

# Age-Friendly Sonoma County Needs Assessment

In Sonoma County, everyone should have the opportunity to live a long, healthy life with dignity and respect. In order to better understand the current state of aging in Sonoma County and to plan for more age-friendly communities in the future, the Council on Aging, in cooperation with the County of Sonoma, partnered with Harder+Company Community Research to conduct an Age-Friendly Sonoma County Needs Assessment.

## Key Findings

The Age-Friendly Sonoma County Assessment process provides an opportunity to gather information about the factors that impact healthy aging, including the opportunity to live in a safe and accessible environment, to access appropriate health care, and to participate actively in the local community. The Assessment considered factors that impact quality of life and experiences of aging residents across ten domains of livability within three broad areas: health and safety, the built environment, and community involvement.



This report highlights key assets and challenges identified in each area, and lifts up recommendations that support building a healthier, more inclusive community for older adults in Sonoma County.

## Assessment Activities

Community input was central to the Age-Friendly Sonoma Assessment process. To conduct this needs assessment, data from existing sources as well as community residents were collected and considered through the following activities:



Review of **publicly available data sources** such as the Art of Aging Report, Sonoma County Local Economic Profile 2017, and the 2016 Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) to contextualize findings and identify information gaps



Collected input from 967 residents through a **survey** available in English and Spanish



Facilitated 11 **focus groups** with 79 resident participants in communities throughout Sonoma County

Community members who provided input in this assessment were 55 years or older, and 85% of survey respondents have lived in their community for more than five years. Although active outreach sought to include input from all communities in Sonoma County, some populations were underrepresented among survey respondents and focus group participants including males, residents who identify as Latino or Hispanic, and residents whose primary language is a language other than English. As such, findings may not represent the experiences of all populations. Assessment findings should be considered as a starting point to inform action, and may evolve as further input is gathered from additional communities in the older adult population throughout the planning process. It is also important to note that data was collected prior to the fires in Sonoma County. In light of the recent fires and the shift in the political climate that the country has felt in the last several months, the findings and issues presented in this report are amplified as the needs of older adults are now even greater.

## Health and Safety

An age-friendly community cares for its older adults, provides ways for them to care for themselves, and allows them to feel safe in their community. Within this focus area, survey respondents and focus group participants were asked about their primary health concerns including access to primary care and exercise, and the factors in their community that make them feel safe and unsafe.

**Abundant opportunity to be physically active** is a key asset to health and safety for older adults.

- **78%** of survey respondents say that their community offers **fitness activities specifically for older adults**.
- Focus group participants enjoy a range of activities in their communities including yoga, walking and running groups, swimming, and aerobics.
- Focus group participants note that cost of activities and lack of transportation can be barriers to accessing these resources.

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**“Affording health insurance [is a problem]. Affording the premium, the medication, the co-pays, the transportation to get there, the tests they order... It's expensive. People are working and not able to afford their payments.”**

**–Focus Group Participant**

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**Older adults face barriers to accessing health care**, including lack of comprehensive care, high cost of primary care, challenges in accessing specialty services including behavioral health services and dental care, lack of transportation to appointments, and challenges in navigating complex health systems. In addition, less than half of survey respondents feel that providers are well-trained in caring for aging patients.



**Older adults express anxiety and fear around issues of aging.** Focus group participants say that the stigma of aging makes it difficult to talk about memory loss and declining health, and worry about dying with dignity and about making arrangements for the end of life care they want.

**Residents feel safe in their communities, but infrastructure improvements could increase perceived and actual safety.** Nearly 90% of survey respondents feel safe walking in their neighborhood. Focus group participants add that more sidewalks and more level sidewalks, and increased street lighting, would make them feel even safer.

### The Built Environment

An age-friendly community includes ways for older adults to travel to the places they need to go, has housing suitable for older adults, and includes public gathering places, indoors and out, for people of all ages. Within this focus area, participants were asked about how they get around their community, and what challenges are associated with transportation. They were asked about their current living arrangement and housing needs, and about their experiences accessing public spaces.

**Older adults enjoy living in multi-person dwellings.** Focus group participants say that they feel more secure if someone they know lives with them or close by. Less than a third of survey respondents report living alone.

**Lack of affordable housing is a key concern for older adults.** Only 40% of survey respondents feel that their community has **affordable housing options** available for older adults, and only 12% feel their community has **affordable options for home maintenance and home modification**.

**Transportation is a major challenge in Sonoma County.** Among all survey respondents,

- Only 59% say their community has **affordable public transportation options**
- Only 27% say their community has affordable **private transportation options**

**Older adults feel there are clean and accessible outdoor spaces**, but inadequate sidewalks, parking, and public transit options limit ability to use these spaces.

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**“Of all the problems that exist for seniors in this area, housing is primary. Transportation is secondary, but housing is primary.”**

**–Focus Group Participant**

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## Community Involvement

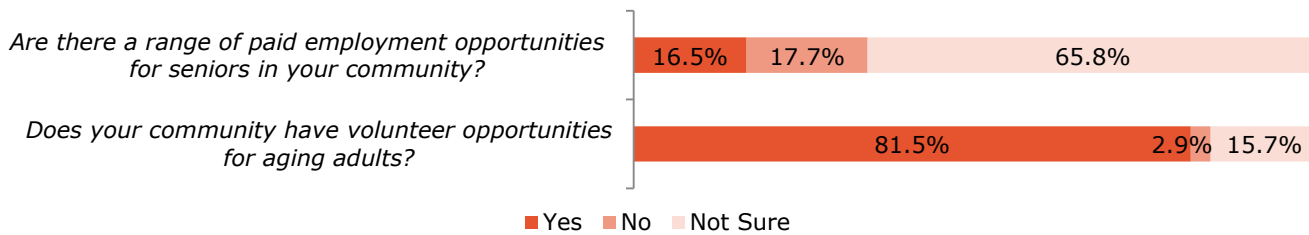
In an age-friendly community, there are places for older adults to attend enjoyable activities, and ways to stay socially connected and actively engaged in community life. An age-friendly community listens to and includes older residents, helps older residents access information they need, provides opportunities for older adults to work for pay or volunteer their time and talents. It provides opportunities for older adults to continue to learn. Within this focus area, participants were asked about their experiences with and barriers to socializing and engaging in activities.

**Older adults feel welcomed and included in their communities.** Many survey respondents (42%) have lived in their community for 25 years or more, and feeling connected to neighbors was a key theme among focus group participants. Being able to walk around the neighborhood increases socialization and connectivity.

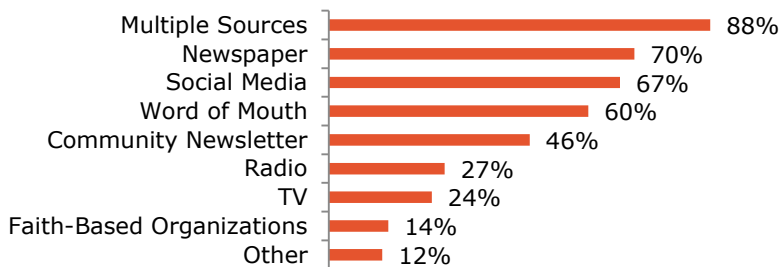
**Although residents highlighted a variety of enjoyable activities, there are barriers to participating in events and activities,** such as a lack of activities tailored to younger seniors, less physically able seniors, and seniors who are single. Other identified barriers are the cost of events, lack of transportation to events, and perceived safety of events.

**Older adults suffer from loneliness and isolation.** Nearly **one-third** of survey respondents **live alone**. Focus group participants say retiring from a job, along with limited access to information about events in their community, contribute to feelings of isolation.

**Some older adults feel disrespected or discriminated against because of their age.** Although older adults emphasized ample opportunities to volunteer, far fewer feel there is a range of paid employment opportunities for seniors in their community.



**Participants reported that older adults like to receive information in a variety of ways.** Survey respondents get information about events, volunteer opportunities, or general happenings from:



## Cross-Cutting Themes

A few themes emerged across domains that impact the quality of life of older adults. These ideas emerge as opportunities to leverage solutions that address multiple needs simultaneously.



**Limited public transit** was cited as a barrier to utilizing health care, physical activity classes, affordable housing units, outdoor spaces, and social events. Recommendations to address this concern include providing free shuttles to main areas and events, offering ride vouchers or ride services for medical appointments, and expanding opportunities to rent bikes and electric cars.



**Intergenerational interactions** were highlighted as a benefit to residents of all ages and as a possible solution to increase socialization and respect for seniors, and decrease isolation and stigma associated with aging. Residents recommend increased opportunities for multi-generational housing, mutually beneficial intergenerational activities such as developing a program for seniors to support high school students with college applications, or for youth to provide support to seniors learning to use technology.



**Addressing the unique needs of younger seniors** arose as an area of focus for future planning efforts. Residents noted that activities, content, and timing of lifelong learning classes, and communication methods to share information about activities are typically tailored to an older audience. Offering more physically active classes and evening learning opportunities, and increasing use of social media to spread information about events, emerged as recommendations to address these needs.



**Fear of isolation** was highlighted as a major concern across several domains, including communication and information, health, housing, and transportation. Older adults value the connections they have to their community and to their peers, and worry that the lack of information about events and the limited availability of transportation to and from events might bar them from engaging in social activities. Residents also expressed that isolation and resulting feelings of loneliness negatively impact their mental health, and fear that living alone may perpetuate their loneliness as they age. To combat isolation, residents suggest widely disseminating information about events and activities in the community and introducing communal housing for older adults.

## Acknowledgements

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