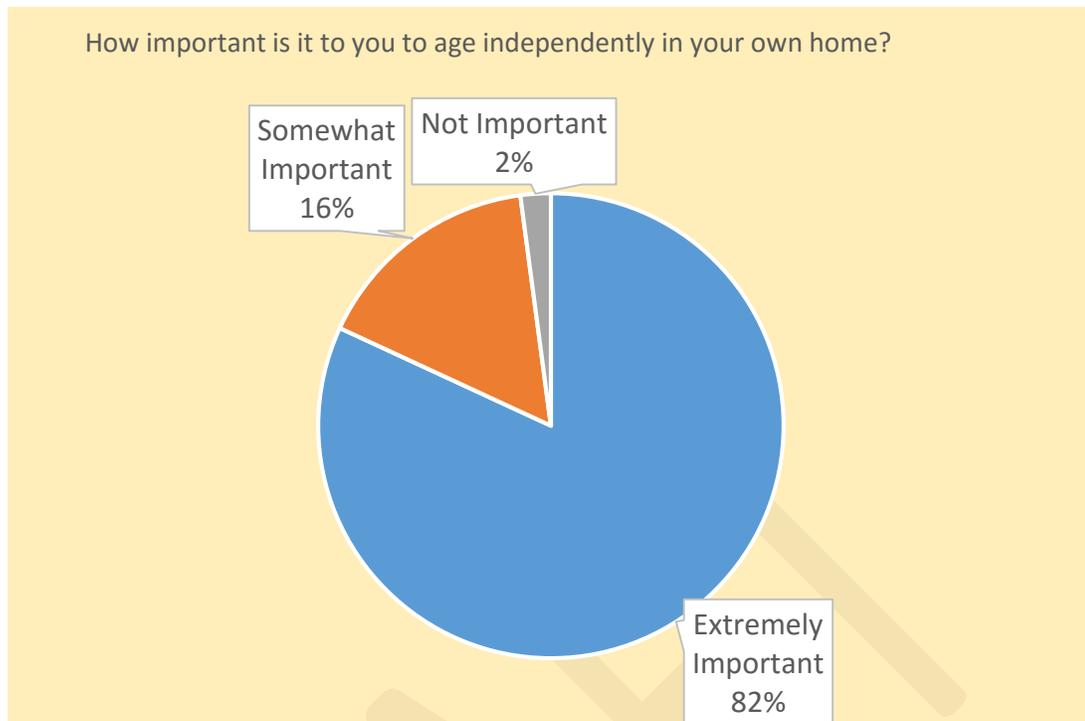# Introduction

An Age Friend Community is a community that is livable and provides opportunities for people of all ages. People of all ages are treated with respect, provided opportunities for support, and surrounded by a structure that allows them to get and maintain physical activity and health. Age Friendly Communities is an initiative administered by the World Health Organization (WHO) internationally, and nationally by AARP. Through Age Friendly Berkshires, Berkshire County was officially accepting into the Age Friendly Communities program in June 2015.

In the United States, one out of every three Americans is 50 years of age or older, and it is predicted that by 2030 approximately one in five will be over the age of 65. In Berkshire County, the population is aging even faster: 40% of the population was 50 years of age or older according to the 2010 census, and it is predicted that by 2030, 60% or more of most municipalities' populations will be 50 years of age or older. Already the number of those over age 65 is higher than children under the age of 18 in Berkshire County, something that won't happen in the rest of the country until 2030.

In 2015, Age Friendly Berkshires, in partnership with the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC) and supported by District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA) funding, conducted a survey that targeted Berkshire County residents 50 years of age or older. Over 2,400 responses were received. A full report on the findings of that survey can be found at: http://berkshireplanning.org/images/uploads/documents/Berkshire_County_Age_Friendly_Survey_Report.pdf.

One of the clearest findings from the survey was the desire for older adults to stay independently in their own homes as they aged. When asked "how important is it to you to live independently in your own home as you age" 98% of survey respondents said that staying in their own homes as they age is either extremely important (82%) or somewhat important (16%), while only 2% said that it was not important to them.

How important is it to you to age independently in your own home?

Somewhat Important 16%

Not Important 2%

Extremely Important 82%

The nearly unanimous response prompted BRPC to host a series of Aging-in-Place forums to understand, from community members' perspectives, what barriers exist to aging in place and what solutions to these barriers might allow them to stay in their own homes for longer.

Age Friendly Communities under AARP and WHO measure livability in eight categories. Category topics include Transportation, Housing, Social Participation, Communication and Information, Community Support and Health Services, Civic Participation and Employment, Respect and Social Inclusion, and Outdoor Spaces and Buildings. Within this framework, communities can look deeper into barriers to healthy, active aging, and aging in place.

Process

Planning

The Community Forums were planned by several staff at Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC), including Thomas Matuszko, Assistant Director, Laura Kittross, Manager, Public Health Program Eammon Coughlin, Planner, and Allison Hope, Planner, as well as several members of the Age Friendly Berkshires Task Force, including John Lutz, Executive Director of Elder Services of Berkshire County and Celeste Harp, Age Friendly Berkshires Program Manager. Although initially only one forum was envisioned, ultimately the planning group felt that three would allow more geographic representation. Dates and venues were organized based on accessibility considerations for potential participants (adequate parking, building accessibility, relatively short distance from all Berkshire municipalities, etc.)

Outreach

Outreach was done by word of mouth and emailing and hanging flyers in public places. BRPC reached out to the Councils on Aging, Senior Centers, Community Libraries, Town Halls, Boards of Health, local newspapers, the Age Friendly Task force and their networks, local television networks, the, among others. The Age Friendly Berkshires email contact list, with over 150 names, as well as the BRPC contact list, were also notified. Some direct mailing was utilized, among postal routes in Pittsfield with high numbers of older adults. The forums were advertised as open to any interested in aging in place.

Goals

The goals of the forums were to:

1. Understand what the barriers are to aging in place in the Berkshires
2. Brainstorm potential solutions to some of these barriers
3. Gather information that will inform future work at BRPC and the Age Friendly Berkshires Strategic Plan

Structure

The open forums were each conducted in three phases:

1.) Introduction to Aging in Place and Age Friendly Berkshires (5 Minutes)
2.) Barriers to aging in place by audience, facilitated by BRPC (40 Minutes)

In an open response format, community participants were asked to briefly discuss their perceived barriers to aging in place. As people were giving their answers one at a time, a BRPC staff member typed and projected those answers in list format onto a large screen in the front of the room in live stream

fashion. After the audience finished discussing barriers, BRPC asked them to rate the immediacy/priority of the barriers by the raising of hands. High priority barriers were defined as ones that would prevent someone from staying in their own home unless they are fixed. Medium priority barriers were defined as ones that would make it difficult to age in place, but not necessarily prevent someone from staying in their home. Lower priority barriers were defined as ones that did not need to be fixed to allow someone to stay in their home, but quality of life would certainly improve if fixed. These immediacy rating were defined by colors and projected into the screen after rated by the audience.

3.) Solutions to barriers of aging in place by audience, facilitated by BRPC (35 Minutes)

Community members were asked to list and discuss solutions they thought could address the barriers to aging in place. All suggested solutions were considered; practicability or other barriers to implementation were discussed, but no solutions were eliminated due to this. Participants discussed services that currently exist, services that could potentially be expanded, and services and solutions that could be developed to address the barriers.

Forums

Three forums were held, at the Froio Senior Center in Pittsfield on the morning of March 31, at the Adams Visitor's Center that same afternoon, and at Berkshire South in Great Barrington the following morning. All three forums were well attended, with approximately 40 attendees at the Pittsfield and Adams forums, and approximately 60 at the Great Barrington forum. The attendees were a mix of the general public, those from agencies working with older adults, and public officials. Participation was strong at all three.

Barriers to Aging in Place

Transportation

Participants emphasized several issues related to transportation in the Berkshires, including lack of access to public transportation from their homes, not being able to drive at night, or losing their driver's licenses and not being able to transport themselves in a personal vehicle. The potential ridership for the BRTA is limited by the geographic spread of Berkshire County residents, which also restricts route coverage to the more densely populated parts of the Berkshires. Additionally, participants mentioned the lack of options for reaching public transport, even in municipalities that are served by the BRTA (i.e., living too far to walk to the bus stop). Limited access to public transportation was mentioned more frequently by participants who attended the Adams and Great Barrington forums than those who attended the Pittsfield forum. Other needs related to transportation were getting to doctors' appointments, including those outside Berkshire County, the grocery store, visiting family and friends, and attending social and cultural events, especially on weekends and in the evening. A lack of knowledge about available transportation options was also expressed.

Housing

Lack of access to affordable, in town, one level housing was a major barrier expressed by the participants in all forums. Participants desired to age-in-place, but relocating to housing that does not require using stairs or excessive yard, garden and general maintenance was an essential to aging in place for some. Some participants expressed that they would prefer to age in place in a smaller home closer to town. The limited availability of accessible housing in downtown areas was a concern, and highly desired by participants. In general, home maintenance and upkeep were major barriers to aging in place in all forums. Moreover, participants also mentioned existing regulatory and zoning barriers to aging in place, such as restrictions on accessory or in-law apartments that could create an obstacle to an older individual's use of a live-in caregiver or aid from a family member. The affordability of and information about accessibility fixtures such as ramps, grab bars, and stair lifts is a major barrier. Minor home maintenance, including changing light bulbs, cleaning, cooking, and checking smoke detectors was also mentioned at all forums as a major concern. In Pittsfield particularly, major home repairs, including the difficulty of finding recommended, affordable, trustworthy contractors was a key concern.

Social Participation

Rural living is a barrier to participants' social lives and in many cases is interconnected with transportation issues. The potential for weakening social lives, not being able to go to cultural and social events, and feeling overall unengaged in the community are barriers to aging in place. Many participants expressed that they would like to have young people around to help with daily chores and yard maintenance and to spend time with on a regular basis in general. Having neighbors and friends to depend on was expressed by many as an essential, and not having these people would be a barrier to aging in place. Access to broadband and the internet, and learning how to use the internet to get information about services and connect with family and friends was also a concern. Several participants

stated that depression and other mental health issues related to social isolation could be a barrier to aging in place.

Communication and Information

A major desire among participants in all three forums was to have a central place where they could obtain information about services, social events, news, advice on Medicaid and Medicare and accessibility products, housing options, advice on how to plan for aging in place, and so on. Participants expressed that it would be extremely useful to have essentially a one stop shop, where they knew they could call for advice on any of the previously stated topics, and be able to get a trusted service to learn about activities and services available to them. Additionally, having access to a network of contractors who were known to provide honest and trusted service to the elderly for home modifications and renovation was desired. A number of educational programs were also desired by participants, including education on long term care insurance, end of life options and related legal issues, and using the internet and other forms of technology. Local television news and programming as well as local newspapers were desired, and are lacking in many Berkshire municipalities.

Community Support and Health Services

Health, wellness, and both mental and physical conditions were major barriers that participants saw to aging in place. In particular, dementia, including Alzheimer's, vision loss, hearing loss, and medication management were major concerns. The need for transportation to medical visits, including medical visits in Springfield and Boston, was a concern, and the lack of primary care physicians and specialists in the area was also a major concern. Many participants expressed that the wait time to see a physician was restrictive, and a couple mentioned that they had to seek medical care at the Emergency Department because they simply could not wait to be seen by their primary care physician. Additionally, many people spoke about the lack of specialists in the area, and stated that they often have to find ways to travel to Springfield and Boston to get the medical care they need. Access to their homes by emergency medical vehicles was also mentioned as a concern, as was the need for training for emergency medical personnel in dealing with the issues of older adults. The availability and cost of at home care was a major worry and how to hire good care was a topic that many individuals wanted more information about. The costs associated with purchasing medical devices, such as hearing aids, was a major concern, especially in the Pittsfield forum. Education around prescription medication, potential drug interactions between medications and keeping track of multiple medications was another concern of several participants. Other concerns included the need for assistance with daily chores, rides to medical appointments, advice about negotiating Medicaid and Medicare and taking care of pets.

Civic Participation and Employment

Many participants expressed that they had either experienced or were concerned about ageism in applying for and staying in jobs as they age. A major concern, not necessarily related to age, was that State legislatures and departments do not understand the unique needs of the Berkshires, and the geographical distance between their homes and Boston made it difficult for them to visit their legislators.

Respect and Social Inclusion

Children and other family members' opinions about participants aging in their own homes was a major concern among all three forums, and perceived paternalism by children and family members was expressed as a barrier by participants. In particular, the perception that someone is "too old" to live on their own was a concern and a barrier. Another barrier to aging in place was the perceived stigma of accepting services, leading to resistance in accepting needed services. Many people expressed that they themselves thought, or they knew people who thought, that services available did not apply to them. Continuing social lives, being engaged in the community, and having young people around were almost unanimously considered to be important aspects of being able to age in place. Also related to health services, many participants stated that they would like emergency medical personnel to have specific training related to understanding older people and their needs.

Outdoor Spaces and Buildings

Many participants stated that there are physical barriers when visiting places for all types of events, such as the lack of ramps, adequate railings, and high steps. In addition to this, more accessible streets and pathways in recreation areas were desired among participants to be able to walk and get physical exercise. The desire to be able to walk to amenities in town was expressed by a number of participants.

Potential Solutions to Barriers

After the brainstorming session about barriers to aging in place, participants were asked for potential solutions to these barriers. Improved dissemination and education around existing resources related to aging in place was a key theme identified by forum participants. Solutions are two fold – they should identify, centralize and better promote what already exists, and then use this as a starting point for future efforts.

The interdisciplinary nature of potential solutions should be noted. As discussed in the previous section, many barriers and solutions defy easy classification into one the eight domains of livability. Transportation is a good example of this. Expanded or better coordinated transportation options are interrelated and tied to Community Support and Health Services, Civic Participation and Employment, as well as overall Social Participation. Moreover, solutions such as encouraging youth to volunteer in service to older residents could help to address simple home renovation or maintenance needs, as well as provide a level of social participation and engagement.

Transportation

Goal: Ensure Older Residents are Fully Aware of Existing Transportation Options.

Strategies:

1. Promote existing transportation options, particularly those that serve rural areas of the county, such as para-transit, Council on Aging vans or existing volunteer programs.
2. Promote the existing Berkshire Regional Transit Authority (BRTA) travel training program, particularly for older adults.
3. Promote Mass. Ride Match, and encourage local transportation providers to list their services on the website.
4. Promote use of Facebook and community email list serves to organize volunteer ride sharing.

Goal: Expand Transportation Options for Older Residents Address Gaps in the Existing System

Strategies:

1. Develop more on-demand transportation options, such as volunteer driver programs, driver reimbursement incentives, or existing Uber or Lyft services.
2. Encourage communities that lack COA van service to apply for the BRTA Community Transit Grant or to explore regionalized COA van service with neighboring municipalities.
3. Explore and advocate for additional funding opportunities to expand regional public transportation options to better meet the needs of older adults.

Goal: Reduce the Need for Unnecessary Travel

Strategies:

1. Work with local groceries and pharmacies to explore options for home delivery services.
2. Encourage development of a comprehensive errand / delivery service in the Berkshires
3. Implement technology training for older adults, including how to shop on-line

Goal: Keep Older Adults Using their Personal Vehicles Safely For as Long as Possible.

Strategies:

1. Promote existing educational programs focused on older drivers, such as AARP Carfit.
2. Collaborate with auto dealerships, mechanics, and others to develop incentives and discounts for car maintenance for older adults.

Housing

Goal: Ensure Older Residents are Aware of Home Renovation and Financing Options.

Strategies:

1. Educate older residents about home renovation options to support aging in place, as well as existing funding mechanisms to implement them.
2. Educate residents about options for home sale or downsizing, or financing options such as reverse mortgages.
3. Develop and promote options to reduce property taxes for seniors, such as senior tax work-off programs or existing tax abatement programs.
4. Promote existing contractor certifications involving aging in place, such as the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) CAPS program.
5. Develop a local contractor referral service.
6. Educate homeowners about the restoration and maintenance of historic homes.

Goal: Develop a Network of Volunteers Provide Free or Low Cost Home Maintenance Services.

Strategies:

1. Develop volunteer networks for minor home maintenance such as a community day of service, or through National Honor Societies at schools.
2. Work to build robust volunteer networks for older adults to help each other.

Goal: Take advantage of Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORC) for services

Strategies:

1. Identify NORCs in Berkshire County and encourage community cohesion
2. Develop low cost options for minor home maintenance through group pricing/purchasing.

Goal: Encourage a Variety of Housing Options to Meet the Needs of Older Residents.

Strategies:

1. Explore options for co-housing younger people and families with older residents who wish to share, and remain in, their homes.
2. Identify and promote changes to existing zoning bylaws to encourage the development of In-law Apartments as well as other successful housing models to support aging in place.
3. Pursue the development of additional senior housing in the county, through a variety of models.

Goal: Encourage Development of Housing with Shared Public Spaces to Reduce Outdoor Maintenance

1. Encourage development of condominiums, townhomes, and apartments, especially in areas close to town centers and at all price points.
2. Development of a standard shared application for all subsidized housing in the County.

Social Participation

Goal: Develop self-sustaining networks of Berkshire residents

Strategies:

1. Develop facilitated on-going conversations or "support groups" with older residents to promote information exchange and development of solutions to address aging in place in the region.
2. Provide training and support for local caregivers.
3. Facilitate the development of local "villages" to join the national "village to village" network.
4. Identify Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs) in the Berkshires.
5. Encourage communities to develop and utilize email list serves and online forums (Front Porch Forum, Alford Assist) to coordinate volunteer services and other activities to support older residents.
6. Make use of existing service learning programs in local schools and college to engage local youth to volunteer and help out older Berkshire Residents (i.e. a window washing or chore help out day).

Encourage community events and gatherings in rural communities, including the use of, particularly those in remote areas or those with limited public facilities. Goal: Older Residents are Welcome and Able to Fully Participate in the Region's Rich Cultural and Social   Offerings and Engage with the Larger Community.

Strategies:

1. Work with local transportation providers to ensure transportation to cultural and social events and activities.
2. Develop mentorship programs between older residents and local schools and colleges.
3. Develop visiting programs, where older adults are paired with high school or middle school students with similar interests.

4. Encourage local COA groups to offer technology training, including how to use the internet or a smart phone in sessions specifically for older adults.
5. Provide information about cultural and social events to older adults through multiple modalities to ensure they are aware of events.

Communication and Information

Goal: A Coordinated Resource Provides a Central Hub for Information and Services Related to Aging in the Region.

Strategies:

1. Develop a "one stop shop" resource for information to support aging in place in the region. Build on and adapt existing models such as the Northern Berkshire Community Resource Guide or Mass 211. Ensure this resource is available online and in printed format.
2. Identify a local organization that would be willing to serve as a county-wide telephone point of contact, referral service, and resource on aging.

Goal: Local Communities and the Region at Large More Effectively Disseminate Information to Older Residents.

Strategies:

1. Encourage development of local community newsletters and newspapers.
2. Develop regular public service announcements (PSA) on community television focused on the needs of older residents.
3. Develop online community bulletin boards through Facebook or Google where older adults can request and provide information.

Promote existing resources related to awareness of scams targeted at older adults, such as the Mass. Attorney General's Elder Hotline.

Community Support and Health Services

Goal: Health and social services that enable aging in place exist and are known to older adults.

Strategies:

1. Promote and provide exercise and wellness classes, such as Matter of Balance and Tai Chi,to help prevent falls and improve other health measures.
2. Promote and provide education, support services and other resources to support caregivers.
3. Work with veterinary services, animal shelters and the humane society to develop and promote options that allow older adults to keep their pets
4. Ensure information is provided through a variety of modalities to enhance awareness of all services/programs and financial assistance available
5. Provide end of life decision making assistance.

Goal: Unnecessary Medical Travel is Reduced in the Region.

Strategies:

1. Promote existing medical transportation options.
2. Promote and develop telehealth options to reduce medical transportation needs.
3. Promote and develop options for home medical care and in home doctor's visits.

Civic Participation and Employment

Goal: Officials, Businesses, and Local Organizations are Fully Aware of and Engaged with the Challenge of Aging in our Region.

Strategies:

1. Encourage volunteerism among older residents, including serving on municipal and non-profit boards
2. Encourage legislators to hold accessible events outside major population centers
3. Educate older adults on other ways to contact legislators / state agencies, including legislative events to focus on the needs of older adults in the region
4. Educate local businesses and organizations about the issue of aging in the region, particularly the benefits to employing older workers and the potential for new services to support an older population.

Respect and Social Inclusion

Goal: Residents and Organizations are Fully Aware of and Sensitive to the Needs of Older Adults.

Strategies:

1. Develop or promote options for aging awareness or "senior sensitivity" training for organizations and businesses.
2. Develop training specifically for emergency medical personnel on responding to emergency calls with older adults
3. Conduct outreach to promote existing services related to aging in the region.

Outdoor Spaces and Buildings

Goal: Public Spaces, Buildings, and Select Recreation Areas are Universally Accessible.

Strategies:

1. Work with local land trusts and municipalities to identify, create, and promote age friendly and universally accessible public parks and hiking/walking trails.

2. Encourage municipalities to adopt "Complete Streets" policies and address pedestrian and bicycle accommodations on local roadways.
3. Encourage municipalities to address the accessibility of public buildings and facilities.