down south can follow their grandkids' games — and stay informed about the Two Harbors weather forecasts and any worrisome consequences. ■

#### SIGN UP FOR SERVICE — AND SHARING

In many places, emergency responders serve an entire county or region rather than a specific town or village. As a result, they often don't know where individuals who need special assistance reside. Some communities have created questionnaires that residents or their caregivers can complete in advance to alert first responders to a person's medical condition or disability.

That's the case in Sagadahoc County, Maine, where residents with special needs can instruct first responders about how to access their home and find their "File of Life" listing the names of medical providers, medications being used, emergency contacts and even pet care instructions.

Questionnaires are also used to seek community help. One used in Phippsburg, Maine, asks, "Do you own and are you willing to loan equipment — such as snowmobiles, boats, ATVs, generators, etc. — that we may use in an emergency situation?"

Among the most pressing emergency needs in rural areas, however, involve the recruiting, training and retention of first responders — and ensuring that enough are nearby when a call comes in.



▲ Two Harbors Community Radio is a listenersupported station with a mission to "build community ... through intergenerational grassroots participation" and "an open forum for all voices to be heard in an atmosphere of respectful inquiry into our shared social issues and respective cultural expressions and beliefs."



▲ Members of the multigenerational Larimore Volunteer Fire Department in Larimore, North Dakota.

"If they're young enough, they're working out-oftown," Dale Trosen, of the North Dakota Firefighter's Association, told the Grand Forks Herald in 2017. At the time, 96 percent of the state's fire departments were staffed by volunteers. Another challenge, he explained, is the engulfing nature of today's fires: "Thirty years ago, you could get to a fire and make a difference. We had more time," he said. "There's so much plastic now, which burns a lot faster."



▲ After Hurricane Maria passed, AARP Puerto Rico staff and volunteers delivered more than 7,000 bags of groceries to older people living alone in 26 towns. Similar outreach efforts were launched in early 2020 after a series of magnitude 5 or greater earthquakes struck the island.

#### **CREATE LEADERS**

In 2017, Hurricane Maria devastated the U.S. territory of **Puerto Rico**, leaving large parts of the island isolated unto itself, disconnected from running water, electricity, medical care and usable roadways.

For many, survival required relying on neighbors because assistance would be a long time coming.

"When your government is bankrupt, you have to invest in the people. That means integration, social participation and empowerment," José Acarón, director of AARP Puerto Rico, told an audience at the AARP Rural Livability Workshop. "If any change was going to happen after Maria, it was going to be house by house, street by street and community by community."

To ignite that change, the AARP office restructured its existing Community Leadership Academy program to focus on three areas of livability: Community Supports and Health Services, Civic Participation and Employment, and Social Participation.

After attending the five-day training program, local volunteers are encouraged to take what they learned back to their home community to mobilize residents and create positive change from within. ■



"When life as you know it literally changes overnight, what do you have? Some people have their family right beside them. Others have only their neighbors. That's when the word 'community' takes on a different and perhaps its truest meaning.

"One of the biggest lessons learned from **Hurricane Maria was that the more** widespread and disconnected communities are — such as in rural areas or sprawling, unwalkable suburbs — the more susceptible people are to the hazards that come with disasters. When modern infrastructure and services collapse, the luxury of space and privacy transforms into isolation and vulnerability.

"Having survived this life-changing event, I understand firsthand the necessity of building more resilient and integrated communities. Doing so promotes solidarity and security for all residents in times of an unstoppable disaster — and, perhaps more importantly, during every day of our lives."

— José Acarón, state director, **AARP Puerto Rico** 



"Rural communities are some of the most politically disenfranchised when it comes to climate policy, and [the 2018] National Climate Change Report showed they're also among the most at risk when it comes to the effect of climate change. This could mean stronger storms, more intense droughts and earlier freezes."

- KCUR 89.3 Radio/Harvest Public Media, Kansas City, Missouri, June 17, 2019

#### FIELD-TESTED STRATEGIES: Extreme Weather and Disasters

#### A GOLDEN SOLUTION FOR SLIPPERY SIDEWALKS

"The day or two after the snowstorm, I couldn't get to the pharmacy. I couldn't get to the post office. I mean, that didn't seem like an extreme thing to ask," said Pearl Swenson, a resident of **Bucksport**, **Maine**, in remarks before the town council. "Those [snow] banks come up, and my legs don't work like they used to," she added.

In many communities, sidewalk care and snow shoveling is the responsibility of the home or business adjacent to the sidewalk. In downtown Bucksport, where many storefronts are empty, the sidewalks are a town duty.

The council and town manager responded to Swenson's concerns with both short- and longerterm solutions. A part-time worker was hired and assigned to shovel downtown sidewalks. The town also shaved down the concrete edges of several sidewalks, "making it easier for pedestrians to shuffle onto them when a slick layer of ice renders normal footsteps difficult," noted the local paper, the Ellsworth American.

Several Bucksport businesses do shovel the sidewalks outside their doors, partly because it's good for business and partly because they could win the annual Ella B. Rayner Golden Shovel Award, named after a longtime Bucksport resident who was an advocate for pedestrian safety.

"It's a lively competition that the various shoveling groups and businesses take very seriously," observes Lori Parham, AARP Maine state director.



▲ In Bucksport, Maine, a golden shovel is given to the business that does the best job of keeping its sidewalks free of snow. BookStacks owner Andy Lacher is a repeat winner.

The full-size, gold-painted snow shovel is presented to a business that does a particularly good job of keeping its sidewalks clear. The winner's name is written on the shovel in a black permanent marker.

Much like Miss America's tiara, the golden shovel is handed down to the following year's champion — when there is one. Due to a lack of snow in 2016, the competition wasn't held. When winter came roaring back the following year, the shovel was in play again. ■



## SNAPSHOT

Designing parks and other spaces so they can dry out and bounce back after flooding is one way a community can protect itself from likely hazards. For instance, when the Napa River floods, this park and trail area in Napa, California, is closed off by levees and solid gates, thus shielding the adjacent business district from the water and fast-moving logs propelled by the rapids. The bench is bolted to the cement so it remains in place even when submerged.





- "It's hard to get residents to engage in disaster planning when a disaster isn't looming."
- "The small, rural areas that are devastated by hurricanes or other disasters don't receive the resources or attention provided to larger communities."
- "Many older and vulnerable residents will not or cannot evacuate without significant help. If no one is able to provide direct assistance — ranging from packing up their essentials, securing their home, and transporting them to a shelter or other safe place — most older people have no choice but to stay."
- "Fears about access to medical care and medicines are a big part of why people don't evacuate when told to."
- "We're losing neighbors. We're losing farms because some just can't afford to pick up the pieces after a disaster."
- "When the floodwaters recede, it's often out of sight, out of mind. Things look dry, they look normal, but what's left behind is devastation. Recovery takes a lot longer than people ever expect."
- "When distant homes are scattered throughout a large area, first responders often don't know where exactly people live."
- "It's hard to recruit first responders. The work is dangerous. It's unpaid. The older residents are aging out of being able to do the physical aspects of the work and younger people need to focus on finding or keeping a paid job and on caring for their children. They can't drop everything and run to put out a fire."

#### **TAKEAWAYS**

- Communities where neighbors know and can look after one another are more resilient and better able to protect themselves in times of disaster — and they can recover more efficiently in the aftermath.
- Even simple solutions, such as posting visible house numbers, are important, effective ways of preparing for a personal emergency or a large-scale disaster.
- High-speed internet and local communications platforms (such as a community radio station, local news website or social media feed) are needed to keep people informed about weather emergencies and other important alerts.
- Emergency preparations need to be done long before a disaster occurs.
- It's critical for first responders to be able to quickly determine who needs help, where they are located and what they need.
- Many older adults have already lived through weather-related or similar emergencies and can tap into those experiences to help themselves and others.
- Rural communities can benefit from employing a team of community nurses and social workers who will identify and reach out to those most in need of help when a disaster strikes, thus calling on other residents, first responders and care providers only if absolutely necessary.
- Since all-volunteer emergency response teams are increasingly difficult to staff, local or regional governments may need to establish a greater number of full-time, salaried first responder positions and teams.

## **Closing Thoughts**

Demographic changes make it imperative that local leaders approach community planning and design differently than how it has been done in the past.

The communities that thrive and survive are those where children can grow up safely and supported, and where residents want to remain and grow old.

There are many reasons why people value living in rural towns and communities — these include easy access to natural places, neighbors who help when help is needed, and the premium placed on privacy and independence. The majority of rural residents want to remain in their communities as they age, despite the potential difficulties.

Some of the overall takeaways and insights gathered during the AARP Rural Livability Workshop and from this report:



▲ A domestic turkey pays a house call at a Maryland farm.

- Rural communities are tight-knit and pride themselves on coming together to tackle challenging problems.
- The distances to services and stores even to neighbors can amplify the challenges of aging in rural places.
- With fewer layers of bureaucracy, small towns and rural areas are the kinds of places where change is possible. The decision-making process can be more efficient than in larger communities or cities. In fact, small communities can be the perfect laboratory for testing new ideas.
- Small and temporary changes often lead to big improvements.
- Like all communities, rural communities that celebrate all generations see an increase in civic participation.
- Larger livability initiatives such as building workforce housing, addressing food insecurity or enhancing transportation services often benefit from a regional rather than purely local approach.
- Developing safe, accessible, welcoming public spaces encourages residents to connect with their neighbors and be physically active. An added bonus: communities with these places can attract tourist dollars.
- Since more and more people of all ages are living alone, housing solutions need to include nontraditional models, such as cohousing, shared housing and accessory dwelling units.
- High-speed internet is an essential service. The lack of high-speed internet access makes it hard if not impossible to attract young adults to a community, and it limits opportunities for entrepreneurs, for telemedicine, online banking and distance learning.
- Small downtowns are valuable assets, provided they are walkable, feature needed shops and services, provide places to gather and, ideally, reflect the community's location, history and culture.



"If we want to change our communities for the future, it can't be a vision that ends with us. The vision needs to be at a point 30, 40 years out. A point in time that I care about and will not occupy."

— **John Robert Smith**, former mayor of Meridian, Mississippi, chairman of Transportation for America, during a presentation at the 2019 AARP Rural Livability Workshop

## Learn More A selection of programs, publications, organizations, agencies and websites

#### **AARP PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES**

#### **AARP Livable Communities**

The AARP Livable Communities initiative develops resources for local leaders, policymakers, municipal staff, placemaking professionals, citizen activists and more. AARP staff and volunteers working at the national-, state- and local-level provide direct support in hundreds of communities. The website AARP.org/Livable features free publications, a subject-based articles archive, links to reports from AARP Research and the AARP Public Policy Institute, and information about the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities (also see page 53).

#### **AARP Livable Communities e-Newsletter**

Created for community influencers, this free, weekly, award-winning newsletter is an easy way to stay informed about livability efforts and ideas: AARP.org/LivableSubscribe

#### **AARP Community Challenge**

This annual small-grants program provides funds to nonprofits and local governments for "quick-action" community improvement projects: AARP.org/CommunityChallenge

#### **AARP Livability Index**

The index calculates a score for communities throughout the United States based on the services and amenities that impact people's lives the most. Searches can be customized by location and livability domains: AARP.org/LivabilityIndex

#### **AARP States and Local Chapters**

AARP is present in communities nationwide, working from offices in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, as well as hundreds of volunteer-run chapters: AARP.org/States and AARP.org/Chapters

#### **AARP Home and Community Preferences Survey**

This recurring survey by AARP Research asks adults age 18 or older what they want and need in the places they live: AARP.org/RuralLivability and AARP.orgLivableSurvey2018

#### **AARP Driver Safety**

Among the program's online and local offerings is the AARP Smart Driver program, a refresher course for people age 50 or older. Drivers in many states qualify for an auto insurance discount upon completing the course: AARPDriverSafety.org

#### **AARP Foundation**

With a focus on allievating poverty among older adults, AARP Foundation supports economic opportunities and social connectedness efforts that can prevent and reduce senior poverty: AARP.org/Foundation

#### **Center to Champion Nursing in America**

An initiative of AARP, AARP Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the center works to ensure community access to highly skilled nurses: AARP.org/Nursing

#### **AARP PUBLICATIONS**

Each of the following titles is free and available in print or by download via the URLs below or AARP.org/LivableLibrary.

#### **AARP Roadmap to Livability**

This six-part collection contains subject-specific strategies for launching or advancing community-based livability efforts: AARP.org/LivabilityRoadmap

- Book 1: AARP Roadmap to Livability
- Book 2: Community Listening Session Tool Kit
- Book 3: Housing Workbook
- Book 4: Transportation Workbook
- Book 5: Health Services and Community Supports Workbook
- Book 6: Economic Development Workbook

#### **AARP HomeFit Guide** and

#### Here to Stay: Home Upkeep for All

Some of the nation's oldest and least aging-friendly housing is located in rural areas. These AARP publications provide information about making a home safer for people of every age: AARP.org/HomeFit and HereToStay.AARPFoundation.org

#### The ABCs of ADUs and Accessory Dwellng Units

Accessory dwellings are secondary residences attached to a single-family home or built on the same property lot. ADUs can help address housing shortages, enable family members to live near one another and provide homeowners with a way to earn rental income: AARP.org/ADU

#### **Making Room: Housing for a Changing America**

Filled with ideas, solutions, photographs, infographics and floor plans from a National Building Museum exhibition of the same name, Making Room is a rallying cry for a wider menu of housing options: AARP.org/MakingRoom

#### **Engaging the Community to Create Community**

This guide by AARP and Cities of Service provides examples of collaborations between public officials and residents to identify needs and solutions: AARP.org/LivableLibrary

#### **Creating Parks and Public Spaces for People of All Ages**

Developed by AARP, 8 80 Cities and The Trust for Public Land, this guide can help communities develop safe, healthy outdoor places for people of all ages and abilities. Rural examples are included: AARP.org/LivableParks

#### The Pop-Up Placemaking Tool Kit

Produced by AARP and Team Better Block, the tool kit is a practical guide to demonstrating and building support for needed community features: AARP.org/Livable-PopUp

#### **AARP Walk Audit Tool Kit and Leader Guide**

Walk audits enable community members to document street safety problems for sharing with local officials as a way to advocate for change: AARP.org/WalkAudit

#### **Where We Live**

A collection of inspiring ideas and solutions from America's local leaders: AARP.org/WhereWeLive Continued ▶

#### **ORGANIZATIONS**

**Citizens' Institute on Rural Design** empowers rural residents to capitalize on local and regional assets in order to guide the civic development and future design of their own communities: *Rural-Design.org* 

**8 80 Cities** brings people together to enhance mobility and public spaces with the goal of creating vibrant, healthy and equitable communities: 880Cities.org

**Feonix: Mobility Rising** creates mobility solutions, systems and programs to increase the transportation options for people in underserved communities: *FeonixMobilityRising.org* 

**Housing Assistance Council** assists in the development of housing and homeownership for working low-income rural families and farmworkers, with a focus on high-need groups and regions, including Indian country, the Mississippi Delta, the Southwest border colonias and Appalachia: *RuralHome.org* 

**LOR Foundation** partners with rural communities in Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico to accelerate ideas and elevate the rural voice: *LORFoundation.org* 

**Main Street America**, a program of the National Main Street Center, works to revitalize older and historic commercial districts to build thriving neighborhoods and economies: *MainStreet.org* 

**National American Indian Housing Council** advocates on behalf of Native housing entities and efforts to provide culturally relevant, quality affordable housing for Native people: *NAIHC.net* 

**National Center for Frontier Communities** serves as a voice for people and programs in frontier communities and raises awareness of frontier issues among policymakers, agencies and the public: *FrontierUS.org* 

**Opticos Design** is an architectural and planning firm that champions "missing middle housing" choices so people can live in affordable, sustainable, walkable places: *OpticosDesign.com* 

**Rural Health Information Hub** is a clearinghouse for data and resources about rural health: *RuralHealthInfo.org* 

**Rural Institute Inclusive Communities** focuses on improving life for rural Americans with disabilities: *RuralInstitute.umt.edu* 

**Smart Growth America** and several of its programs (including the **National Complete Streets Coalition** and **Transportation for America**) provide supports and resources for rural places: *SmartGrowthAmerica.org* 

**Strong Towns** advocates for community- and sustainability-focused development that improves the resiliency and financial strength of cities, towns and neighborhoods: *StrongTowns.org* 

**The Trust for Public Land** works to save land for people to enjoy, from neighborhood parks to national parks: *TPL.org* 

**Team Better Block** is a planning and placemaking firm that works with local leaders and community members to create useful public spaces: *TeamBetterBlock.com* 

**Village to Village Network** is an umbrella-organization for locally created aging-in-community programs: *VTVNetwork.org* 

#### **GOVERNMENT AGENCIES**

In addition to the services and information that's available from state, regional and local governments, the federal government departments and agencies listed below are among those with programs and resources that can be helpful to local leaders and residents of rural communities: *USA.gov* 

- U.S. Department of Agriculture
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
- · U.S. Department of Transportation
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- Federal Emergency Management Agency

#### **RURAL REPORTS**

#### Creating an Age-Advantaged Community: A Tool Kit for Building Intergenerational Communities that Recognize, Engage and Support All Ages

Many rural communities are adopting livability practices, in part to attract young families. This Generations United tool kit provides successful examples. Available via *GU.org* 

## e-Connectivity @ USDA: Broadband Resources for Rural America

This report helps navigate the agencies within the USDA to find the programs, grants, loans and supports that can help expand rural internet service. Available via RD.USDA.gov

## **Emergency Preparedness and Recovery:**A Tool Kit for Rural Communities

Produced by the Texas Chapter of the American Planning Association, the tool kit addresses the need for partnerships between emergency management personnel, local government and service organizations. Available via *RuralCenter.org* 

## Exploring Strategies to Improve Health and Equity in Rural Communities

A look at how the strengths and assets of rural areas can be leveraged to address community needs. Available via NORC.org

## Rural Development Hubs: Strengthening America's Rural Innovation Infrastructure

Hubs build on community assets to improve public health, economic development and community engagement. Available via AspenInstitute.org

#### **Rural Risk Communication Tool Kit**

The Georgia Department of Community Health's Southeast Health District provides advice for connecting with rural communities about weather disasters and other emergency events. Available via *RuralRCKit.org* 

#### **Smart Growth in Small Towns and Rural Communities**

An examination of strategies that can help rural communities achieve growth and development goals while maintaining a rural character. Available via *EPA.gov* 

## Tips for Designing Transit Services and Infrastructure That Promote Livability

Produced by the National Rural Transit Assistance Program, the guide explains how rural communities can enhance transit and make roads safer for cyclists, motorists and pedestrians. Available via *NationalRTAP.org*.

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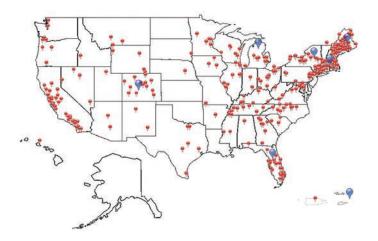
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## **AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities**

he AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and **Communities** — a program of the AARP Livable Communities initiative — encourages local leaders to implement the types of changes that make places more livable for people of all ages, especially older adults.

Several of the communities that appear in this publication belong to the network. Among them: Grayson County, Virginia; Winnemucca, Nevada; and numerous small, rural and remote towns in Maine.

The work that happens within the network is hands-on and locally determined and directed. While membership does not mean the community is currently "agefriendly," or that AARP is endorsing it as a place to live, membership does mean that a community's elected leadership has made the commitment to actively work toward making their town, city, county or state a great place to live for people of all ages.



▲ This map represents the network's membership at the start of 2020. The red pins indicate the city, town and county members. Blue pins mark the member states or territories. Learn more about the network and check out the ever-growing member list by visiting AARP.org/AgeFriendly.

### The Workshop Roster

In addition to AARP staff and volunteers from throughout the nation, representatives of the following organizations participated in the AARP Rural Livability Workshop. (If a state isn't indicated, the organization has a national presence.)

- 8 80 Cities
- Age-Friendly Coastal Communities (ME)
- Age-Friendly Biddeford (ME)
- Age-Friendly Georgetown (ME)
- Age-Friendly Jackman (ME)
- Age-Friendly Raymond (ME)
- Age-Friendly Readfield (ME)
- Age-Friendly Saco (ME)
- Age-Friendly Sullivan (ME)
- Age-Friendly Surry (ME)
- Aging 2.0 (ME)
- Aging Well in Waldo County (ME)
- Alaska Housing Finance Corporation Aroostook Agency on Aging (ME)
- Auburn Recreation Department (ME)
- · Augusta Age-Friendly Committee (ME
- Berkshire Interfaith Organizing (MA)
- Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (MA) Bethel Area Age-Friendly Community Initiative (ME)
- Bicycle/Pedestrian Committee (ME)
- Big Project Days (ME)
- Boise State University (ID)
- Bucksport Bay Healthy Communities Coalition (ME)
- **Build Maine**
- Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce (NM)
- Carv Medical Center (ME)
- Charles City Area Chamber of Commerce (IA)
- Citizens Health Action Team (ME)
- City and County of Honolulu (HI)
- City of Auburn Recreation and Sport Facilities (ME)
- City of Bath (ME)
- City of Cuba City (WI)
- · City of Danforth (ME) City of Hallowell (ME)
- City of Saco (ME)
- Community Friendly Connection (ME)
- Cumberland Aging in Place (ME)
- Eastern Area Agency on Aging (ME)

- Eliot Aging in Place Committee (ME)
- Federal Emergency Management Agency
- Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park (ND) • Fourth Economy Consulting (ME)
- Freeport Community Services (ME)
- Friends in Action (ME)
- Gibson Center for Senior Service (NH)
- Government of the U.S. Virgin Islands
- Grayson County S.A.C. (VA)
- Hallowell All Age-Friendly Committee (ME)
- Healthy Island Project (ME)
- · Healthy Peninsula (ME)
- Housing Assistance Council
- Indiana Electric Cooperatives
- · International Council on Active Aging
- Island Connections (ME)
- ITNAmerica
- Living Communities Foundation (ME)
- Living Well in North Yarmouth Committee (ME)
- LOR Foundation
- Maine Center on Aging
- Maine Community Foundation
- · Maine Council on Aging
- Maine Department of Health and Human Services
- Maine Development Foundation • Maine Office of Elder and Disability Services
- MaineHousing
- MCH, Inc. (Maine)
- Mercy Care for the Adirondacks (NY)
- Millinocket Regional Hospital/Thrive Penobscot (ME)
- Montana State Government
- National American Indian Housing Council
- North Dakota Department of Commerce
- Northern Hilltowns Consortium of Councils on Aging (MA)
- Northland Foundation (MN)
- Oak Hill Assistive Technology (CT)
- Office of U.S. Senator Angus King (ME)
- Oklahoma State University

- Old Orchard Beach Community Friendly Connection (ME)
- Opticos Design
- Palermo Community Center (ME)
- · Partnership for Age-Friendly Communities, Larimer County (CO)
- · Portland Office of Elder Affairs (ME)
- Senior Services, Forsyth County (NC)
- Somerset County Public Health (ME)
- South Dakota Community Foundation
- Southern New Hampshire Planning Commission
- Strong Towns
- Team Better Block (OK)
- The Trust for Public Land
- Town of Bowdoinham (ME)
- Town of Bucksport (ME)
- Town of Fryeburg (ME)
- Town of Kennebunk Committee on Aging (ME)
- Town of Madison (ME)
- Town of Ogunquit (ME)
- Town of Scarborough Community Services (ME)
- Trafton Senior Center/Sanford-Springvale YMCA (ME)
- · Transportation for America
- . Trinity Green, LLC. (ME)
- Tufts University (MA)
  - University of Alaska Fairbanks School of Natural Resources
- University of Maine Center on Aging
- · University of Montevallo (AL)
- University of Nebraska
- University of New England (ME)
- University of North Carolina Wilmington
- University of South Florida
- U.S. Department of Agriculture
- Vitruvian Planning (ID)
- Wayne Aging at Home (ME)
- West Virginia Municipal League
- Westbrook Housing (ME) Windham Human Services Advisory Committee (ME)
- Yarmouth Aging in Place (ME)

## **AARP** Rural Livability Workshop Report

How and why small towns and remote communities are working to become more livable for older adults and people of all ages



▲ Lake Winnipesaukee, Meredith, New Hampshire



The road to Casper, Wyoming



A home and orchard in Chesnee, South Carolina



A hayfield in Huntsville, Utah

A merica's demographic future is showing up first in rural areas, where older residents form a greater proportion of the population than in urban or suburban areas.

One-quarter of all Americans age 65 or older live in small towns and rural communities. That percentage is growing, since the rural population is aging at a faster rate than the nation's population as a whole.

According to the AARP Home and Community Preferences Survey, adults in rural areas are more likely than those in cities and suburbs to say they want to reside in their community and/or current home for as long as possible.

In June 2019, AARP convened its first-ever national gathering about rural livability — as it relates to people of all ages and, especially, to older adults. Held in Portland, Maine, the event was attended by AARP staff, volunteers, community partners and livability practitioners representing a range of specialties and locations.

This report is based on presentations and conversations from that event, as well as related meetings, media sources and AARP's work in communities throughout the nation.

While the AARP Rural Livability Workshop Report is by no means an exhaustive examination of the many issues that impact rural communities, the data, observations and examples contained within these pages can serve to inform community influencers — local, state and national officials; policymakers; service providers; advocacy organizations; citizen activists; and others — about the needs, benefits, challenges and solutions found in rural places.

To learn when AARP releases new livability publications, sign up for the free, weekly **AARP Livable Communities e-Newsletter**:

AARP.org/LivableSubscribe.