

US Environmental Protection Agency: Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging Award program

The principal goal of the Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging Award program is to raise awareness across the nation about healthy synergies that can be achieved by communities combining Smart Growth and Active Aging concepts. Awards are presented to communities that demonstrate the best and most inclusive overall approach to implementing smart growth and active aging at the neighborhood, tribe, municipality, county, and/or regional levels.

Lead Agency:

US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

Agency Mission:

The mission of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is to protect public health and safeguard the natural environment.

Principal Investigator:

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Partner Agencies:

National Council on Aging
National Blueprint
Center for Disease Control
Active for Life
President's Council for Fitness and Sports

General Description:

Communities built for healthy aging are characterized by development patterns that emphasize ease of getting around, with convenient housing options, walking and biking paths, and abundant green space to create an attractive environment. Conversely, unbridled growth or haphazard development harms not just the environment, but health and quality of life. As our population 85 years and older grows, many may no longer be

driving. Communities that plan ahead and provide a variety of transportation options or housing developments situated near public transit will be better prepared to meet the needs of those who choose not to or no longer can drive their own automobile. Smart growth is a term used to control the spread of auto dependent development away from cities and traditional suburbs by revitalizing urban areas to be more attractive and healthy places to live. Older adults can play a critical role in making smart growth possible by getting involved in local planning efforts.

Chronic health conditions such as heart disease, stroke and diabetes result in adverse human costs and impacts. Lifestyle changes are a critical component of effective health promotion strategies. Obesity is reaching epidemic proportions and soon will pass smoking as a major cause of preventable disease and premature death. Daily physical activity is vital for keeping fit and controlling chronic conditions. Walkable communities, a principle of smart growth, encourage active aging and are essential to prevention and management of chronic diseases. Smart growth practices that promote walkable communities and shorter trips to work, to shop and to do other activities help protect the environment and the ability of people to maintain their independence and quality of life as they age. An added advantage is that walking through one's neighborhood increases awareness of neighbors, and expands social contacts and potential support networks.

Impervious surfaces will cause storm water runoff to bypass soil filtration, potentially affecting drinking water sources. Traveling long distances can be not only is a barrier for elders seeking care, but also contributes to air pollution. Many studies have found an association between air pollution and aggravation of heart and lung diseases, resulting in increased medication use, more visits to health care providers and admissions to emergency rooms. Involvement in local planning efforts at the community level is critical for the implementation of smart growth principles.

In May 2007, EPA announced, with its partners, CDC, the President's Council for Fitness and Sports, the National Council on Aging, Active for Life, (funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation) and the National Blueprint, a new awards program that encourages communities to adopt smart growth principles and encourage active aging, "Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging." In 2008, seven communities were recognized for their excellence in smart growth and active aging. The awards program is a voluntary effort allowing communities lead by example and showcase their successes in building a health community for active aging.

Smart Growth

Older persons are a susceptible population with respect to air and water pollution, and research has demonstrated links between development and environmental degradation. Increases in impervious surfaces result in more storm water runoff that directly enters surface waters without being filtered through the soil, potentially contributing to contaminants in drinking water. Increasing distances between where people live, work, and play can contribute to longer trips, increasing motor vehicle emissions and air pollution. Smart growth practices combined with active aging provide choices that both

protect the environment and help people maintain their independence as they age, resulting in environmental benefits and enhanced quality of life.

Healthy Communities

The EPA Aging Initiative and a coalition of federal and non-governmental partners recognized that community design directly affects our health. Considerable attention has been paid to risk factors predicting longevity and quality of life. This award focuses our attention on the built environment. For example, encouraging communities to design neighborhoods for walking and biking are also directly influencing the quality of one's life and the livability of the community.

Cities will become healthier for Americans as they work to preserve their natural environment, reduce air pollution and improve water quality—key smart growth benefits. Those who move to the edge of towns expect amenities such as transportation, health care, shopping and recreation along with safe drinking water, waste water treatment and solid waste disposal, but they may not realize that those demands stress their environment. The location, configuration and scale of homes and communities within a watershed not only increase risks to wildlife, but also threaten environmental sustainability. Efforts to assure smart growth, will produce huge dividends for communities that want to retain a reputation for being a good place to live.

Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging

In February 2008, the EPA announced the seven winners and two communities received the highest awards, the achievement awards: the Atlanta Regional Commission and Kirkland, WA.

The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) launched Aging Atlanta, a partnership of 50 organizations focused on meeting the needs of the region's growing older adult population. Aging Atlanta's pilot projects laid the foundation for the Lifelong Communities Initiative. The Initiative works with local governments to create housing and transportation options that enable older adults to "age in place." To improve housing options, ARC facilitated zoning policy changes and the development of 30 senior housing developments located close to services and connected to existing neighborhoods. With more than 90% of Atlanta's older adults relying on automobiles for transportation, ARC has taken steps to decrease auto dependency by promoting ride sharing through its six voucher programs and working to improve bus stops and routes. These efforts increase quality of life and offer environmental benefits. ARC and its partners converted traditional senior centers to wellness centers, emphasizing physical activity and social interaction. Currently, 46 of these centers offer programs for the 400,000 older adults in the metro area, and approximately 1,000 individuals have joined walking clubs. Through community involvement, ARC has incorporated older adults' needs into parks, trails and pedestrian paths. Working with city and county staff, ARC is integrating age-appropriate features into local sidewalk audits and plans.

The city of Kirkland, WA has succeeded in making its physical activities more accessible for its 19,000 older residents by organizing exercise opportunities and improving

infrastructure. The city offers more than 50 physical activity programs specifically designed for older adults. The Kirkland Steppers Walk Program, which is free for adults over age 50, organizes group walks through downtown twice a week during the summer.

Over the next six years, the city of Kirkland will invest \$6 million to improve sidewalk connections between commercial and residential developments to make the city more walkable. In addition, Kirkland is the first city in the state of Washington to adopt a Complete Streets Ordinance to design streets for the needs of walkers, bicyclists and drivers. It has adopted two innovative programs: the "PedFlag" Program, which has placed flags at 63 crosswalks to remind drivers to yield to pedestrians, and the Flashing Crosswalk Program, which has incorporated flashing lights into the pavement of 30 crosswalks. Both programs promote a safe pedestrian environment. By listening to the good counsel and recommendations from the Active Living Task Force and the Kirkland Senior Council, the city of Kirkland has and will continue to enhance the quality of life for its older residents.