

BUILDING AN AGE-FRIENDLY WORLD

While health care facilities and systems explore what it means to be “age-friendly,” the concept of inclusion and attention to older people is being played out in America’s communities and globally. The Geneva-based World Health Organization offers resources for countries and cities for creating an age-friendly world. In the United States, AARP has taken the lead in encouraging American communities to be age-friendly, and the Trust for America’s Health is encouraging public health agencies to create an age-friendly public health system.



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On its “Ageing and Life-course” web page, WHO says an age-friendly world “enables people of all ages to actively participate in community activities and treats everyone with respect, regardless of their age. It is a place that makes it easy for older people to stay connected to people that are important to them. And it helps people stay healthy and active even at the oldest ages and

provides appropriate support to those who can no longer look after themselves.”¹

Through its “Age-Friendly World” website,² WHO provides guidance, support and training to countries and regions committed to becoming age-friendly. It maintains a global network database of age-friendly cities and communities and publishes *Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide*, which includes a checklist of core features.³

In the United States, AARP, an affiliate of the WHO program, maintains a network of age-friendly communities.⁴ It offers guidance and encouragement for creating what it calls livable communities that are safe and secure, have affordable and appropriate housing and transportation options and offer supportive community services. They also offer opportunities for walking and exercise and neighborhoods where residents are engaged and look out for each other.

AARP offers toolkits and other resources on how to improve livability, foster self-sufficiency and personal safety. These materials suggest ways policymakers on the federal, state and local levels

can design — and sometimes retrofit — communities to be places where people of all ages can participate fully. These policies deal with land use, housing and transportation.

A related program is sponsored by Dementia Friendly America, a national network of communities created after the 2015 White House Conference on Aging. It is modeled on a Minnesota initiative.

The dementia-friendly community, according to DFA, is a village, town, city or county that is informed, safe and respectful of people with the disease, their families and caregivers. The organization describes how, in a dementia-friendly community, every sector can play a role in supporting people living with dementia. This could include businesses, law enforcement and first responders, the health care system, faith communities and local governments.⁵

One of the most recent additions to the age-friendly movement is a project to create an age-friendly public health system. Sponsored by the John A. Hartford Foundation and the Trust for America’s Health, the project aims to promote

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health and prevent injury, optimize physical, cognitive and mental health and encourage social engagement.

Trust for America's Health is piloting the concept in several Florida counties. The pilot sites will convene various sectors and professions to create an infrastructure that supports healthy aging. They will develop and coordinate services, collect data and publish findings.

RESONATING WITH CATHOLIC HEALTH VALUES

Several themes that speak to Catholic values emerge from these programs: respect for the dignity of all persons, the common good, solidarity, stewardship of resources and subsidiarity.

At the heart of the age-friendly movement is respect for the dignity of older people. No matter his or her ability or disability, every member of this population deserves our attention and high regard. As Pope Francis said, "We must reawaken the collective sense of gratitude, of appreciation, of hospitality, which makes the elderly feel like a living part of the communities."⁶

The Second Vatican Council described the common good as "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups, and their individual members, relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment."⁷ That is exactly what these programs do as they promote the inclusion and well-being of older people.

Being age-friendly also means being in solidarity with older people. What matters to them, matters to us and to their communities. It also recognizes that we are all on the aging journey, thus it is not a matter of "us" attending to "them," but rather realizing we are united, with the same interest and goals.

Underpinning the movement is the goal of helping older people remain in the home of their choices by supporting them, their caregivers and families. Avoiding costly institutionalization demonstrates good stewardship of resources.

Finally, the emphasis on action at the community and neighborhood levels reflects the importance of subsidiarity. Although leadership and encouragement nationally and globally have inspired these programs, they are successful only

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— POPE FRANCIS

when they are based on the needs of individual communities, build on their strengths and are carried out by community members who care about one another.

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NOTES

1. World Health Organization, "Towards an Age-Friendly World," webpage, www.who.int/ageing/age-friendly-world/en/.
2. World Health Organization, "Age-Friendly World" <https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/>.
3. World Health Organization, *Global Age-friendly Cities: A Guide* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2007). <https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/WHO-Global-Age-friendly-Cities-Guide.pdf>.
4. AARP, "The AARP Network of Age Friendly Communities: An Introduction," webpage, www.aarp.org/livable-communities/network-age-friendly-communities/info-2014/an-introduction.html.
5. Dementia Friendly America, webpage. www.dfamerica.org/.
6. Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, para. 191 (March 19, 2016). http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html.
7. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 26 (Dec. 7, 1965). www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

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