

Environmental Policy Change

Building Communities to Support Healthy Aging

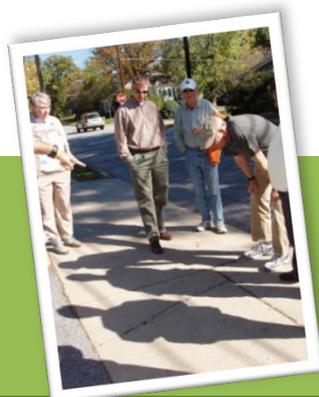
Strengthen Your Capacity to Make a Difference

Spring 2010



Leaders Needed!

1. Get the guidance and support you need to make a difference in your community or sphere of influence.
2. Complete HAN survey on learning needs relative to policy (go to: www.prc-han.org).
3. Join our community of leaders working for environmental policy change to support healthy aging. Sign up at www.prc-han.org.



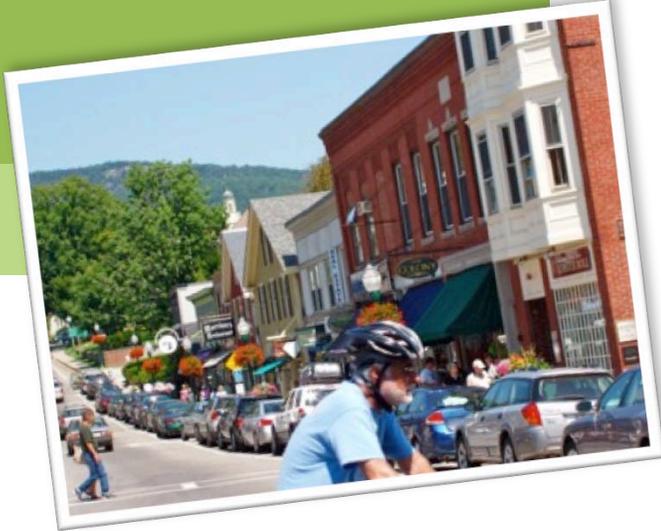
What are the challenges?

A growing body of research points to the influence of the social, physical, and built environment on older adult health. Despite the evidence, we have been slow to design and implement environmental policy that supports healthy aging and helps prevent or delay functional decline and disability. As leaders from diverse fields, it is urgent that we get to work, learning more about effective policies and how to advance them; educating other professionals including planners, engineers, architects and aging and public health personnel; and joining with others who share our concerns to work toward policy change. Together we can call greater attention to needs and build stronger communities for healthy aging. This document describes needs and suggests priorities and opportunities for action.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Healthy Aging Research Network (HAN) is a consortium of eight university-based member centers, affiliates and their community partners. Funded by the CDC Healthy Aging Program, CDC-HAN has focused on translating research into practice and policy for over eight years.

Why do environments matter?

Physical activity, access to nutritious food, mobility and social engagement are all linked to environmental conditions.



Neighborhoods matter.

Neighborhoods provide places to walk, socialize and participate fully in the life of the community. Where high noise levels, heavy traffic, and inadequate lighting exist, older residents are at increased risk of functional loss (Balfour & Kaplan, 2002; Clark et al., 2009); those living elsewhere are more likely to be physically active, have access to nutritious food, and be independent in activities of daily living (Clarke & George, 2009). Neighborhood design matters, also, with more walking where there is high housing density, attractive destinations, and green spaces (Berke et al., 2007; Li et al., 2005). Pleasant common spaces also promote social ties (Sugiyama & Thompson, 2007).

Safety matters.

When out in their communities, older adults worry about crime, falling, being struck by a motor vehicle, or having other problems because of physical limitations. These concerns are real. For example, in 2007, the rate of pedestrian deaths was almost twice as high for adults aged 70 and older than for younger people (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2007), with even non-fatal accidents likely to cause serious injury (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2007).

Older adults have particular concern about the availability of benches and restrooms, as well as sidewalk quality and maintenance. Outdoor falls are a significant problem.

Housing matters.

Older adults who live in homes that have universal design features are more likely to be able to stay in their homes even in the face of disabling conditions. Very few homes, unfortunately, have these features (Campbell & Memken, 2007). And accessibility is not just a problem inside homes. Most homes lack step-free entrances and wide doorways, and may not provide easy links from homes to pathways and then to transportation that provides access to the larger community. The 44% of US older adults who lack accessible public transportation are at particular risk for social isolation when they are no longer able to drive (Skufca, 2008).

Environmental hazards matter.

Air and water pollution and other toxicants, such as lead or the metabolites of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), are known to have cumulative health effects most often becoming evident in late life (Stein et al., 2008).

Climate change also is increasingly acknowledged as one of the most serious global health threats of the 21st century (Costello et al., 2009), posing huge risks to vulnerable older adults from changing patterns of disease, food insecurity, and extreme weather events.



I feel so much better when I know my neighbors are looking out for me.

What policy strategies will make a difference?

Neighborhood Design and Safety

Current trends in neighborhood design, influenced by concepts such as smart growth and lifelong communities, emphasize compact designs with homes, shops and other amenities within close proximity, giving residents and visitors the option of walking, bicycling, taking public transportation, or driving as they go about their business. These approaches can be strengthened with attention to age-sensitive issues such as accessible housing, pedestrian countdown signals that account for slower walking speeds and benches or other places to rest.

Upgrading of older neighborhoods and rural communities needs increased attention. Basic policy tools include county and municipal zoning changes, requirements that older adult needs be considered in planning at every level, and tax incentives for incorporating lifelong community concepts. Difficult choices must be made regarding use of resources, especially at the community level, so policy must also include intermediate strategies, such as improvement of selected “senior-friendly” routes and provision of walking guides and maps of safe routes.

Housing

To meet the needs of the growing aging population, we must increase the percentage of our housing stock that has universal design features. We should educate consumers and builders about the importance of these features. In addition, we need funding, zoning, and development incentives, or design requirements through state housing finance agencies, local and county zoning boards, and local housing funders.

Local communities might elect to target a specific percentage of their housing stock as universally designed and require new developments to incorporate the targets into their plans. States could provide tax incentives, recognition for exemplary practices in retrofitting older homes, and stimulate new models of supportive housing.

Transportation and Mobility

Let’s move beyond thinking about different modes of transportation in isolation, instead considering policies from the broader perspective of available, accessible and safe mobility.

We need to advocate for enhancements to automobile and highway design to aid older drivers, while also encouraging more public transportation that is responsive to the needs of older adults, including specialized transport programs and systems that serve rural areas. Design and land use solutions such as increasing the number of lower speed routes and reducing the width of intersections are also important. States should be encouraged to invest transportation dollars on a full range of mobility alternatives: engineers and transportation planners should be provided more training in aging issues.

Environmental Hazards

Green building, infill development, reduced automobile use and other strategies noted above also have potential to reduce environmental hazards. Communities should be aware of hazards that may be especially problematic to some older adults, for example, poor air quality for people with pulmonary disease, and develop clear plans to mitigate problems.

What is healthy aging?

CDC-HAN defines healthy aging as...

...the development and maintenance of optimal physical, mental, and social well-being and function in older adults.

The definition also notes that healthy aging is...

...most likely to be achieved when physical environments and communities are safe and support the adoption and maintenance by individuals of attitudes and behaviors known to promote health and well-being.



How can leaders contribute?



We need good policy on all levels – national, state, community and organizational.



Our biggest job is to educate others about aging and the environment.

New to policy? Take this quiz.

Policy 101 – True or False?

- | | |
|---------|---|
| 1). T/F | Policy originates in Washington, DC. |
| 2). T/F | Experts in fields outside aging, such as planning and engineering, are knowledgeable about aging. |
| 3). T/F | Elected and/or government officials have flexibility in establishing and overseeing policy. |

1). **False.** Effective policy can and should be developed at all levels of government and organizations. Many opportunities exist to create effective policy at the community level that will have significant impact on older adults. For example, setting targets for the quantity of accessible housing in new development can help ensure adequate housing for “aging in community”.

2). **False.** Experts from various areas such as environmental protection, public health, planning, transportation, and the design professions may have limited knowledge about the needs of older adults. We all need to learn from and educate one another.

3). **True.** Elected and/or government officials do have flexibility in establishing and overseeing policy, and they typically are pleased to learn of constituent needs. For example, they might target sidewalk improvement dollars to improve walking routes in neighborhoods with older residents.

Important Actions You Can Take

- Develop your knowledge of policy. Learn what effective policies are, how they are created, and what steps are necessary to get them implemented.
- Communicate and exchange knowledge with professionals in aging, public health, architecture, universal design, planning, recreation, transportation and engineering, as well as interested citizens.
- Learn about good design solutions for roadways, walkways, homes, and neighborhoods that meet the needs of older adults. Share ideas broadly.
- Build relationships with decision-makers and advocates, including those who may not be focused on aging, but have shared interests in the quality of the environment.
- Use a broad aging perspective to foster better integration of community design and safety, housing, transportation and environmental protection.

Please join the CDC-HAN in promoting environmental policy change!

During the coming year, CDC-HAN expects to engage professionals nationwide in promoting environmental policy change. You can be a part of this initiative!

Technical support will be provided to enable you to:

- Lead policy change initiatives to improve health outcomes for older adults,
- Increase your collaboration with other professionals, and
- Plan, implement and evaluate a policy action plan appropriate to your setting and local needs.

This work will draw upon results of an online survey asking interested participants about specific learning needs and what they would like to accomplish. Based on the survey results, we will create a series of action briefs, online resources, and interactive online mini-conferences. In addition, participants will have access to an online community to share ideas, resources and successes.

Interested? Please visit www.prc-han.org

You may also contact Basia Belza at basiab@u.washington.edu or Rebecca Hunter at Rebecca_Hunter@unc.edu

Resources

- AARP Public Policy Institute (<http://www.aarp.org/research/ppi/>)
- Active Living By Design (<http://www.activelivingbydesign.org/>)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
 - *The Guide to Community Preventive Services* (<http://www.thecommunityguide.org/index.html>)
 - Health Impact Assessment Tools and Case Studies (<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/hia.htm>)
- CDC Healthy Aging Research Network (<http://www.prc-han.org/>)
- National Association of City and County Health Officials. *Working with Elected Officials to Promote Healthy Land Use Planning and Community Design* (<http://www.naccho.org/topics/environmental/landuseplanning/upload/LUP-Working-with-Officials.pdf>)
- Partnership for Sustainable Communities (http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/pdf/2010_0105_partnership-in-action.pdf)
- Smart Growth Online (<http://www.smartgrowth.org/>)
 - Smart Growth Principles (<http://www.smartgrowth.org/about/principles/default.asp>)
- *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Promote Healthy Homes* (<http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2009pres/06/20090609a.html>)
- US Environmental Protection Agency (<http://www.epa.gov/aging/>)
 - *Growing Smarter, Living Healthier: A Guide to Smart Growth and Active Aging* (http://www.epa.gov/aging/bhc/guide/2009_Aging.pdf)

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