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How can city become more elder-friendly?

Hubert Humphrey once noted that “the moral test of government is how it treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped.”



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Commentary

Our population continues to age. The number of seniors in Indianapolis is on the threshold of doubling—from 95,500 in 2000 to 187,500 in 2040.

Therefore, it is incumbent on us to create a community that welcomes the aged and provides them with the tools and resources necessary to remain vibrant contributors to society.

Older people are a valuable community asset. The majority of people 65 and older own their homes and have lived in the city 30 years or more. Older people are more likely to vote and have time to devote to community affairs and politics. They are also more likely to make charitable gifts, and larger ones than those from younger donors. Many volunteer at and sit on the boards of religious organizations, hospitals, and civic and social-service organizations.

“Aging in place” is a phrase commonly used in connection with aging in one’s home. A community that allows seniors to age in place embraces services and programs that enable seniors to comfortably remain in their homes and communities, benefiting both the individual and his neighborhood.

The AdvantAge Initiative develops a planning framework to help communities measure their elder-friendliness and to improve. This national program, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, was undertaken in Indianapolis, Chicago, New York and several other cities.

The AdvantAge Initiative starts with a comprehensive survey of older adults designed to increase understanding of how well seniors fare in the following areas:

■ **Basic needs**—Does the community provide appropriate and affordable housing, promote safety at home and in the neighborhood, assure that no one goes hungry, and provide information about available services?

■ **Social and civic engagement**—Does the community foster meaningful connections with family and friends, promote active engagement in community life, provide opportunities for meaningful paid and volunteer work, and make aging issues a community-wide priority?

■ **Independence for the frail and disabled**—Does the community mobilize resources to facilitate living at home, provide accessible transportation, and support family and care givers?

■ **Physical and mental health**—Does the community promote healthy behaviors; support community activities that enhance well-being; and provide access to preventive health, medical, social and palliative services?

A notable recommendation from the Indianapolis survey was to establish and fund home-modification programs. More than 90 percent of Indianapolis seniors want to continue living at home. However, more than a third are not confident they will be able to maintain their residences because of budget, accessibility or availability of care.

The Central Indiana Council on Aging is part of an effort to identify neighborhoods and funding sources to help low-income seniors remain in their homes. As an example, linking such an effort with redevelopment programs in the Fountain Square area and with the Cultural Trail would provide a notable example of how Indianapolis values those in the twilight of life. •

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