

AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES PRINCIPLES AND INITIATIVES

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Introduction

The present paper provides background on the global Age-Friendly Cities Initiative, as well as the Manitoban Age-Friendly Communities Initiative. The paper concludes with a discussion surrounding possible intersections between age-friendly and acoustical environments.

Age-Friendly Communities: Background

In Canada, as in many nations around the world, the proportion of older adults is increasing due to factors such as longer life expectancies and lower fertility rates. In 2012, 14.9% of the population was aged 65+, and this proportion is expected to grow such that in ten years almost 1 in 5 (18.5%) of Canadians will be aged 65+. One in four Canadians are expected to be 65 or over by 2051. It is also noteworthy that one of the fastest growing segments of the population is the aged 80+ [1-2].

In addition to the trend of population aging, globally, more people of all ages are living in cities, and this is a national phenomenon as well. In 2011, 81% of Canadians lived in urban areas as compared to 19% living in rural areas. Although variation exists across regions, in Manitoba, 72% of Manitobans lived in urban areas in 2011 [3].

The Age-Friendly Cities concept, as spearheaded by the World Health Organization (WHO), presents a response to these two major world-wide trends of global aging and urbanization [4]. To help facilitate world cities to incorporate aging issues into their city planning, the WHO initiated a global project to identify the key city features that define “age-friendly.” The WHO Global Cities Project, completed between 2006-2007, involved 33 cities from across the globe, including large cities such as Rio de Janeiro, and smaller cities like Portage La Prairie, Manitoba. The project involved asking older adults and those who work with older adults to identify features they liked about their city as well as features that could be improved within the following 8 domains of city living: 1) Outdoor spaces, 2) transportation, 3) respect and social inclusion, 4) civic engagement and employment, 5) health services, 6) housing, 7) social participation, and 8) communication and information [4-5]. Results from this project were released by WHO in the Global Age-Friendly Cities Guide [4]. As well, a listing of core age-friendly features was released in the Checklist of Essential Features of Age-Friendly Cities [6]. Building on this work, Canada developed the Age-Friendly Rural/Remote Guide [7]. The research revealed similar issues as raised by the WHO project but also highlighted

unique features and barriers associated with living in rural Canada.

What is Age-Friendly?

According to the WHO [4], the underlying premise of age-friendly cities is that they foster the health, security, and social participation of older adults, or what the WHO refers to as ‘active aging.’ The argument is that urban environments have a role to play in facilitating (or hindering) quality of life for older individuals. Specifically, in an age-friendly city, “policies, services, settings and structures support and enable people to age actively” [4, p. 5].

In addition, what has emerged from the Age-Friendly Initiative is the idea that age-friendly cities should benefit all ages, not just older individuals. For example, as reported in the WHO Guide, “According to the project participants, it should be normal in an age-friendly city for the natural and built environment to anticipate users with different capacities instead of designing for the mythical “average” (i.e. young) person. An age-friendly city emphasizes enablement rather than disablement; it is friendly for all ages and not just elder-friendly” [4, p. 72].

The checklist developed by the WHO [6] provides a concrete way of assessing the age-friendliness of cities by each of 8 domains of city living. For example, the domain of “Outdoor Spaces” pinpoints issues such as sidewalks and accessible washrooms. In the domain of “Respect and Social Inclusion” it is noted that community activities and events should allow for inter-generational participation by accommodating age-specific needs. Of course, not all of the core features are as relevant for every city: public transport would look different in larger cities than in smaller towns, for example. However, the checklist helps define what age-friendly means to older adults in each domain and can help guide city assessments and community development [5].

Age-Friendly and Manitoba

Since the initiative of Age-Friendly Cities from WHO, cities and communities around the world have begun the process of becoming more age friendly. Along with several other provinces in Canada, Manitoba has embraced the concept of creating age-friendly communities. The Provincial Government launched the Manitoba Age-Friendly Communities Initiative in 2008 which also coincided with a 5-year Community-University Research Alliance led by Dr. Menec of the University of Manitoba. Since its launch, the initiative has been fruitful, and 100 communities (including

villages, towns, cities, and rural municipalities) have joined the initiative in Manitoba. Although the process has varied somewhat, for the most part, each community has formed an Age-Friendly Committee made up of community members, government, business-owners, etc. In addition, most communities have undertaken a community survey and consultation to determine the priorities for making their own community more age-friendly [8-9]. Community consultations have revealed, for example, that although there is a lot of commonalities between the needs of different communities (e.g., housing, transportation), each place also has unique strengths and unique priorities [10].

The Age-Friendly Manitoba Initiative has resulted in interesting and important linkages, for example, between city planners, government, academics, community members, and not-for-profit organizations. Given the aim of creating social and physical environments 'friendly' and accessible for all ages, it is not surprising that various stakeholders and experts need to be involved.

Discussion: Acoustics and Age-Friendly

What kind of linkages could be formed between experts on acoustics and acoustical environments and age-friendly? Specifically related to the domains of city living, it would seem that acoustics would be particularly relevant to the domains of communication, social participation, and respect and social inclusion. For example, are there elements of acoustics design that are, perhaps, hindering older adults' in participating fully in events and activities in their city or community?

Although the WHO Age-Friendly guide and checklist did not touch on acoustics per se, some examples of ways that communities were dealing with issues of hearing loss were given. One such example was taken from Portage La Prairie, Manitoba, in which older people were given the option of having a headset in church [4, p.45]. Not being able to hear properly in church represents a serious barrier to participation and involvement. On this track, the Age-Friendly New York includes in their guide for businesses a section on "sound" and what businesses can do to make the environment more comfortable for their older customers [11]. What other ways do the physical and social environment intersect with issues of hearing, communication, and social participation in older adults? And what kind of solutions could be developed?

In conclusion, the two trends of global aging and urbanization represent both challenges and opportunities. It would seem that meeting the challenges and taking advantage of opportunities will be best served through collaboration among various stakeholders.

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