# Community AGEnda

TALKING ABOUT AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

A TOOLKIT FROM COMMUNITY AGENDA

Building support for age-friendly communities can be difficult. Part of the challenge is communicating effectively about this promising, but complex, idea ... and with a wide variety of community stakeholders.

The language and insights that follow reflect the experience and research of Grantmakers In Aging and its age-friendly initiative, Community AGEnda, but also of several national age-friendly networks and local project sites, including the WHO Age-Friendly Cities, AARP Livable Communities and AARP International, The Village to Village Network, N4A, the AdvantAGE Initiative, and others. This work is presented here to help the growing number of advocates for age-friendly communities who seek to create great places to grow up and grow old around the United States and the world.
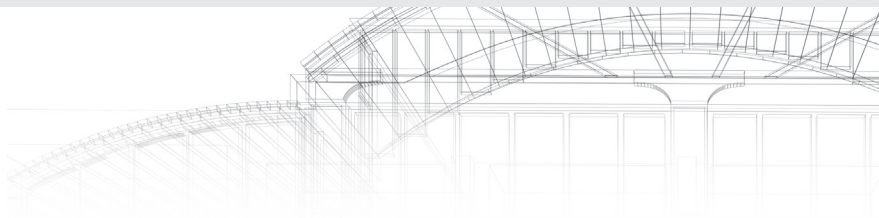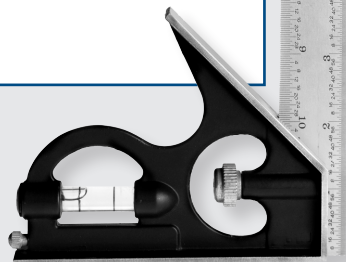
HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

You can use the thinking and the language here in a variety of ways. This tool should enable you to create more effective messages or talking points, shape brochures or other printed materials, and even frame public communications campaigns.

That said, the sample language offered here is best viewed as a guidepost. You should always adapt these messages to meet the unique and/or local requirements of your situation, audiences, or broader effort.

THE BASICS

 As with most new ideas, the first order of business is finding clear, concise language that describes age-friendly communities: what they are, what kind of work they entail, and why they matter.

This is, of course, essential when introducing the concept to new audiences, but it is helpful to repeat and reinforce this definition every time you talk about this important work. Remember, once it starts to sound rote or repetitive to you, it is likely that external groups are just starting to recognize the idea.

The following pages provide guidance and sample language that you can use and adapt, as well as insights to help you communicate more effectively.
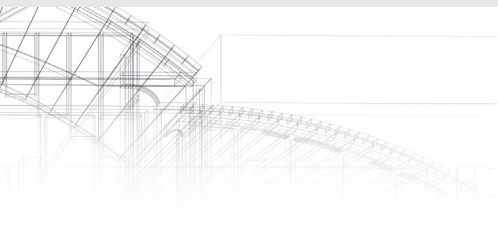
WHAT IS AN AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITY?

Age-friendly communities are great communities—great places to live for people of all ages. At Community AGEnda, we like to say age-friendly communities are "great places to grow up and grow old."

Age-friendly community work can take many different forms:

- Improving physical infrastructure (e.g., around development, transportation, housing, walkability)
- Enhancing health, wellness, and social services
- Creating more opportunities for work, volunteerism, and civic engagement

Photo credit: Paul Versluis, SeniorStock
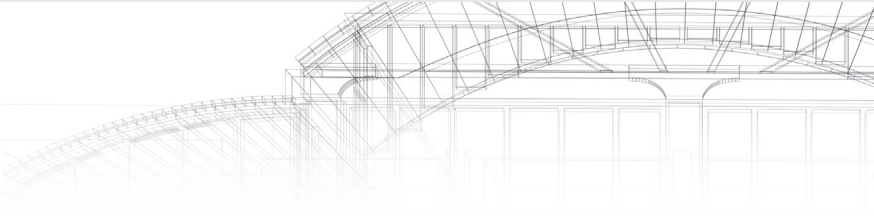
WHY SHOULD PEOPLE CARE?

Most people would like to age in place, near the people and activities that are important to them.

Unfortunately, most cities, towns, and villages are not organized to help residents stay connected and engaged as they age. Communities are often unprepared for the growing number of older people.

Creating more age-friendly communities can unleash the energies and contributions of both older and younger people and create places that are better for all of us.
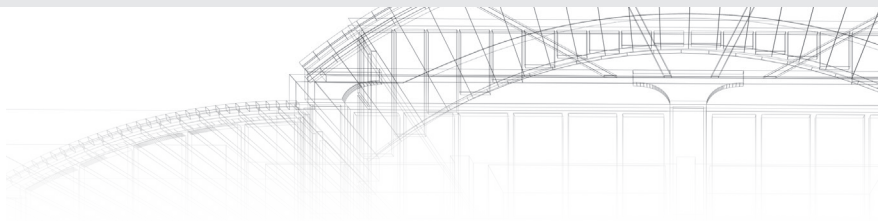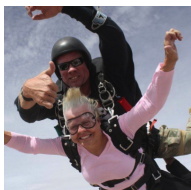
Photo credit: Julie Turkewitz
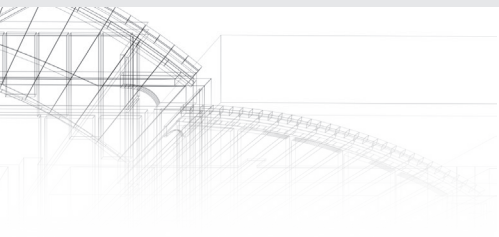
MESSAGE INSIGHT #1

People don't automatically love older people. Ageism and competing priorities impede many community stakeholders from immediately supporting age-friendly work.

MESSAGE GUIDANCE

Stay positive, focus on the benefits of age-friendly work (not the age of the people involved), and ensure that your language and particularly your images are intergenerational and upbeat, to underscore the value of this work for people of all ages. Some have even esch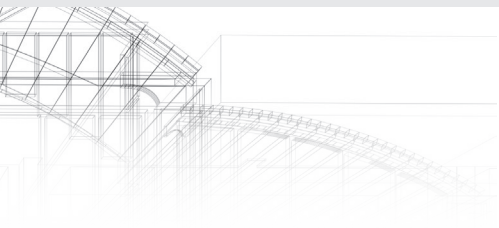ewed the term "age-friendly" altogether in favor of "livable communities" or "communities for all ages" to avoid negative stereotypes associated with older people. Remember, the work is not about "those seniors," but about all of us.

SAMPLE MESSAGING

"Age-friendly communities are win-win-win communities, unleashing the energies and potential of people young, middle-aged, and old. This work not only takes advantage of the untapped potential of our most experienced citizens (likely your community's only growing natural resource), but finds new ways to engage all of our residents."
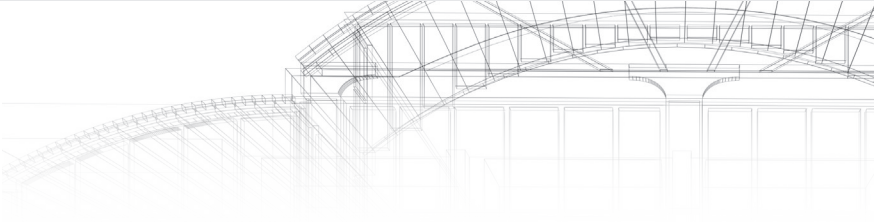
Photo credit: Sun Health Senior Living

MESSAGE INSIGHT #2

For many, the idea of "age-friendly communities" sounds positive, but also vague, too good to be true, too much like, well, "unicorns and rainbows."
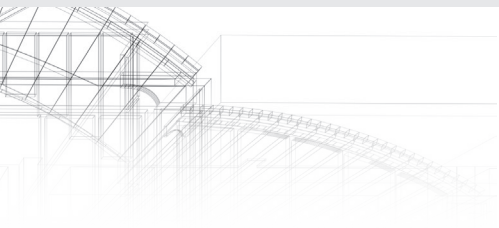
MESSAGE GUIDANCE

Always combine concrete examples of age-friendly activities that demonstrate the practical, short-term benefits of the work with more general descriptions of the longer-term process that creating a more age-friendly community will require.

SAMPLE MESSAGING

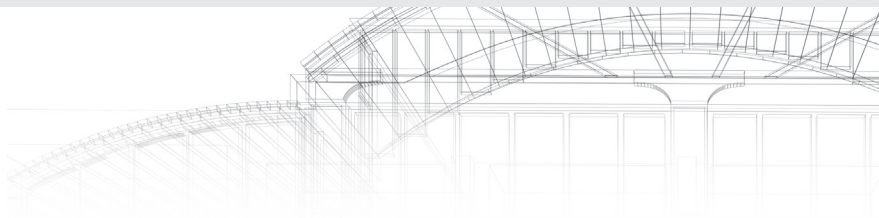"Our age-friendly initiative is already making [our city or town] a great place to grow up and grow old. We are co-locating child care and senior services programs and have launched two intergenerational community gardens. At the same time, we are working with city planners to ensure our strategic plan includes provisions to promote walkable, mixed-use development and to make our region's public transportation accessible to all."

MESSAGE INSIGHT #3

Avoid phrases like the "silver tsunami" and numbing statistics that oversell the breadth of the challenge and overwhelm rather than inspire.

MESSAGE GUIDANCE

To date, the growing number of older people in our country and communities has been framed as an overwhelming demographic tidal wave. This framing, and the associated numbers, may seem dramatic, but they engender a sense of fatalism rather than a desire for action. A better strategy is to focus on the infrastructure and services that can be expanded and improved, and the benefits that accrue to people across their lifespan.

SAMPLE MESSAGING

"Older people will continue to be an important and even growing part of our community. In an age-friendly community, some older people will require services and supports, but many others will be able to continue to play active and helpful roles in our families, schools, and civic life."
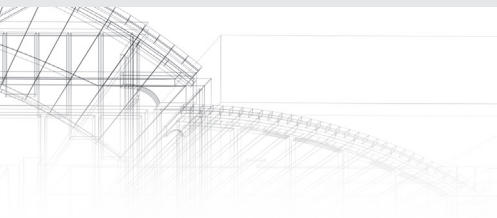
COMMUNICATIONS TIPS

When thinking about your communications, getting your message right is important, but there are always a number of other things to think about as well.

Get to know your audience
Whether it is through formal surveys and market research or more discreet listening, strong communication starts with a clear sense of what your audience knows and believes.

Find the right messenger
You may not be the most effective spokesperson for age-friendly communities in a particular situation. Building allies who can carry the flag for you is critical.

Engage, don't lecture
While it is important to explain the work, pivot where possible to asking the audience what excites them, what moves them, what questions they have regarding you and the work.

Find (a few) powerful numbers
Data is important, indeed crucial, for many audiences. But often, one or two carefully constructed, locally meaningful statistics will have more impact than a numbing litany of numbers.

Tell a story
Often the best way to communicate about a complex topic is to provide a compelling narrative of how an age-friendly community has transformed an individual's or a group's experience.
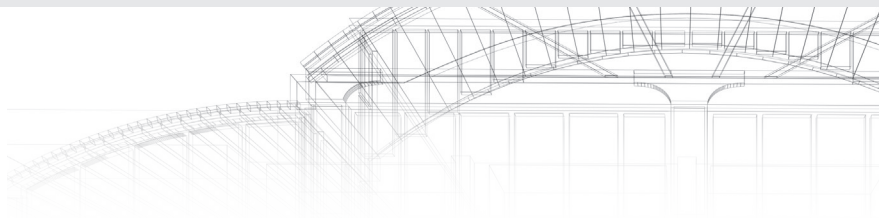
ADAPTING YOUR MESSAGE

In addition to talking generally about age-friendly communities, a critical challenge is making the case to diverse stakeholders who have a whole range of values, interests, and needs. To communicate effectively, we also need to understand the broad range of benefits — the many "colors" — of our work.

For each stakeholder, we need to create a persuasive rationale — a meaningful value proposition. Developing this case requires us to learn what a stakeholder really cares about and how an age-friendly community can help. We must ask (and then answer) the question, "What can an age-friendly community do for you?"
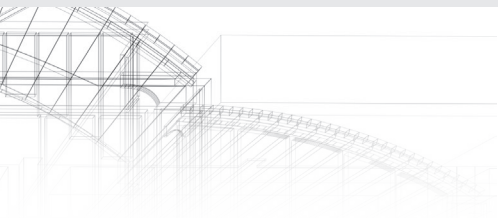
LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Most services and resources for older people come directly or indirectly from national/state government or non-formal support (e.g., family, friends, clubs). Age-friendly community development, however, provides a powerful opportunity for local government to lead and support efforts that maximize these resources, coordinate services, and enhance older adults' community contributions.

Sample messaging
Older adults are consumers, taxpayers, and voters.
Older adults are an important and growing constituency in our community (may add Census numbers here). They are valued employees and consumers, pay their taxes, make a variety of important civic and volunteer contributions, and, of course … they vote.

Expanded services such as ride-sharing or community gardens, as well as short-term, modest adaptations like better curb cuts, additional benches, and longer crossing periods at traffic lights can make your community more attractive. Efforts that support longer-term planning and zoning changes can make a difference for older people and citizens of all ages for years to come.
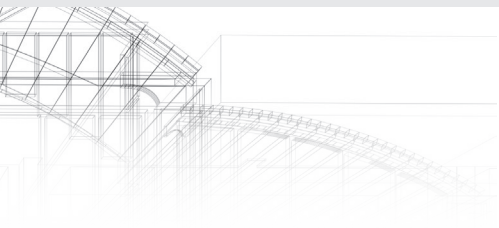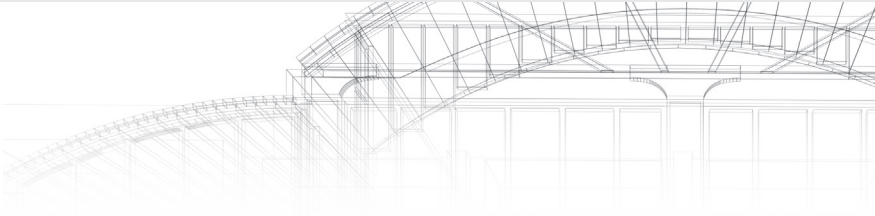
BUSINESS

Private sector leaders may support age-friendly community initiatives out of enlightened self-interest. Commercial interests are increasingly hearing that the large and growing (and overall wealthier) older adult population is good for local business, particularly for expanding its customer base. It is also important to highlight how community empowerment and development benefit the bottom line for local business. For example, making streets safer and other livability enhancements that benefit people of all ages can also improve the economic competitiveness of downtowns and special districts. Local businesses may benefit from making their shops more age-friendly. Additionally, businesses may welcome initiatives that address workforce concerns, such as enabling older workers to work longer, supporting older adult entrepreneurs, or mentoring younger workers.

Sample messaging
Turn silver into gold.
Modest community improvements can help older people live longer in their homes, get to and from shopping and other services, and remain active consumers and workers.

REGIONAL PLANNING/TRANSPORTATION

Mobility and access to transportation are primary needs for young and old alike. When people can no longer drive, they can become socially isolated, which can be devastating to their health as well.

Community-based groups sometimes offer volunteer-provided transportation services, and private sector players (e.g. medical facilities and shopping centers) recognize the return on investment that free or low-cost transportation offers.

Increasingly, transportation planners in regional and municipal planning departments are turning to mobility management as a way to coordinate services among a variety of public and private transportation providers. Every sector that either provides or requires transportation services for its clients should inform this broader mobility management plan.

Sample messaging
A new way to talk about good work.
An age-friendly communities approach can help build support with new stakeholders throughout the community for your existing planning and transportation projects and initiatives.
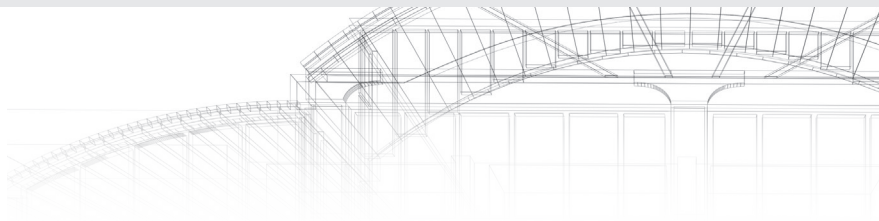
FUNDERS

A wide range of local funders may be interested in livable/age-friendly communities. In fact, this issue generally offers something for everyone in the philanthropic community. In addition to foundations already supporting aging services, other funders interested in education, transportation, affordable housing, health, cultural life, economic and community development, and even children and family services are likely already supporting projects that can be included in a broader livable/age-friendly community agenda.

Age-friendly projects can both build on these existing efforts and seek to connect programs and activities to benefit people of all ages. Funders can also serve as neutral, nonpartisan conveners to hold meetings that gather stakeholders from throughout the community—a critical early part of this work.

Sample messaging
Bring us together.
You may not fund directly in aging or community development, but age-friendly community initiatives are about integrating a whole range of community improvements and activities, including those you are already supporting. Help us get started by bringing a range of stakeholders together to talk about how to make our community better for people of all ages.
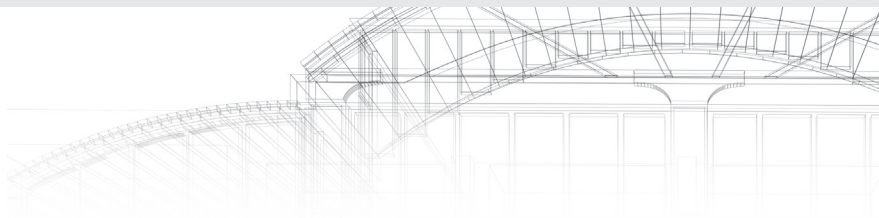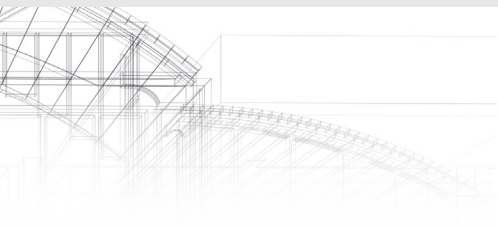
EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Our communities are often designed in ways that segregate older adults from the rest of society, limiting the spontaneous opportunities that young people have to interact meaningfully with older adults. Yet the children and college students in our school systems reap tremendous benefits when older adults serve as teacher assistants, tutors, and mentors. Educational institutions also maintain facilities that are often underutilized during off-hours and can both be re-purposed for other community needs and serve as focal points for intergenerational engagement.

Sample messaging
What are you missing?
Older adults represent an under-recognized resource and audience in our schools and can play a variety of critically needed roles as educators, tutors, assistants, and mentors. As the percentage of families with children in your community decreases, it is important to engage older adults to support needed bond initiatives or tax increases that maintain the health of your local school system.

COMMUNITY-BASED/FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Neighborhood organizations know their constituents well and help them with a variety of daily needs. Some, like those in the Village to Village Network, are even launching age-friendly initiatives of their own. Still, many groups are not aware of resources that can enhance their efforts or existing programs that may provide some services more cost-effectively. As older adults' needs grow, it is increasingly important for these key community groups to focus their energies in areas and ways that can have the greatest impact.

Sample messaging
Get connected.
A livable/age-friendly community initiative can link your community efforts/senior ministry to the broader effort to improve your region, city, town, or village and put you in contact with government, funders, and other leaders beyond your current network/congregation.
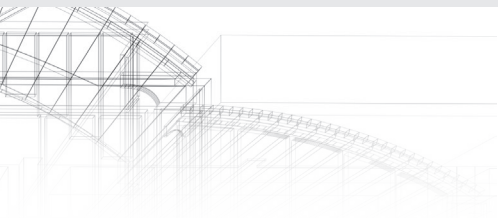
ABOUT COMMUNITY AGENDA

Community AGEnda is an initiative of Grantmakers In Aging and is funded by the Pfizer Foundation. It seeks to enhance and accelerate age-friendly development work in communities across America. Launched in 2012, Community AGEnda has awarded grants to local groups in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, and the greater Kansas City area to support their efforts to become great places to grow up and grow old. The project also hopes to inspire similar age-friendly work across the country through convening, promotional activities, and the collection and development of planning, assessment, and strategy tools, and other practical resources, including an online searchable database of age-friendly projects in the United States. For more information, please visit: GIAging.org/CommunityAGEnda.

Community AGEnda
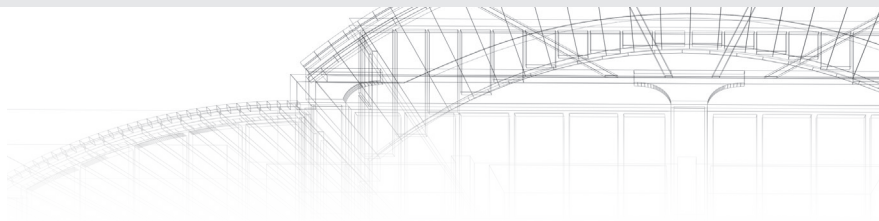
ABOUT GRANTMAKERS IN AGING

Grantmakers In Aging is an inclusive and responsive membership organization that is a national catalyst for philanthropy, with a common dedication to improving the experience of aging. GIA members have a shared recognition that a society that is better for older adults is better for people of all ages. For more information, please visit: GIAging.org.

GIA Grantmakers In Aging
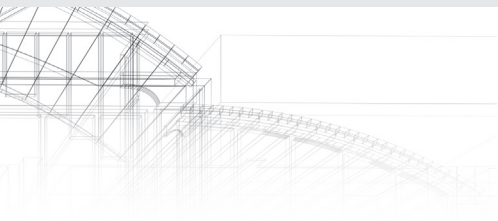
ABOUT THE PFIZER FOUNDATION

The Pfizer Foundation is a charitable organization established by Pfizer Inc. Its mission is to promote access to quality health care, to nurture innovation, and to support the community involvement of Pfizer colleagues. The Pfizer Foundation provides funding and resources to local and international organizations that expand and improve global health strategies. In 2013, the Foundation provided over $17.7 million in grants and employee matching gifts to non-governmental organizations around the world. For more information, please visit: Pfizer.com.

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