SOMA

BECOMING AGE FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

JULY 8, 2016

The need for establishing self-sustaining age-friendly communities has been thoroughly researched and documented. Demographic data reveals that the population of the United States is aging; the 65+ cohort nation-wide is projected to increase from 13% in 2015 to 20% in 2050. The populations of South Orange and Maplewood mirror this trend with persons over age 65 projected to increase in South Orange from 12.4% in 2016 to 14.8% in 2021 and in Maplewood from 12.5% in 2016 to 15.2% in 2021. *South Orange and Maplewood (SOMA) are taking a proactive approach and are engaged in assessing their age-friendly status with a generous grant from the Grotta Fund.*

The Grotta Fund for Senior Care's mission is to improve the quality of life of older adults and their families living in Essex, Union, Morris, Sussex and eastern Somerset counties by helping them age in place, with dignity and independence.

South Orange and Maplewood (SOMA) have joined together to ensure that they provide a full range of municipal services to the community, including seniors. Improving outreach to this group of residents, identifying their needs, and developing a responsive age-friendly community action plan procuring an age-friendly environment and culture is paramount.

Methodology

Primary data collection allowed for questions tailored to elicit findings specific to South Orange and Maplewood in each of the WHO 8 Domains of Livability. These include:

> *Domain 1: Outdoor Spaces and Buildings:* People need public places to gather — indoors and out.
> *Domain 2: Transportation:* Driving shouldn't be the only way to get around.
> *Domain 3: Housing:* AARP surveys consistently find that older adults want to stay in their homes and communities for as long as possible.
> *Domain 4: Social Participation:* Regardless of a person's age, loneliness is often as debilitating a health condition as having a chronic illness or disease.
> *Domain 5: Respect and Social Inclusion:* Everyone wants to feel valued.
> *Domain 6: Work and Civic Engagement:* Why does work need to be an all or nothing experience?
> *Domain 7: Communication and Information:* Information today is delivered in ways few could have imagined a decade ago — and many still don't know how to use.
> *Domain 8: Community and Health Services:* At some point, every person of every age gets hurt, becomes ill or simply needs some help.

Each component illuminated issues through a different perspective – township leadership, township employees, community members, and providers of services to adults over age 60. Site visits, key informant interviews, a community survey of adults age 60+, focus groups (consumer and provider-based), a community forum, and a community asset map captured multiple vantage points to ensure a comprehensive landscape of community gaps and assets. Findings from each component were reported in a timely manner to the Local Steering Committee (LSC) at in-person meetings.

The SOMA Local Steering Committee (LSC) is comprised of a diverse collaborative group, reaching beyond the traditional sectors of aging. South Orange and Maplewood local governments' spearheaded recruitment of LSC membership representing faith based organizations, local business, elder-care providers, housing, non-profits and health care providers. Key municipal department heads are integral members of the committee including: Recreation, Emergency Response and Health. Representatives from senior organizations in both towns (South Orange Seniors, Maplewood Senior Share) are actively engaged participants and provide insightful constructive input.

Site visits were conducted to assess both the physical and supportive environments of municipal buildings, town pools and senior residences. Supportive environments, including building design, can enhance physical well-being and quality of life, accommodate individuality and independence, foster social interaction and enable people to conduct their daily activities.

Key informant interviews were conducted to provide an overview of issues relative to gaps in services, awareness of services, communication with seniors and suggestions for improvements.

An age 60+ community survey was administered to gather meaningful opinions, comments, and feedback from a convenience sample and aid the development of an implementable action plan to better foster an age-friendly environment. The survey, based upon the AARP Livable Communities – Great Places for All Ages survey as well as the Village of RidgeWood survey, explored key topics within the WHO 8 Domains of Livability. Survey results serve as a foundation to base decisions on objective information while allowing comparative results acting as a snapshot of local attitudes and behaviors. Questions included Likert scale responses, free form response and collected demographic information.

The survey was distributed on-line via Survey Monkey with links provided on township web sites. Hard copy surveys were available at multiple municipal buildings. Paper surveys were also available in Russian. As needed, technical assistance was provided for on-line survey completion at municipal buildings, primarily libraries.

The survey launched on April 5, 2016, and closed on May 9, 2016; there was a soft Launch in Maplewood on March 25, 2016, using only hard copy surveys. A total of 443 residents participated in the survey with a final sample size N=427, excluding 16 residents that did not meet the 60+ age criteria.

Three focus groups were conducted to delve further into key initial survey findings – two consumer based groups and one group of providers of services to persons over age 60, primarily non-township employees. The focus groups sought to gather additional meaningful opinions, comments, and feedback from a small sample of residents and providers to aid the development of an implementable action plan to better foster an age-friendly environment.

The Community Forum was designed to raise awareness of the age-friendly initiative, motivate community members to participate in the process and provide an opportunity for their perspectives to aid the development of an implementable action plan to better foster an age-friendly environment.

Designed to identify gaps in programs and services that are targeted to older adults in the community, asset mapping is another method used to identify and graphically depict SOMA's strengths and the resources it has available to address needs of older adult residents, and to improve age-friendliness of the communities. Maps provide information about which resources are available to increase the community's age-friendliness.

Key Findings

- Municipal buildings and outdoor spaces are in need of better maintenance, repairs and renovations.
- Jitney service, although available in both municipalities, is underutilized. Residents are unsure of jitney route, schedule, availability, accessibility and modes of access.
- There is not enough accessible and affordable housing for those that want to age in place; taxes are a major concern.
- South Orange's senior discount card assists older adults with the costs of daily living, especially those on fixed income.
- Although both municipalities offer a wide array of recreational activities in which seniors participate, additional options are requested.
- Seniors seek action beyond the planning phase of the initiative including realistic accountable goals and timelines for completion. Seniors need to have a voice in decision making.
- Intergenerational neighborhoods exist however programming aimed at bringing together various age groups needs improvement.
- Older adults indicated concern about identification and outreach to those that are socially isolated or homebound.
- Residents are unsure of volunteer opportunities; an organizing entity is needed to connect volunteers with organizations and persons in need.
- SOMA has tremendous resources available for residents to age in place, but information about these resources is not well communicated, centralized or easily accessible.
- Local hospitals partner with SOMA to provide community health services. Health Officers and Public Health Nurses offer screenings, flu vaccinations and health education.

General Recommendations

- Create a SOMA livable community vision statement, age friendly logo and motto to raise initiative awareness and incorporate it into all facets of communication.
- Employ a dedicated project champion to coordinate services and programs for residents to age in place.
- Create a SOMA Senior Advisory Committee based upon the foundation of the established South Orange Senior Advisory Committee.
- Mobilize teams of volunteers with skills, experience and community commitment to maximize resources and accomplish measurable goals. SOMA will gain community members as change agents, teams focused on local concerns and initiatives, and local talent.
- Seek and procure additional funding sources for sustainability of age friendly initiative.
- Educate and encourage individuals to plan and implement long-term financial, housing, transportation and health decisions.
- Include older adults in community-wide decision making.
- Provide on-going evaluation and assessment of services offered.

Domain 1: Outdoor Spaces and Buildings

People need public places to gather — indoors and out. Green spaces, safe streets, sidewalks, outdoor seating and accessible buildings (think elevators, stairs with railings, etc.) can be used and enjoyed by people of all ages.

Findings

- Municipal buildings and outdoor spaces are in need of better maintenance, repairs and renovations.
- Although both communities offer walkable downtown areas, there is room for improvement of pedestrian friendliness.

Recommendations

- Provide department phone number and or South Orange mobile application information on stickers adhered to benches, entrances, bathrooms to report needed municipal building and outdoor spaces maintenance and repairs; increase awareness of South Orange mobile application for reporting issues.
- Ensure municipalities allocate ample budget funding for facilities maintenance and renovation.
- Allow better access to public restrooms, specifically after business hours.
- Increase bench seating along specific seniors' walking routes.
- Educate public on crosswalk standards and the walk/stop signals.
- Examine feasibility of reducing speed limits and/or stricter enforcement of traffic violations.
- Better enforcement of sidewalk repair ordinances for residential and business areas.
- Evaluate and upgrade public area lighting, as needed.
- Encourage residents to illuminate their neighborhoods by leaving porch lights on.
- Ensure public drinking fountains are clean and functional.

Domain 2: Transportation

Driving shouldn't be the only way to get around. Public transit options can be as expansive and as infrastructure dependent as a train system or as targeted as a taxi service that provides non-drivers with rides to and from a doctor's office.

Findings

- Jitney service, although available in both municipalities, is underutilized. Residents are unsure of jitney route, schedule, availability, accessibility and modes of access.
- Parking, including handicap accessible spaces, is insufficient.
- Maplewood train station is not handicap accessible; South Orange train station is.

Recommendations

- Create a transportation subcommittee to evaluate existing jitney service and make recommendations to address needs.
- Meet with DOT to discuss parking limitations and existing plans to address concerns.

- Provide municipally sponsored reduced-fare taxi coupons for older adults.
- Educate seniors about Uber.

Domain 3: Housing

AARP surveys consistently find that older adults want to stay in their homes and communities for as long as possible. Doing so is possible if a house is designed or modified for aging in place and if a community includes housing options for varying life stages (and varying bank accounts).

Findings

- There is not enough accessible and affordable housing for those that want to age in place.
- High property taxes are a major concern.
- Long waiting lists for senior housing.

Recommendations

- Create a senior housing subcommittee to assess needs and make recommendations to local government.
- Designate a representative of older adults to advocate for affordable housing options at local planning, zoning and development commissions.
- Review and modify zoning ordinances to permit multiple housing options in residential districts.
- Ensure planning of new developments is consistent with SOMA's vision regarding aging in place.
- Review possibility of tax incentives for seniors and home owners modifying existing structures for accessibility to sustain intergenerational neighborhoods.
- Provide a list of vetted contractors for home repairs, modification or improvement to increase seniors' level of confidence level while providing for a safer environment.
- Provide assistance to vulnerable seniors with finding and maintaining suitable housing.
- Establish a network of eldercare services for senior housing developments.
- Encourage lending entities to provide reduced-rate loans for seniors to make home modifications.

Domain 4: Social Participation

Regardless of a person's age, loneliness is often as debilitating a health condition as having a chronic illness or disease. Sadness and isolation can be combatted by the availability of accessible, affordable and fun social activities.

Findings

- South Orange's senior discount card assists older adults with the costs of daily living, especially those on fixed income.
- Although both municipalities offer a wide array of recreational activities in which seniors participate, additional options are requested.

Recommendations

- Evaluate costs of senior programming and offer reduced fees.
- Establish SOMA business senior discount card; enable Maplewood resident's access to South Orange senior discount card.
- Evaluate attendance and scheduling of older adult programming to ensure maximum interest.
- Raise awareness of shared SOMA recreational department opportunities.
- Provide a centralized system of access to recreational, educational, cultural and trip information for seniors.
- Collect contact information (create database) from registration materials to distribute other relevant communications.
- Provide transportation to recreational and cultural activities and events.
- Partner with faith based organizations to raise awareness of community wide opportunities.
- Build a network of seniors to assist other seniors for example, library book delivery and shared shopping excursions.
- Emphasize educational opportunities regarding technology for older adults to keep them up to date.

Domain 5: Respect and Social Inclusion

Everyone wants to feel valued. Intergenerational activities are a great way for young and old to learn from one another, honor what each has to offer and, at the same time, feel good about themselves.

Findings

- Seniors seek action beyond the planning phase of the initiative including realistic accountable goals and timelines for completion. Seniors need to have a voice in decision making.
- Intergenerational neighborhoods exist however programming aimed at bringing together various age groups needs improvement.
- Older adults are concerned about identification and outreach to those that are socially isolated or homebound.

Recommendations

- Create a SOMA Senior Advisory Committee based upon the foundation of the established South Orange Senior Advisory Committee.
- Solicit older adult participation on Township Committees and Boards.
- Coordinate community spaces and programs to promote intergenerational social interaction; for example, a community garden partnering local elementary school and senior group.
- Provide opportunities for older adults to engage with children and teens through intergenerational learning opportunities such as school reading buddies or art partners.
- Provide opportunities for older adults to engage with children and teens through social events such as an intergenerational dance.
- Create senior friendly opportunities at family friendly SOMA festivals and events.
- Establish connections between new moms groups and senior groups.
- Enhance role of neighborhood associations in identifying isolated or homebound seniors.
- Work with Seton Hall University to improve opportunities for low or no cost learning.

- Encourage youth volunteer hours to provide snow removal and or grass maintenance for senior neighbors.
- Provide transportation to intergenerational activities and events for example, high school concerts and plays.
- Distribute SOMA calendar of events, indicating age-friendly opportunities with logo.
- Ensure proper planning of age friendly spaces for concerts, events and festivals including reserved senior parking, seating, microphones and large print materials.
- Educate the community about ageism, including language choices and stigma.
- Establish living history programs enabling seniors to share experiences with students.
- Establish an annual SOMA Living Legacy award and acknowledge accomplishments and life experiences of a community member.

Domain 6: Work and Civic Engagement

Why does work need to be an all or nothing experience? An age-friendly community provides ways older people can (if they choose) continue to work for pay, volunteer their skills and be actively engaged in community life.

Findings

- Residents are unsure of volunteer opportunities; an organizing entity is needed to connect volunteers with organizations and persons in need.

Recommendations

- Promote seniors as reliable dependable experienced employees.
- Provide a centralized repository for local businesses to advertise age appropriate employment opportunities.
- Assist with senior job placement.
- Provide transportation opportunities to support employment.
- Consider financial incentives for volunteerism including reduced fees, tax credits or reimbursable transportation costs.
- Create a SOMA-wide directory of volunteer opportunities and or municipal office of volunteerism to improve awareness.
- Collaborate with Community Coalition on Race to increase attendance at volunteer training sessions.
- Enhance volunteer recruitment events.
- Promote volunteer roles that address the needs of isolated older adults.

Domain 7: Communication and Information

Information today is delivered in ways few could have imagined a decade ago — and many still don't know how to use. Age-friendly communities recognize that not everyone has a smartphone or Internet access and that information needs to be disseminated through a variety of means.

Findings

- SOMA has tremendous resources available for residents to age in place, but information about these resources is not well communicated, centralized or easily accessible.
- Local senior publications exist but could benefit from expanded distribution.
- Community websites are a tremendous source of information but require redevelopment of senior related sections.

Recommendations

- Employ a dedicated project champion to coordinate services and programs for residents to age in place.
- Create a comprehensive SOMA resource directory subsidized with advertising dollars from local businesses.
- Create a refrigerator magnet including key contact information for emergency and social services.
- Engage faith based organizations as a conduit of information to seniors.
- Create a dedicated senior hotline for daily assistance, similar to 311.
- Increase distribution of senior newsletters through local businesses affiliated with senior discount card and registration database from SOMA recreational activities.
- Ensure communication is distributed via multiple media including print, electronic and phone.
- Ensure that communication materials use age friendly language, culturally appropriate and are in a legible font size.
- Distribute print materials through unexpected venues including tax bills, meal delivery, pharmacies and local physician offices.
- Improve senior section of town web sites including content, ease of navigation, font size and increase visual aids; create a centralized web site for SOMA seniors.
- Provide map of local community assets highlighting places of worship, health providers, shopping, parks and recreational areas, municipal building and non-profit organizations.

Domain 8: Community and Health Services

At some point, every person of every age gets hurt, becomes ill or simply needs some help. While it's important that care be available nearby, it's essential that residents are able to access and afford the services required.

Findings

- Local hospitals partner with SOMA to provide community health services. Health Officers and Public Health Nurses offer screenings, flu vaccinations and health education

Recommendations

- Provide transportation to medical appointments within neighboring communities.
- Evaluate adult day care options.
- Analyze availability of respite care providers for primary care givers; create and distribute vetted list.
- Evaluate South Orange's senior social work position to maximize effectiveness for older adults.
- Increase partnership with local health providers to promote the health and safety of older residents including screenings and education.
- Strengthen connection with Seton Hall University physician's assistant and nursing students to provide services to older residents.